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# Historicising *Documents* (1929-1931)

A Parisian Avant-Garde Journal  
and the Visual Culture of Interwar France

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*Submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the Degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy*

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# Abstract

The avant-garde journal *Documents* (Paris, 1929-1931) was an interdisciplinary endeavour, involving ethnographers, archaeologists, art collectors, and art historians. Among the regular contributors were a number of former adherents to André Breton's Surrealist group. In the role of *secrétaire général* was Georges Bataille, a notoriously slippery character in the avant-garde scene. The resulting magazine was sprawling, subversively mixing the mainstream and the marginal. In art historical discourse, following Rosalind Krauss' formative interpretation of the journal, *Documents*' criticality tends to be identified in deconstructionist terms: as a text that enacts a radical displacement of meaning by sabotaging the very processes of meaning-production. The radical heterogeneity championed across its pages is thus decontextualised, abstracted to a purely linguistic domain far removed from the materiality of lived experience. Seeking to instead establish a historicised understanding of the journal's critical work and to explore how it positioned itself as an avant-garde text by critically negotiating, in image and text, various ideologically charged themes in discourse, this thesis re-inserts *Documents* into the visual culture of interwar France and re-interprets it through the pragmatist semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce – a theory that locates the process of semiosis in the social use of signs.

Focussing on the journal's critical treatment of three areas where French fragilities were felt to be particularly prominent in the interwar period – the perceived feeble health and strength of the nation (Chapter 1), America's increasing dominance and the influx of Hollywood films (Chapter 2), as well as the seemingly fragile built space of Paris (Chapter 3) – this thesis resituates various signs mobilised in *Documents* within their socio-cultural contexts, excavates the currency they carried in culture through extensive examination of primary materials e.g., contemporary press, advertisements, political debate, official campaigns, etc. Subsequently, it will be argued that the journal actively intervened into infected debates only to disruptively redeploy the anguished signs and motifs they encompassed to dissident ends. Indeed, once reinterpreted through a different theoretical and methodological framework, once recontextualised and rehistoricised, a critical strategy very different from that identified in the prevailing deconstructionist identification emerges. This is one that did not work to sabotage meaning-production but to subversively participate in such cultural processes. This is a strategy whose criticality stemmed not from an unveiling of the undecidability of signs or a reduction of meaning but, on the contrary, from

radical re-dissemination of the heightened meaning those signs carried in culture. Diffusing motifs that troubled topical Third Republican anxieties – tuberculosis microbes, monstrous children, Hollywood talkies, and American skyscrapers; defunct sewage systems, slaughterhouses, statutory programmes, and Parisian slums – *Documents*, however, not only prodded and pressurised French wounds. It enacted a critical recalibration of reality too. The transgressive heterogeneity promoted by the journal, a critical philosophy developed by Bataille during the *Documents*-years, operated not on the level of language but on the level of experience, *within the fabric of life*. Signs, wrapped up in and charged by their use in anguished discourses, were strategically re-circulated to expose a counter-portrayal of humanity, decidedly deglorified and incongruously heterogenous.

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# Glossary of Critical Terms

Throughout this thesis, a series of terms are repeatedly used to describe the critical operation attributed to *Documents*. This terminology has been mobilised to delineate the journal's critical sign-use within the visual culture of interwar France.<sup>1</sup> Below is a brief glossary, providing the working definitions of some of these oft-used terms as well as their role within the thesis.

**subversion** an activity or critical gesture that uses motifs or signs against the grain of their established or hegemonic usage, thus undermining or subverting the cultural logic they uphold, be that the sign-use established by the official Third Republic or by other avant-garde and modernist groups.

**dissident** a position of opposition vis-à-vis official or established sign-use, fuelled by refusal to conform to the ideals and dogma such usage sustain.

**agitation** a form of sign-use that sabotages the coherency of an established concept, image, or identity; a disruptive act that forces the status quo into a state of instability, volatility, or fragility. As cracks appear in that which is assumed to be self-evident, the axiomatic is denaturalised, exposed as ideology, and thus rendered fallible.

**pressurise** a form of sign-use that pushes an accepted form or notion to the brink of collapse, thus unmasking areas of conceptual, structural, or ideological incongruence previously covered-up by the veil of assumed soundness cloaking hegemonic definitions.

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<sup>1</sup> A central influence on my use of these terms is Stuart Hall's famous essay 'Encoding, Decoding', which identifies three positions from which decoding may be constructed. The first, '*dominant-hegemonic*' position takes on board the intended meaning 'full and straight', that is, '*inside the dominant code*.' The second, '*negotiated*' position accept the 'dominant definitions' whilst acknowledging their political function: 'Decoding within the *negotiated version* contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements.' The third, '*oppositional*' position amounts to a decoding of 'the message in a *globally* contrary way', that is, the receiver 'detotalises the message in the preferred code in order to retotalise the message within some alternative framework or reference.' The latter '*oppositional*' reception of signs has been formative for my interpretation of *Documents*' engagement with hegemonic sign-usage within the visual culture of interwar France. (Stuart Hall, 'Encoding, Decoding', in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 507-517).

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# Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other university.

Disa Persson

# Introduction: *Documents* in Context

The life of the avant-garde journal *Documents* was short, (Fig. 1). Fifteen issues appeared in Paris between 1929 and 1931.<sup>2</sup> The editorial board was large and wide-ranging, consisting of high-ranking art collectors, archaeologists, historians, and ethnographers.<sup>3</sup> Dubbed *secrétaire général* was Georges Bataille, a notoriously slippery character in the Parisian avant-garde scene, working as a numismatist at the prestigious Bibliothèque nationale de France by day and writing transgressive pornographic novels by night. Among the regular contributors were a group of artists and writers formerly aligned with Breton's Surrealist group. The end result was eclectic: photographs of a Parisian slaughterhouse, stills from Hollywood films and displays of archaeological finds all shared space with essays on subjects ranging from big toes to Picasso. In many ways, *Documents* was a ticking bomb. Sprawling, incoherent, inflammatory, unforgiving, and, perhaps, inevitably temporary. As Michel Leiris – one of the journal's core collaborators and a close friend of Bataille – later admitted: *Documents* and its *secrétaire général* were 'impossible'.<sup>4</sup>

Despite its short life, *Documents* has received much attention. This is partly due to the remarkable afterlife enjoyed by the term 'formless' or, in the French original, 'informe' – a concept explained in a six-sentence-long text written by Bataille as part of the journal's recurring 'Critical Dictionary'. The long-lasting legacy of 'formless' has primarily been cultivated by the American art historian Rosalind Krauss, who assigned it a decidedly deconstructionist role. Indeed, as we will see, Krauss' interpretation of 'formless' was central to her writing of the 1980s and 1990s, informing her readings of *Documents* as well as of the avant-garde at large. As a result, in art historical discourse, following Krauss' formative interpretation, *Documents*' criticality tends to be identified in deconstructionist terms: as a text that enacts a radical displacement of meaning by sabotaging the very processes of meaning-production.

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<sup>2</sup> The full title of the journal was *Documents: doctrines, archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie*. After the third issue (1929), it changed to *Documents: archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie, variétés*.

<sup>3</sup> The *comité de rédaction* featured: Jean Babelon, Georges Contenau, Carl Einstein, Pierre d'Espezel, Raymond Lantier, Paul Pelliot, Gottlieb Reber, Paul Rivet, Georges Henri Rivière, Joseph Strzygowski, Georges Wildenstein.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Leiris, 'From Bataille the Impossible to the Impossible *Documents*', in Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, *Correspondence*, ed. Louis Yvert, trans. Liz Heron (Oxford and New York: Seagull Press, 2008). This text was originally published in 1963, as part of *Critique*'s posthumous 'Hommage à Bataille'-issue.

Whilst producing an important critical reappraisal not only of *Documents* and Bataillean thought but of the wider avant-garde too, however, the enduring dominance of this interpretative model has left unexplored other ways in which the journal functioned as a critical text. In particular, as we will see, by being preoccupied with locating the criticality of the journal in an ability to disrupt and disturb stable signification, thus transposing and abstracting it to a purely linguistic level far removed from lived experience, the deconstructionist interpretation of *Documents* ends up decontextualising and dehistoricising the journal's critical work, and therefore missing out on the ways in which it positioned itself as an avant-garde text within the visual culture of interwar France by strategically engaging with and critically negotiating, in image and text, various ideologically charged themes in contemporary discourse.

Seeking to address this gap in current scholarship and establish a historicised understanding of the journal's criticality, this thesis re-inserts *Documents* into the visual culture of interwar France and reinterprets its criticality using the pragmatist semiotics developed by Charles Sanders Peirce – a theory that locates processes of semiosis in the social use and interpretation of signs. As we will see, once returned to the messy complexities of culture, once recontextualised and rehistoricised, a critical strategy very different from that identified by the dominant deconstructionist reading will emerge. This is a strategy embedded within and powered by discourse; a strategy that did not seek to sabotage meaning-production but to critically participate in such cultural processes; a strategy whose subversiveness stemmed not from an unveiling of the 'undecidability' of signs but, on the contrary, from dissident re-dissemination of the charged currencies those signs carried in culture.

This introductory chapter situates *Documents* in its historical as well as historiographical contexts. Part One, 'The Formation of *Documents* in Interwar Paris', sketches the genesis of the journal, outlining its conflictual or, to return to Leiris' portrayal, 'impossible' existence in Paris between the wars. As we will see, these tricky dynamics characterised not only the journal's editorial board but also *Documents'* relation to the avant-garde scene surrounding it, in particular, that to Surrealism. Part Two, 'Interpreting *Documents*: An Introduction to the Methodological Field', traces the deconstructionist reception of the journal and its critical work, from Jacques Derrida's 1967 essay on Bataille to Linda Steer's 2017 analysis of appropriated photographs in Surrealist periodicals. After demonstrating how this interpretative tradition ultimately ends up dehistoricising the criticality of *Documents*, a different methodological approach is suggested: visual culture studies and the semiotic theory developed by Charles Sanders Peirce. As we will

see, this methodological and theoretical framework enables a focus on precisely the aspects of representation left unexamined by the deconstructionist reading: namely, an analysis of how the various signs mobilised in *Documents* were used in the visual culture of interwar France and how the signification generated from such discursive usage helped to position the journal as an avant-garde text.

## The Formation of *Documents* in Interwar Paris

The unlikely birthplace of the unprincipled publication of *Documents* was the principled halls of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Georges Bataille had secured a trainee position at the library after having graduated from the prestigious École des Chartes in Paris with a title of palaeographic archivist. In July of 1924, Bataille was promoted to the Cabinet des Médailles where he worked alongside conservators Pierre d'Espezel and Jean Babelon, both of whom would later feature of the editorial board of *Documents*.<sup>5</sup> As founding editors of *Aréthuse* (1923-1931), a highbrow periodical on art and archaeology, d'Espezel and Babelon were already entrenched in the world of publishing. When the idea of a new journal called *Documents* cropped up, Bataille, a promising young archivist who had contributed to *Aréthuse* on several occasions, was entrusted with the role of *secrétaire général*.<sup>6</sup> The reputable art collector and editor of the glossy *Gazette des beaux-arts*, Georges Wildenstein, who had already collaborated with d'Espezel and Babelon on other publications, agreed to foot the bill.<sup>7</sup>

Envisioning a journal fit to satisfy modern appetites, especially those for so-called *art primitif*, Wildenstein saw in *Documents* a possibility to rival Christian Zervos' popular *Cahiers d'Art* – an interdisciplinary journal launched in 1926 marked by its ability to amalgamate popular culture and contemporary art with prehistoric and non-Western objects.<sup>8</sup> The German art historian and

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London and New York: Verso Books, 2002): 39, 146.

<sup>6</sup> Who first suggested the idea of *Documents* is debated. Surya writes: 'Jean Babelon and Pierre d'Espezel – former editors of the very serious art and archaeology journal *Aréthuse* (to which Bataille contributed on several occasions) – suggested to G Wildenstein the idea of a journal to replace *Aréthuse*, with the title *Documents*.' (116). Yet, in 1986-7, Leiris was to say: 'I believe that Rivière was the one who had the idea to start *Documents*, and he must have thought that Bataille would make a very good general secretary.' (Sally Price and Jean Jamin, 'A Conversation with Michel Leiris,' *Current Anthropology*, vol. 29, no. 1 (February 1988): 165.) However, Louis Yvert writes: 'In fact, Rivière was probably connected with the project at a later stage and at the request of G Wildenstein, to strengthen the 'ethnographic' wing of the publication.' (*Correspondence*, n23p14).

<sup>7</sup> D'Espezel had collaborated with Wildenstein on *Gazette des beaux-arts* and *Les Cahiers de la République des lettres, des sciences et des arts*. Babelon had contributed to Wildenstein's *L'Art français*, an advertisement for which was publicised in the first issue of *Documents*.

<sup>8</sup> Dawn Ades, *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), 229; Yves Chevrefils Desbiolles, *Les Revues d'art à Paris, 1905-1940* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2014), 138; Christophe Gauthier, 'Documents: De l'usage érudit à l'image muette,' in *L'Histoire-Bataille: L'écriture de l'histoire dans l'oeuvre de Georges Bataille*, ed. Laurent Ferri and Christophe Gauthier (Paris: École nationale des chartes, 2006), 58. For an account of Zervos' *Cahiers d'art* in relation to Parisian 1920s primitivism, see e.g. chapter four of John Warne Monroe, *Metropolitan Fetish: African Sculpture and the Imperial French Invention of Primitive Art* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019).

writer, Carl Einstein – who had made a big splash with his 1915 *Negerplastik*, lauded as one of the first European texts to have ‘discovered’ the aesthetic abilities of African sculpture – was brought in as an editor.<sup>9</sup> A connection to the blossoming discipline of ethnography was also cemented.<sup>10</sup> Endowed with seats on the editorial board were Paul Rivet and Georges Henri Rivière – who, at the time of *Documents*, were overseeing a radical reorganisation of the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, updating its museological rationale with the newest ethnographic thinking.

Founded in 1878, the Trocadéro was France’s first public museum dedicated solely to ethnography.<sup>11</sup> Despite grand plans, however, the museum quickly became a neglected space. Its founding director, Ernest-Theodore Hamy, had brought together a vast collection of colonial objects but showed little interest in display. The museum was dark, dusty, and damp. During the war years, it fell into even bleaker times: underfunded and overstocked. When Rivet was appointed as director in 1928, the Trocadéro was in desperate need of renewal.<sup>12</sup> As one of France’s leading ethnographers, Rivet had – along with Marcel Mauss and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl – founded the nation’s first university institute dedicated to ethnographic studies and fieldwork training, the *Institut d’Ethnologie*, in 1925.<sup>13</sup> Soon-to-be *Documents* collaborators, Michel Leiris and Marcel Griaule, both studied here. Telling of the cross-pollination between the emerging ethnographic discourse and *Documents*, when France’s first ethnographic excursion, the *Mission*

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<sup>9</sup> Einstein’s role at *Documents* has been debated. In ‘Notes on the Publication of “Un Cadavre”’, Bataille wrote: ‘as ‘secretary-general’, I really edited, in agreement with Georges-Henri Rivière, who is today curator of the Folklore Museum at the Palais de Chaillot, and against the titular editor, the German poet Carl Einstein’. (Georges Bataille, *Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, edited and translated by Michael Richardson (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 31.) Liliane Meffre, however, has emphasised Einstein’s importance to the publication, deeming that Einstein’s role has been ‘scandalously and partially’ forgotten. In the course of the journal’s life, Einstein published around a dozen articles and a number of reports. (*Carl Einstein, 1885-1940: Itinéraires d’une pensée moderne* (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002), 232.) Similarly, Sebastian Ziedler writes: ‘After World War II, Bataille and Leiris kept marginalizing Einstein’s role at *Documents*’. Ziedler quotes Klaus Kiefer’s 1994 publication *Elan vital oder Das Auge des Eros* as having ‘set the record straight’ by demonstrating that Einstein, in 1928, sent a publication plan – including tables of contents for prospective *Documents* issues – to his friend Gottlieb Friedrich Reber, an industrialist and art collector later featuring on *Documents* editorial board, thus dispelling ‘the myth that Einstein was just a figurehead at the journal.’ (*Form as Revolt: Carl Einstein and the Ground of Modern Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 282n1.) See also: Charles W. Haxthausen, ‘Introduction,’ in Carl Einstein, *A Mythology of Forms: Selected Writings of Art*, trans. Charles W. Haxthausen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> For a history of French ethnography, see e.g.: Alice L. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Vincent Dabaene, *Far Afield: French Anthropology between Science and Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Conklin, 22-34.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g.: Elizabeth A. Williams, ‘Art and Artefact at the Trocadero: Ars Americana and the Primitivist Revolution’ in *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, ed. George W. Stocking Jr (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 146-166; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 117-151.

<sup>13</sup> On the curriculum at the *Institut d’Ethnologie*, see Marcel Fournier, *Marcel Mauss: A Biography* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1994), 233-238.

*Dakar-Djibouti*, set off in May of 1931, the crew of nine included three *Documents*-collaborators: Marcel Griaule, who led the expedition, as well as Michel Leiris and André Schaeffner.<sup>14</sup>

The mission was primarily a collecting enterprise, set to fill the Trocadéro with more rigorously documented ethnographic objects. Over three thousand objects were accumulated during two years.<sup>15</sup> To guide the French fieldworkers, an instructional pamphlet had been produced:

Because of the need that has always driven men to imprint the traces of their activity on matter, nearly all phenomena of collective life are capable of expression in given objects. A collection of objects (...) creates archives more revealing and sure than written archives, since these are authentic, autonomous objects that cannot have been fabricated for the needs of the case and that thus characterise types of civilisation better than anything else.<sup>16</sup>

At the heart of this manual loomed the ethnographic teachings of Mauss. Indeed, adding to and expanding upon the sociological notion of ‘social facts’ developed by his uncle, Émile Durkheim, Mauss explained in *Essai sur le don* (1924):

The facts we have studied are all total social facts (...). That is, in certain cases they set in motion the whole society and its institutions (...) these phenomena are at once legal, economic, religious, and even aesthetic and morphological.<sup>17</sup>

Countering both the aestheticisation of the art object and the decontextualisation of the curiosity, Mauss spoke of ethnographic objects as ‘precious things’ invested with a ‘productive capacity’: ‘The large abalone shells, the decorated blankets (...) The houses and decorated beams are themselves beings. Everything speaks - roof, fire, carvings and paintings’.<sup>18</sup> The preciousness

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<sup>14</sup> The mission was promoted in ‘L’œil de l’ethnologue (A propos de la Mission Dakar-Djibouti)’, an article written by Leiris for *Documents* (7:1930). On the conflation between *Documents* and ethnography, see e.g.: Clifford, 117-151; Jean Jamin, ‘Objets trouvés des paradis perdus: à propos de la Mission Dakar-Djibouti,’ in *Collections Passion*, ed. J. Hainard and R. Kaehr (Neuchâtel: Musée d’Ethnographie, 1982); Jean Jamin, ‘*Documents* revue: La part maudite de l’ethnographie,’ *L’Homme*, vol. 39, no. 151 (1999): 257-266; Julia Kelly, *Art, Ethnography and the Life of Objects: Paris c. 1925-35* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Sébastien Côté, *L’Ethnologie détournée: Carl Einstein, Michel Leiris et la revue Documents* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019). On Mauss influence on Bataille’s thought, see e.g.: Alfred Metraux, ‘Rencontre avec les ethnologues,’ *Critique*, no. 195-196 (1963): 677-84. On *Documents* and discourses of primitivism, see e.g.: Monroe, 150-172; Petrine Archer-Shaw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000); Françoise Levailant, *Penser le primitif et la sculpture: la revue Documents, 1929-1931* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> The crux of Griaule’s justification for the expedition was that the Trocadéro had no properly identified African collection. (Conklin, 203).

<sup>16</sup> ‘Instructions sommaires pour les collecteurs d’objets ethnographiques’ (1931), quoted in Clifford, 67.

<sup>17</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Cohen and West, 1966), 274.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

of these objects, thus, lay not in their exclusivity or uniqueness, but in their typicality. Embedded in the rich context of everyday social practices, these objects are able to articulate their function within the whole. Collection practices taught at the *Institut*, in particular in Mauss' own course entitled 'Ethnographie Descriptive', therefore promoted the production of a corpus of ephemera – photographs, recordings, accounts of body techniques, etc. – tasked to prevent the ethnographic object from becoming, as Leiris wrote in 1933, 'something dead and forever lost in the glaciers of abstraction.'<sup>19</sup>

Ethnographic collecting, Barbara Kirchenblatt-Gimblett writes, is a surgical issue. An object only becomes 'ethnographic' once it has been cut out.<sup>20</sup> Meticulous documentation, the French ethnographers therefore argued, would help keep the object alive post-incision, protecting it from decontextualisation or fetishisation. In his 1931 handbook for the ethnographic fieldworker, *Manuel d'ethnographie*, Mauss explained: 'One will study carefully all the circumstances which surround each object, each artistic event: where, who, when, as what, for whom, for what.'<sup>21</sup> When the 'Exposition de la mission Dakar-Djibouti' opened at the revamped Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in 1933, Rivière announced the renewed museological rationale in *L'Intransigeant*:

No jewel-box vitrines, no mounting as art objects or like tie pins; above all a very simple presentation, where each thing is shown in as living as way as possible and surrounded by maximum of information. It is not a question here of 'art nègre', jewels for antiquarians or even articles in a bazaar; it is a question of human documents.<sup>22</sup>

A young curator with no scientific training, Rivière had been appointed assistant director of the Trocadéro by Rivet in 1928, after having made a name for himself by organising the first major representation of pre-Columbian art in Europe. Held in the Marsan wing at the Louvre in the spring of 1928, the exhibition was an instant success. Through his connections to the aristocratic and artistic elites, Rivière managed to attract 'le tout Paris' to the opening, including the president of the Third Republic, Gaston Doumergue. Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris – both friends of

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<sup>19</sup> Leiris (1933), quoted in Dabaene, 30.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Objects of Ethnography,' in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 388.

<sup>21</sup> Mauss (1931), quoted in Kelly, 72.

<sup>22</sup> Rivière (1933), quoted in *ibid.*, 114.

Rivière – were brought in to help with the organisation.<sup>23</sup> On the occasion of the exhibition, another of d’Espezel’s journals – *Les Cahiers de la République* (1926-1931) – published a special issue, entitled ‘L’art pré-colombien : L’Amérique avant Christophe Colomb’. The issue featured Bataille’s first major published article, ‘L’Amérique disparue’.<sup>24</sup> Leiris later wrote that the text amounted to ‘the first instance of the hybrid approach combining passion and objectivity that he was to develop with such brilliance.’<sup>25</sup> Despite his lack in ethnographic training, thus, Rivet found in Rivière precisely what he needed: a well-connected, market-savvy Parisian. As the two embarked on their reorganisation of the Trocadéro, *Documents* was to become, Julia Kelly writes, ‘crucial forum for the presentation of new ethnographic ideas in the period’.<sup>26</sup>

Sharing the unofficial role as *Documents*’ sub-editor, or *gérant*, were two ex-Surrealists, recently expelled by André Breton: Michel Leiris and Georges Limbour.<sup>27</sup> Leiris had first met Bataille in 1924, a few months before he would officially join the Surrealist group.<sup>28</sup> Struck by the ‘breadth and variety of his cultural knowledge’ and ‘his nonconformist way of thinking’, Leiris immediately introduced Bataille to his friends – a circle of artists, including, among others, Georges Limbour, Joan Miró, Antonin Artaud and Robert Desnos, unified by their shared admiration for Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.<sup>29</sup> Their usual haunt was the studio of the painter André Masson, located at 45 rue Blomet in Paris. Leiris recalls:

It was I who (...) brought in Georges Bataille, a numismatist at the time and extremely dissatisfied with his discipline, a man whose elegantly bourgeois exterior quite belied the idea of this violator of taboos (...).<sup>30</sup>

Leiris and Bataille, who quickly grew close, had toyed with the idea of launching a Nietzschean *Yes* movement, envisioned as ‘a perpetual acquiescence to everything and being superior to the *No* that had been Dada because it would avoid the puerility of provoking through systematic

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<sup>23</sup> Conklin, 105-109.

<sup>24</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘L’Amérique disparue,’ *Les Cahiers de la République des lettres, des sciences et des arts* (1928): 5-14.

<sup>25</sup> Leiris, ‘From Bataille the Impossible’, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Kelly, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Leiris, ‘From Bataille the Impossible’, 5. See also Leiris’ journal entry from 2 June 1929 (Michel Leiris, *Journal: 1922-1989*, ed. Jean Jamin (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 188. Some of these duties were later taken over by Griaule.

<sup>28</sup> Leiris and Bataille met via Jacques Lavaud, who also worked at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. For an account of Leiris life and work, see e.g.: Allan Stoekl, *Politics, Writing, Mutilation: The Cases of Bataille, Blanchot, Rousset, Leiris, and Ponge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); Séan Hand, *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Agnès de la Beaumelle, Maire-Laure Bernadec and Denis Hollier (eds.), *Leiris & Co.* (Paris: Gallimard/Centre Pompidou-Metz, 2015); Jean Jamin and Denis Hollier, *Leiris unlimited* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2017). See also the 1992 special issue of *Yale French Studies* on Leiris.

<sup>29</sup> Leiris, ‘From Bataille the Impossible,’ 7. See also Surya, 71-81.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Leiris, ‘45, rue Blomet,’ *Zébrage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 223. In Bataille’s *The Story of the Eye*, published under pseudonym in 1928, eight unsigned lithographs by Masson are found.

negation.<sup>31</sup> Dada, Bataille explained, had been too modest: ‘Dada? not idiotic enough’.<sup>32</sup> Saying *yes* to the world – warts and all – was to become a Bataillean constant.<sup>33</sup> One part of the project involved a periodical whose headquarters would be housed at a ‘squalid and rundown’ brothel in the old Saint-Denis quarter, ‘chanced upon’ during one of their late-night wanders.<sup>34</sup> Nothing came of it. Instead, Leiris – along with several of his fellow rue Blomet-frequenters – joined Breton on his new Surrealist adventure, officially launched in October 1924 with the publication of his manifesto in the inaugural issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*.<sup>35</sup> A suspicious Bataille kept his distance.<sup>36</sup> His only Surrealist exchange took place in 1925, when Leiris, with whom Bataille remained close, recruited him to produce a translation of medieval poems, *fatrasies*, into modern French for publication in Breton’s Surrealist mouthpiece.<sup>37</sup> To hand over his finished work, Bataille met with Breton at the Cyrano, a small café on Place Blanche. Leiris later reported that Bataille had left a bad impression, characterised as an ‘obsessive’ by the Surrealist leader.<sup>38</sup> The piece was published in the sixth issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, unsigned.<sup>39</sup>

The solidity of the Surrealist group soon began to fissure.<sup>40</sup> A source of particular concern was the political status of the group. During its first years, the movement was plagued by a damaging back-and-forth between statements of official alignment with the Communist Party and subsequent counterclaims of artistic autonomy.<sup>41</sup> Faced with untenable fragmentation, a summit was arranged, set to re-rally the Surrealist troops and, once and for all, officialise their commitment to the revolutionary cause. The meeting was to take place at the Bar du Château on 11 March 1929, eight-thirty sharp.<sup>42</sup> A month in advance, invitations in the form of a

<sup>31</sup> Leiris, ‘From Bataille the Impossible,’ 8.

<sup>32</sup> Ades, *Dada and Surrealism*, 229.

<sup>33</sup> Surya, 508n7: ‘Bataille never stopped saying *Yes*, or wanting to. (...) On this point he would remain unchanged until his death.’ For an account of Nietzsche’s influence on Bataille, see: François Warin, *Nietzsche et Bataille : la parodie à l’infini* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1994); Lionel Abel, ‘Georges Bataille and the Repetition of Nietzsche,’ in *On Bataille: Critical Essays*, ed. Leslie A. Boldt-Irons (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 51-60; Denis Hollier, ‘From Beyond Hegel to Nietzsche’s Absence,’ in *ibid.*, 61-78; Jeremy Biles, *Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007); and Stuart Kendall’s introduction to Georges Bataille’s *On Nietzsche* (Albany: State University Press, 2015).

<sup>34</sup> Leiris, ‘From Bataille the Impossible,’ 8.

<sup>35</sup> For a general account of the history of Surrealism, see e.g.: Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism* (London: Plantin Publishers, 1987).

<sup>36</sup> In retrospect, Bataille stated: ‘I immediately thought that the dense world of surrealism would paralyse and suffocate me. (...) I was suddenly faced with people who assumed an authoritative tone.’ (*The Absence of Myth*, 36.)

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Leiris to Bataille (16 July 1925), in *Correspondence*, 84.

<sup>38</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘Surrealism from Day to Day’, in *Correspondence*, 53.

<sup>39</sup> Leiris claimed that Bataille had refused permission ‘for his name to appear in anything at all (...), because he mistrusted Surrealism’ (*Correspondence*, 12). For a recent account of the Bataille-Breton polemic, see e.g.: Raymond Spiteri, ‘Georges Bataille, André Breton, and the Culture of Surrealism,’ in *The Routledge Companion to Surrealism*, ed. Kirsten Strom (New York: Routledge, 2022), 127-135.

<sup>40</sup> Nadeau, 127-166.

<sup>41</sup> On Surrealism and politics, see e.g.: Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss (eds.), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>42</sup> Nadeau, 154-166. The event was narrativised in a special issue of the Belgian *Variétés*, edited by Breton and Éluard, entitled ‘Le Surréalisme en 1929’.

questionnaire were sent out to over seventy ‘intellectuals with revolutionary sympathies’, asking recipients to confirm their willingness to put differences aside and to pledge their allegiance.<sup>43</sup> The disciplinary tone of the letter provoked stark reactions. Responses from some recipients were of such offensive nature that their invitations to the rendezvous were immediately withdrawn. Among these were a number of once-rue-Blomet-frequenters and soon-to-be *Documents* collaborators: Michel Leiris, Georges Limbour, Jacques-André Boiffard, Roger Vitrac, André Masson, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, and Robert Desnos. Desnos’ response is indicative: ‘I do not refuse to collaborate in a communal activity, but I refuse to accept orders and a discipline which is too often arbitrary’.<sup>44</sup> Ribemont-Dessaignes, who left the meeting midway through, disgusted by the moralising tone, wrote a letter to Breton the following day, denouncing his ‘schoolboy pettiness’ and ‘commissariat de police viewpoint’.<sup>45</sup> Instead of realigning the group, the Bar du Château-episode marked the first crisis of Surrealism.<sup>46</sup>

Despite never having been an official member of Breton’s group, Bataille too received an invitation. His response did not hide any resentment: ‘too many pain-in-the-ass idealists’.<sup>47</sup> Bataille’s invitation too was withdrawn. Along with those of a few others, Bataille’s response was read aloud at the summit, deemed representative of the ‘tone of the most vocal opponents’. Disillusioned with Breton, therefore, some of the rejects instead gathered around Bataille, self-styled as Surrealism’s ‘old enemy from within’.<sup>48</sup> When the first issue of *Documents* appeared in April of 1929, both Leiris and Limbour were listed as contributors. By the end of the year, an array of ex-Surrealists had become regular *Documents*-collaborators.

Breton bit back. In his second manifesto, marking a symbolic rebirth of the movement, Breton re-shuffled his Surrealist cabinet and re-articulated the movement’s doctrine, this time in firm alignment with historical materialism.<sup>49</sup> His former Surrealist colleagues were not only slandered and formally ousted, but also ridiculed for choosing to rally around the obnoxious Bataille:

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<sup>43</sup> The invitation/questionnaire and a selection of responses is reprinted in André Breton, *Œuvres complètes: Tome I*, ed. Marguerite Bonnet (Paris: Gallimard, 1922), 962.

<sup>44</sup> Katherine Conley, *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvellous in Everyday Life* (London and Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 56.

<sup>45</sup> Nadeau, 158. Ribemont-Dessaignes first contribution to *Documents* appeared in the third issue (1930).

<sup>46</sup> Raymond Spiteri, ‘Surrealism and its Discontents: Georges Bataille, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, and the 1929 Crisis of Surrealism,’ *French History & Civilisation* 4 (2011): 145-156.

<sup>47</sup> Breton, *Œuvres complètes: Tome I*, 962. ‘Beaucoup trop d’emmerdeurs idéalistes’. Henceforth, all translations made by the author will be accompanied by a footnote detailing the original text.

<sup>48</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘On the subject of slumbers’ in *The Absence of Myth*, 49.

<sup>49</sup> André Breton, ‘Second Manifesto of Surrealism,’ in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972). The manifesto was published in December of 1929, as part of the final issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*. The following year, *La Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (1930-1933) took over as the official mouthpiece of the movement.

Perhaps M. Bataille is sufficiently forceful to bring them together (...) all they have in common is their dissatisfaction. I am amused, moreover, to think that one cannot leave Surrealism without running into M. Bataille, so great is the truism that the dislike of discipline can only result in one's submitting oneself anew to discipline.<sup>50</sup>

*Documents* too received a cutting mention. Breton was particularly provoked by a number of texts, mostly written by Bataille, championing a lowly and sullied *base-materialism*, spurring, the Surrealist leader wrote, 'an obnoxious return of old anti-dialectic materialism'.<sup>51</sup> Bataille – only interested in the vile and sordid, the discouraging and corrupt, in that which is 'seamier than flies' – Breton explained, was nothing but an 'excrement-philosopher' with a 'phobia about 'the idea''.<sup>52</sup> Riled up by Breton's characterisation, the targets of the Surrealist manifesto decided to respond. Desnos came up with the idea of producing a pamphlet entitled *Un Cadavre*, mockingly satirising Breton's own pamphlet with the same name, published in 1924. Bataille signed off and Rivière secured funding. On 15 January 1930, five-hundred copies were printed in Paris.<sup>53</sup> In his contribution to the pamphlet, Bataille's wrote: 'How could Breton's revolutionary attitude be anything other than a swindle? (...) nothing is ever changed by a great big soft strumpet armed with a gift-wrapped library of dreams.'<sup>54</sup>

Within the editorial board of *Documents*, it did not take long before concerns over the direction of the journal arose. Visions were clashing. Desires were in disaccord. Leiris recalls 'an 'impossible' mixture': conservative forces – 'inclined towards little more than art-historical writing or reviewing' – constantly in friction with those of the avant-garde, seeking to mobilise *Documents* as a 'war machine against received ideas.'<sup>55</sup> In fact, already after the first issue, Bataille had received a stern, disciplining letter from d'Espezel, charged with threats of discontinuation:

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 182-183.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 181, 184-185. Breton also writes: 'M. Bataille misuses adjectives with a passion: befouled, senile, rank, sordid, lewd, doddering, and that these words, far from serving him to disparage an unbearable state of affairs, are those through which his delight is most lyrically expressed' (184).

<sup>53</sup> In 'Notes on the Publication of 'Un Cadavre'', Bataille wrote: 'The majority of the signatories of the second 'Cadavre' had in fact collaborated on *Documents*, and this collaboration provided proof of their tenuous cohesion. (...) There are many other things in my life with which I do not agree, but 'Un Cadavre' is amongst them. I hate this pamphlet as I hate the polemical parts of the *Second Manifesto*. These immediate accusations, with no possibility of recall, came from facility and premature annoyance: how much better silence on both sides would have been.' (*The Absence of Myth*, 31-32). See also e.g.: Surya, 131-139; Nadeau, 167.

<sup>54</sup> Georges Bataille, 'The Castrated Lion,' in *The Absence of Myth*, 29.

<sup>55</sup> Leiris, 'From Bataille the Impossible,' 15.

From what I have seen up until now, the title you have chosen for this magazine is hardly justified, apart from in the sense that you present us with 'Documents' on your state of mind. It is a lot, but it is not entirely enough. You must really return to the idea that inspired this project in the first instance, when we spoke to M. WILDENSTEIN, you and me. Will you give this some serious thought? I have, of course, no sanctions to hold against 'Documents'. I only have one: the cancellation of the magazine...<sup>56</sup>

Rivière, however, remained supportive of Bataille, defending his position, increasingly in question, to Wildenstein and d'Espezel.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, *Documents* seemed only to become more and more daring.<sup>58</sup> From the sixth issue onwards, the *comité de rédaction* ceased to be referred to. The only name appearing on the title page was that of the *secrétaire général* himself: Georges Bataille.

Far from what Wildenstein had envisioned, far from his dreams of a commercially viable magazine neatly capitalising on a contemporary craze for non-Western objects, *Documents* was discontinued in 1931.<sup>59</sup> Two failed attempts at relaunching the journal took place. Editorship was assumed by Wildenstein and the list of collaborators was furnished with new names. Published as a supplement to *Gazette des beaux-arts*, the journal held little resemblance to the original iteration. In 1934, *Documents* disappeared again, this time for good.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Letter from D'Espezel to Bataille (15 April 1929) in Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes: Tome I*, edited by Denis Hollier (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 648-649. 'D'après ce que j'ai vu jusqu'ici, le titre que vous avez choisi pour cette revue n'est guère justifié qu'en ce sens qu'il nous donne des 'Documents' sur votre état d'esprit. C'est beaucoup, mais ce n'est pas tout à fait assez. Il faut vraiment revenir à l'esprit qui nous a inspiré le premier projet de cette revue, quand nous avons parlé à M. WILDENSTEIN, vous et moi. Voulez-vous songer à cela très sérieusement? Je n'ai, naturellement, aucune sanction à brandir contre 'Documents'. Je n'en ai qu'une : la suppression de la revue ...'

<sup>57</sup> Letter from Rivière to D'Espezel (23 December 1929) in Bataille, *Œuvres Complètes*, 649.

<sup>58</sup> Leiris explained that with the publication of 'The Big Toe' (6:1929), 'Bataille literally puts his foot down'. ('From Bataille the Impossible', 18.)

<sup>59</sup> Hollier writes that the inclusion of ethnography in the journal's title announced that *Documents* would 'not be another *Gazette des beaux-arts*, and even less a *Gazette des beaux-arts primitifs*.' (Denis Hollier, 'The Use-Value of the Impossible,' trans. Liesl Ollman, *October*, vol. 60 (Spring, 1992): 5. This essay introduced the 1991 facsimile of *Documents* published by Jean-Michel Place.

<sup>60</sup> Two issues appeared, one in 1933 and another in 1934.

## Interpreting *Documents*: An Introduction to the Methodological Field

Despite its short life, *Documents* has received a lot of attention. This is largely due to the work of the American art historian Rosalind Krauss and, in particular, to the remarkable afterlife she gave the Bataillean term ‘formless’: a concept explained in a six-sentence-long text written for the journal’s ‘Critical Dictionary’ (7:1929).<sup>61</sup> Indeed, as we will see, Krauss’ interpretation of ‘formless’ would become central to her writings of the 1980s and 1990s, informing not only her reading of *Documents*’ criticality but of that at play within the avant-garde at large.<sup>62</sup>

### *Krauss on ‘Formless’: A Contextualisation*

When Krauss took an interest in *Documents* in the early 1980s, setting in motion her influential framing of Bataille’s ‘formless’, it was as part of a larger critical effort set to challenge the dominant interpretative traditions in art history and criticism by exposing its practices to the array of theoretical frameworks and philosophical approaches, broadly termed postmodernist, that had been shaking up academic and cultural discourse since the late 1960s.<sup>63</sup> Taking particular

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<sup>61</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘Formless,’ in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 31.

<sup>62</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1985), ‘Corpus Delicti,’ in *L’Amour Fou: Photography & Surrealism*, eds. Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingstone (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985) and Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997). On the afterlife of ‘formless’, see e.g.: Patrick Crowley and Paul Hegarty (eds.), *Formless: Ways in and Out of Form* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005).

<sup>63</sup> In *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Krauss uses the term ‘postmodernist’ to refer to ‘the theoretical domain of structuralist and poststructuralist analysis’ (6). The theoretical and philosophical sources drawn upon in Krauss’ writings are wide-ranging, including e.g. Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, etc. Whilst her earlier writings tend to put these influences to use for broadly postmodernist ends, it is notable that later work, in particular that on post-medium, e.g. *A Voyage on the North Sea: Post-Medium Condition* (1999) and *Under Blue Cup* (2011), mobilise the theories of Stanley Cavell, an American ‘ordinary language’ philosopher who had studied under J. L. Austin. For an account of Derrida’s deconstructionist critique of Austin, see p. 60-62 of this thesis. For an account of Cavell and Derrida, see e.g.: Gordon Bearn, ‘Sounding Serious: Cavell and Derrida’, *Representations*, vol. 63, no. 1 (1998): 65-92. On the effect of Cavell on Krauss work, see e.g.: Diarmuid Costello, ‘Automat, Automatic, Automatism: Rosalind Krauss and Stanley Cavell on Photography and Photographically Dependent Arts’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 38, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 819-854; Rex Butler, *Stanley Cavell and the Arts: Philosophy and Popular Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). Costello writes: ‘where much of Krauss’s earlier work may be read as a deconstruction, if not outright rejection of medium talk (...) Krauss now seems to go out of her way to revive it, albeit in noncanonical forms’ (820n2). As such, it is important to emphasise that Krauss’ art historical oeuvre at large is

aim at the doctrines of her modernist mentor, Clement Greenberg, Krauss announced in the introduction to *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985): ‘Practically everything (...) stands in contradiction to this position.’<sup>64</sup>

The story of Clement Greenberg begins in the 1930s.<sup>65</sup> For the cultural American Left, this was an anxious time, riddled with disillusion. As dreams of a revolutionary Communist Soviet seemed slowly to be crushed by the increasing totalitarianism implemented under Stalinist rule, utopian hopes for the role of radical art within such societal transformation seemed equally dampened after the introduction of propagandistic social realism as state art. Reacting to this perceived threat to avant-garde art, the Trotskyite circles around the American magazine *Partisan Review* (1934-2003) began to make a different case for its role. Withdrawing claims of art as a political instrument, Greenberg and his colleagues instead began to argue for disengagement. In order to save art from complete ruination, they announced, it must be freed from all political interference.<sup>66</sup>

The role of the avant-garde, Greenberg explained in his famous 1939 essay ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, is to preserve art from the mess of culture and realpolitik – that is, from kitsch. And the only way to do so, Greenberg claimed, was by means of isolation.<sup>67</sup> Elaborating on the formal repercussions of such protective gesture, Greenberg announced that each medium was to surrender to itself, performing a complete withdrawal into its own essential qualities. There, Greenberg explained, ‘hunted back’ into a formal self-sufficiency, ‘art lies safe’.<sup>68</sup> Painting was to be *only* painting and nothing else: not propaganda, not advertisement; not referential, not figurative, but a realisation of its own essence – that is, pigment on a flat, two-dimensional surface.<sup>69</sup> Leaving figuration for abstraction, thus, avant-garde artists were not breaking with

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not exclusively ‘deconstructionist’ in tone, but, on the contrary, decidedly amorphous and wide-reaching. As this thesis demonstrates, however, Krauss’ interpretation of ‘formless’, which would become important for her work of the 80s and 90s as well as for her reading of *Documents*, was firmly deconstructionist, building upon Derrida’s 1967 analysis of Bataille’s critical work.  
<sup>64</sup> Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 1-2. The publication is a collection of essays, dating to the late 70s-early 80s, most of which had appeared in *October*, the periodical launched by Krauss and Annette Michelson in 1976. Telling of their ambitions, the title journal’s title referred to the rupture of the 1917 October Revolution. On the revolutionary role of the periodical, François Cusset writes: ‘*October* was the only journal at the time that seriously explored the issues of French theory in relation to art and artistic practice.’ (*French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008: 64).

<sup>65</sup> For an account of Greenberg’s theories, see e.g.: Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Serge Guilbaut, *How America Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 17-47.

<sup>67</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant Garde and Kitsch,’ in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticisms: Volume 1*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago, 1986), 5-22.

<sup>68</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘Towards a Newer Laocoön,’ in *ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>69</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘Irrelevance versus Irresponsibility,’ in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticisms: Volume 2*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago, 1986), 232.

tradition but, on the contrary, preserving what had *always* been the formal essence of painting. To Greenberg, avant-gardists are not radical transgressors of tradition but heroic guardians of it. ‘Modernist art develops out of the past without gap or break’, Greenberg explained.<sup>70</sup>

Through the teleology of Hegelian historiography, Greenberg tells the history of modernist painting as a story of self-realisation. Starting off with Manet and Courbet, the first painters who, Greenberg argues, began to flatten the pictorial space and focus attention to the medium itself, he moves into the twentieth-century via the Impressionists and their ‘cross-hatched dabs of colour’. The formalist baton is subsequently passed onto Cézanne, who, Greenberg explains, solidified those ‘dabs’ into uniform colour fields, thereby creating the platform from which the Cubists took their departure.<sup>71</sup> With the collage – a ‘clue to the aesthetic of genuinely modern art’ – the Cubists finally destroyed the illusion of depth by slamming together multiple planes into one flat surface.<sup>72</sup> Skipping over Surrealism, Greenberg then moved onto abstract expressionism and, in particular, to Jackson Pollock, whose art he considered to ‘extend’ directly from the Cubist and post-Cubist tradition.<sup>73</sup> Greenberg’s story of modern art is a story of continuity and purification.

To break with the modernism of Greenbergian thought, therefore, an updated, *postmodernist* conception of the criticality of the avant-garde was needed. This is the context in which Krauss’ reading of Bataille’s ‘formless’ emerged: as an aid for reformulation; as a catalyst capable of severing the logocentric commitments to essence, authenticity, and originality lingering in the traditional practices and frameworks of art historical analysis. Indeed, the radical work of Georges Bataille – who in 1967, five years after his death, had been posthumously hailed by Derrida himself as a deconstructionist *avant la lettre* – was perhaps a natural place to turn as part of such a mission.<sup>74</sup> Expanding on Derrida’s 1967 interpretation of Bataille, Krauss moved to launch a distinctly deconstructionist identification of ‘formless’. Subsequently placing this now deconstructive force at the heart of the journal’s critical strategy, Krauss could single out *Documents* as an avant-garde text that was critical in the Derridean sense of the word: a text whose criticality stemmed only from its ability to radically displace meaning by sabotaging the

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<sup>70</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting,’ in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticisms: Volume 4*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago, 1993), 92.

<sup>71</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘Cézanne: Gateway to Contemporary Painting,’ in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticisms: Volume 3*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago, 1993), 114-118.

<sup>72</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘The Paper Pasted Revolution,’ in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticisms: Volume 4*, 66.

<sup>73</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘The European View of American Art,’ in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticisms: Volume 3*, 62.

<sup>74</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve,’ in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 251-277. The essay originally appeared in a special issue on Bataille published by *L’Ar* (May 1967): 24-44.

very processes of meaning production.<sup>75</sup> As we will see, although Derrida's 1967 interpretation of Bataille has since been subject to revision, the deconstructionist identification of *Documents*, cemented by Krauss in the 1980s and 1990s, has remained prevalent in art historical discourse.

### *A Derridean Critique*

To Derrida, traditional Western thought is 'logocentric': that is, relying on the assumption that it is somehow sustained and validated by an external authority.<sup>76</sup> Throughout history, this authority has taken on different shapes and forms – the divine logos, speech, reason, law, etc. Its function, however, has remained the same: to act as an absolute source of truth that stabilises signification from an outside position.<sup>77</sup> Logocentrism, then, describes both the illusion of and desire for what Derrida calls the 'transcendental signified': an irreducible point of origin that warrants us a metaphysical presence.<sup>78</sup>

Critiquing such unsupported notion of a non-discursive stabiliser of meaning and values, Derrida mobilises an alternative epistemological condition: writing or *écriture*. In this terrain, he explains, there simply is no such thing as an outside. There is no innocent point of truth capable of warranting presence. Instead, it is all on the inside. It is all writing. Or as Derrida famously put it: '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*'.<sup>79</sup> From this premise, Derrida sketches a new foundation for philosophy: instead of a neat and unquestionable correspondence between sign and external validation – between inside and outside – we are faced with a never-ending 'chain of substitution'.<sup>80</sup> Never validated or arriving at a full stop, the process of signification is instead unlimited and free-floating where 'every signified is also in the position of a signifier'.<sup>81</sup> Here, Derrida continued,

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<sup>75</sup> On Krauss, *October*, and deconstructionism, see e.g.: Matthew Biro, 'Art Criticism and Deconstruction: Rosalind Krauss and Jacques Derrida,' *Art Criticism*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1990): 33-47; David Carrier, *Rosalind Krauss and American Philosophical Art Criticism: From Formalism to Beyond Postmodernism* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002); Matthew Bowman, 'October's Postmodernism,' *Visual Resources*, vol. 31, no. 1-2 (2015): 117-126. It should be noted that Krauss was not the first art historian to discuss *Documents*. An earlier example is Dawn Ades' 1978 catalogue *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* which contains a brief chapter on the journal. In the French context, early commentators include the literary scholar and editor of Bataille's *œuvres complètes*, the first volume of which appeared in 1970, Denis Hollier. Hollier had been a member, alongside Derrida, of the *Tel Quel*-group and his subsequent 'alliance' with Krauss and *October* was, as C.F.B. Miller writes, 'a decisive factor' in the 'the deconstructive turn in American art history'. ('Rotten Sun,' *Art History*, 34:2 (April 2011): 392.)

<sup>76</sup> For a general account of Derrida's deconstructionist project, see e.g.: Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction* (Oxon: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 11-13.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 158. Spivak translates this statement to 'there is nothing outside the text'. Later scholarship, however, has used a more literal translation: 'there is no outside-of-text'. See e.g. Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>80</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), 14.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

even the *'thing itself is a sign'*.<sup>82</sup> This structure of repeatability, however, is not predictable. In the absence of any original source, each reiteration is subjected to movement, dislocation, and difference. This is what Derrida calls the *iterability* of the sign: 'the logic that ties repetition to alterity'.<sup>83</sup> As such, Derrida concludes, the inevitable play of difference also triggers a perpetual deferral of meaning.

To illustrate this phenomenon, Derrida coins a neologism: *différance*. This term does not describe the impossibility of stable meaning, but rather – in true deconstructionist fashion – forcefully enacts it. Indeed, *différance* – a deliberately misspelled amalgamation of 'differ' and 'defer' – has no closure, it never arrives at an irreducible or full identity. It is characterised by absence, alteration, and deferral. It is split at the very core. *Différance*, Derrida explains, is 'neither a *word* nor a *concept*'.<sup>84</sup> Instead, it disrupts the relation between the signified and signifier, that is, between the sign and its meaning. The logocentric illusion of a static system of signs is here displaced by one of never-ending movement and instability.

The fundamental property of *écriture* therefore is the sense of meaning slipping away, or in Derrida's words, 'a disruption of presence in a mark'.<sup>85</sup> This phenomenon, which Derrida calls *spacing*, works as 'an index of a movement, of a displacement which indicates an irreducible alterity'.<sup>86</sup> Derridean *écriture* becomes the ultimate deconstructionist antidote needed to collapse the logocentric structure of Western thought. Through his cohort of semantically destabilising non-concepts – *iterability*, *différance*, *spacing*, etc. – Derrida mobilises a deconstructive artillery working to enact a collapse of the 'metaphysics of presence', subjecting it to a perpetual instability of meaning. Deconstructionism therefore is not a methodology in any traditional sense. Rather than producing results or positive data, it collapses the very foundation that enables such a process. Deconstruction, Derrida writes, is a 'force of dislocation that spreads itself throughout the entire system, fissuring it in every direction'.<sup>87</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, after exposing the discipline of art history to be suffering from a similar set of logocentric illusions, Krauss released Derrida's 'force of dislocation' within its interpretative traditions, rupturing any assumed stability between the visual sign and its

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<sup>82</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 49.

<sup>83</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context' in *Limited Inc*, trans. Alan Bass (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 7.

<sup>84</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Différance,' in *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 130.

<sup>85</sup> Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context,' 19.

<sup>86</sup> Derrida, *Positions*, 81.

<sup>87</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Force and Signification,' in *Writing and Difference*, 20.

significance. As we will see, Bataille's 'formless', defined in firmly deconstructionist terms, would act as an important instrument.

### *Derrida on Bataille: A 'transgression of meaning'*

In 'From Restricted Economy to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve' (1967), Derrida mobilises Bataille to displace Hegelian dialectics. To Derrida, Hegel is a philosopher of totalising systems where, by means of the logocentric magic of *Aufhebung*, or sublation, any contradictions, negations or differences are absorbed and assimilated into a teleological schema of reason.<sup>88</sup> Derrida writes: 'The *Aufhebung* is included within the circle of absolute knowledge, never exceeds its closure, never suspends the totality of discourse, work, meaning, law, etc.'<sup>89</sup> Unwilling to subscribe to any neatly idealising narratives, opting instead to champion and reveal irrecoverable excess and transgressive incompleteness at the heart of things, Bataille provides Derrida with an alternative terrain.

Performing 'an endless and baseless substitution', Bataille's writing, Derrida explains, enacts 'a kind of potlatch of signs that burns, consumes, and wastes words in the gay affirmation of death: a sacrifice and a challenge.' It 'relates its objects to the destruction, without reserve, of meaning.' Situating Bataille as a proto-deconstructionist, Derrida thus transposes Bataillean transgression to a linguistic level and abstracts it into a 'transgression of meaning'.<sup>90</sup> Bataillean *excess* morphs into Derridean *écriture* and is transformed into an epistemological terrain where, as Bruce Baugh summarises, 'negations and differences could proliferate endlessly without ever being recuperated into a positive and totalizing synthesis.'<sup>91</sup> A deconstructive terrain, that is, that 'falls outside the totalizing schema of thesis-anti-thesis-synthesis, and it achieves this 'escape' through the mobility and undecidability of its terms.'<sup>92</sup> The criticality of Bataillean expenditure therefore amounts, in Derrida's view, to 'a reduction of meaning.'<sup>93</sup> This deconstructionist interpretation of Bataille was subsequently repeated at *Tel Quel* (1960-1982) – a French periodical important for the development of post-structuralist and deconstructionist theory, hailing Bataille as one of its

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<sup>88</sup> Derrida, 'From Restricted to General Economy,' 251-277. On Derrida's interpretation of Bataille, see e.g.: Stuart Barnett (ed.), *Hegel After Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2002); Bruce Baugh, *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>89</sup> Derrida, 'From Restricted to General Economy,' 348.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 347, 339.

<sup>91</sup> Baugh, 120.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>93</sup> Derrida, 'From Restricted to General Economy,' 339.

precursors.<sup>94</sup> Working from Derrida's interpretation of Bataille, Krauss moved to launch a deconstructionist identification of 'formless'. Subsequently placing this now deconstructive force at the heart of the journal's critical strategy, Krauss could single out *Documents* as an avant-garde text that was critical in the Derridean sense of the word.

### *Formless*

In the seventh issue of *Documents'* first year (1929), Bataille's six-sentence-long dictionary-entry on 'Formless' announced:

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.<sup>95</sup>

In her interpretation of this short text, Krauss gives 'formless' a distinctly Derridean function:

philosophy's task is to make sure that everything has its proper form, its defined boundaries, its limits. But certain words, and *informe* is one of them, have a contrary mission. Their task is to declassify, to strip away the 'mathematical frockcoats' that philosophy drapes over everything. (...) *Informe* denotes what alteration produces, the reduction of meaning or value, not by contradiction – which would be dialectical – but by putrefaction: the puncturing of the limits around the term, the reduction to the sameness of the cadaver – which is transgressive.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> For an account of *Tel Quel*, see e.g.: Patrick ffrench, *The Time for Theory: A History of Tel Quel (1960-1983)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>95</sup> Bataille, 'Formless'.

<sup>96</sup> Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 63-64.

Krauss' 'formless' is similar to Derrida's 'différance'. As Bataille's 'frock-coats' are equated with Derrida's 'metaphysics of presence', Krauss' 'formless' – just like Derrida's 'différance' – is singled out as the deconstructive force able to collapse such logocentric illusions, or, to paraphrase Derrida, as the 'force of dislocation that spreads itself throughout the entire system, fissuring it in every direction'.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, just like 'différance', Krauss' 'formless' does not perform the traditional, signifying duties of 'a word' or 'a concept'.<sup>98</sup> Instead, just like 'différance', it operates directly in relation to meaning production, working to semantically destabilise signification by subjecting its processes to the 'collapse of difference'.<sup>99</sup> 'Informe', Krauss concludes, reframing the phraseology from Derrida's 1967 essay, amounts to a 'reduction of meaning'.<sup>100</sup>

In her subsequent reading of *Documents*, Krauss positions 'formless', now characterised as a Derridean 'force of dislocation', at the heart of the journal's avant-garde work. To demonstrate how such deconstructive operation materialised in *Documents*, Krauss turns to a photograph displaying an open, saliva-laden mouth, (Fig. 3). Shot by Jacques-André Boiffard, the image was printed in the fifth issue of the journal's second year (1930), alongside Bataille's dictionary-entry on 'Mouth'. As 'mouth and anus are conflated', Krauss explains, the photograph engenders an 'amorphous blur'.<sup>101</sup> A 'mechanism for the achievement of *informe*' is detected: 'an axial rotation from vertical to horizontal – through, that is, the mechanics of fall', the critical effect of which is 'to undo formal categories, to deny that each thing has its 'proper' form, to imagine meaning as gone shapeless'.<sup>102</sup>

Defined in decidedly Derridean terms, thus, Bataillean excess – finding its way into the pages of *Documents* via the mechanics of 'formless' – is primarily marked, Krauss explains, by the 'contradiction that operates its relation to meaning, such that the signifier oscillates constantly between two poles'.<sup>103</sup> Semantically fractured by the 'irremediable doubleness at the root of things', the sign is stuck in a limbo: forever unstable, forever subject to the dislocating powers of alteration, never arriving at a full identity or presence.<sup>104</sup> Through this particular identification of 'formless', Krauss thus positioned *Documents* as a prime example of a deconstructionist avant-garde. Once modelled, however, this formula was soon to be extrapolated out of *Documents* and

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<sup>97</sup> Derrida, 'Force and Signification,' 20.

<sup>98</sup> Derrida, 'Différance,' 130.

<sup>99</sup> Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 64.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 63-64. The phraseology ('reduction of meaning') is the same as that used in Derrida's 1967 essay, see Derrida, 'From Restricted to General Economy,' 339.

<sup>101</sup> Krauss, 'Corpus Delicti,' 65.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>103</sup> Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 62.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 54.

applied onto a wide array of radical practices. First, onto Surrealist photography in *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (1985). Then onto the avant-garde at large in *Formless: A User's Guide* (1997), a catalogue co-written with Yve-Alain Bois.

### *Moving On From Documents: Surrealism, Photography and Beyond*

In *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (1985), a catalogue co-edited by Krauss and Jane Livingstone as part an exhibition held the same year at the Hayward Gallery, Krauss positions 'formless' as an umbrella term of sorts, allowing it to stretch across Surrealist practices as well as a definition of the photographic medium per se.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, after identifying 'formless' as an 'assault on reality', Krauss could effectively attach it to the Surrealist mission at large – the aim of which was, Krauss explains through quoting Breton, 'a total revision of real values'.<sup>106</sup> With the effect of radically revaluing the role of photography within Surrealism, Krauss subsequently argued that this 'assault on reality' was particularly evident in the photographic practices of the movement. Using Man Ray and his photographic deformations of the human body as an example, Krauss declared that 'surrealist photographers were masters of the *informe*'.<sup>107</sup> Through distortion and doubling, the image stops being a representation and instead becomes a movement of displacement.

Having unveiled the dislocating forces of 'formless' within Surrealist practices too, Krauss subsequently turns to identify the photographic medium *as such* with deconstructionist processes. To these ends, she starts off with a Barthesian framing of the medium. The photographic image, Barthes announced, works to capture a 'reality one can no longer touch', something that is 'irrefutably present, and yet already deferred'.<sup>108</sup> Working from this premise, Krauss moves on to equate the photographic process with Derridean *spacing*: 'Through duplication it opens the original to the effect of difference, of deferral, of one-thing-after-another, or within another: of multiples burgeoning within the same.'<sup>109</sup> The process of cropping, essential to the ontological

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<sup>105</sup> For critical accounts of the exhibition and catalogue, see Steve Edwards, 'Gizmo Surrealism,' *Art History*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (December 1987) and Hal Foster, 'L'Amour Faux,' *Art in America*, vol. 74, no. 1 (1986). The former scathingly dubs it an 'attempt to drag Surrealism (kicking and screaming, it seems to me) into the arena of North American "Post-Modernism"' (509).

<sup>106</sup> Krauss, 'Corpus Delicti,' 65; André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 32.

<sup>107</sup> Krauss, 'Corpus Delicti,' 60.

<sup>108</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage, 2000), 77-87. Significantly, Derrida lauded *Camera Lucida* as one of the 'most significant texts on the so-called question of the Referent in the modern technological age.' (Jacques Derrida, 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes' in *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 39.)

<sup>109</sup> Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 109.

nature of photography, Krauss explains, thus subjects the medium to ‘the transmutation of presence into succession’.<sup>110</sup> Photography is announced as a vehicle of deconstruction: ‘In cutting into the body of the world, stopping it, framing it, spacing it, photography reveals that world as written.’<sup>111</sup> In turn, Krauss concludes, photography can be seen to work ‘in the service of surrealism’: ‘Surreality *is*, we could say, nature convulsed into a kind of writing.’<sup>112</sup>

In 1997, the catalogue *Formless: A User's Guide*, published in relation to an exhibition with the same name held the previous year at the Centre Pompidou, extended the domain of ‘formless’ further, stretching it to encapsulate a deconstructive avant-garde tradition of sorts. Indeed, as Bois and Krauss write in the preface, ‘the operational, performative ‘force’ of the ‘formless’ revealed itself as necessary to the understanding of other practices’.<sup>113</sup> Similarly to Greenberg, they begin their story with Édouard Manet. Rather than identifying a teleological preservation of an essence, however, they identify a series of ‘operations that brush modernism against the grain’.<sup>114</sup> Constructing what resembles a teleology of absence, encompassing Manet as well as Cy Twombly and Cindy Sherman, Krauss and Bois identify an artistic avant-garde lineage that, under the spell of ‘formless’, worked towards the ‘splitting apart of meaning from within’, towards the ‘wreckage of representation’.<sup>115</sup> This is an avant-garde that never preserves, only collapses. Greenberg’s modernist vision was far gone.

In the 1980s and 1990s, thus, Krauss’ interpretation of ‘formless’ provided a powerful counternarrative to dominant paradigms, radically unleashing a deconstructionist ‘force of dislocation’ in an art historical tradition steeped in logocentric assumptions.<sup>116</sup> Whilst triggering a

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>111</sup> Rosalind Krauss, ‘Photography in the Service of Surrealism,’ in *L'Amour Fou: Photography & Surrealism*, 36.

<sup>112</sup> Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 113. In his review of the exhibition and catalogue, Edwards writes: ‘This is the project of book and exhibition, to rewrite Surrealism, to empty its history into the giddy heights of discursive idealism. It is also why Ades seems so marginal: in her piece there is still some historical anchorage on the ground of the magazines. Surrealist photography, becomes, in Krauss’s hands, simply the (...) antecedent of ‘Post-Modern’ practice’ (509-510).

<sup>113</sup> Bois and Krauss, 9.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 245, 146.

<sup>116</sup> Greenberg was not the only target of Krauss’ art historical revisions in the 80s and 90s. On the contrary, her writings from this period partly take aim at a broader logocentric tendency that seeks to stabilise interpretation by assuming the visual sign to be granted meaning from an external point of absolute origin. A frequent yet fraudulent source of such presence, according to Krauss, is the autobiographical details of the artist. To exemplify this ‘art-history as a history of the proper name’, Krauss turns to MoMA’s director of Painting and Sculpture, William Rubin, and, in particular, his recent Picasso retrospective (1980), where any formal changes in the artist’s career were carefully traced back to the twists and turns of his private life. This interpretative framework, Krauss continues, can ‘be likened to a detective story or the *roman à clef*, where the meaning of the tale reduces to just this question of identity.’ It is a practice that wants to arrive at a full stop. It is a practice that, Krauss elaborates, wants ‘to achieve a type of signification beyond which there can be no further reading or interpretation.’ Krauss’ sentiment is clear: ‘That this manoeuvre of finding an exact (historical) referent for every pictorial sign, thereby fixing and limiting the play of meaning, should be questionable with regard to art in general is obvious.’ (*The Originality*, 23-40). For an account of Derrida’s critique of the logocentric structures underpinning the so-called ‘proper name’, see e.g.: Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 95-316; Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 250-253.

significant critical reappraisal not only of *Documents* and Bataillean thought, but of Surrealism, photography, and the avant-garde tradition too, however, its long-lasting dominance in art historical discourses surrounding the journal has left unexplored other ways in which it generated a critical position in interwar France. In particular, as we will see, the tendency to interpret ‘formless’ and Bataillean heterogeneity in deconstructionist terms has had a dehistoricising effect. Indeed, by placing its critical focus on the moment of collapse, on the gesture of destabilisation, deconstructionist thought tends to miss out on other less reliable and more porous but nonetheless *experienced* forms of signification. This thesis seeks to address this lacuna and produce a historicised understanding of the *Documents*’ critical work, exploring how the journal acted as an avant-garde text by critically partaking in – rather than collapsing – cultural processes of meaning-production.

### *Recent Bataille Scholarship*

In recent Bataille scholarship, Derrida’s 1967 interpretation and its afterlife has been subject to revision. The notion that Derrida mobilised Bataille to deconstructionist ends has become commonplace. As Derrida himself admitted, he was interpreting ‘Bataille against Bataille’.<sup>117</sup> ‘We have reached a point,’ Allan Stoekl explained in 1985, ‘at which we recognize how contemporary deconstructive critics, in their method of reading, seem to have gone beyond the ‘urtexts’’. As such, he continues, ‘Derrida therefore changes the priorities of Bataille’s project’.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, to Michael Richardson, this interpretative tradition – in which Bataille is ‘sanctified as a prophet of deconstruction’ – ‘appropriates his work in a way that is contemptuous of its determinants’ and, therefore, ends up being ‘reductionist of the themes that Bataille wanted to tackle in his work’.<sup>119</sup> Patrick ffrench too notes that ‘the ‘theoretical’ interpretations of the 60s’, ‘sought to re-evaluate the thought of Bataille and to use it to drive a wedge into the conceptual framework of their time.’ It is an interpretation, he concludes, that ‘risks missing and misinterpreting what was at stake’.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Derrida, ‘From Restricted to General Economy,’ 348. Baugh writes: ‘Derrida was at least frank enough to more or less admit that he had used Bataille for his own project, that of producing a theory of writing, (...) resulting in a number of ‘interpretations’ that contradict what Bataille explicitly says.’ (91).

<sup>118</sup> Stoekl, xvi, 115.

<sup>119</sup> Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4. See also, Suzanne Guerlac’s emphasis on the difference between Bataille of 20s/30s and that of the poststructuralist interpretation of 60s/70s. (‘Bataille in Theory: Afterimages (Lascaux),’ *Diacritics* (Summer, 1996): 6-17).

<sup>120</sup> Patrick ffrench, *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* (London: Legenda, 2007), 1-3.

A recurring theme in recent revisions is the decontextualising effect of this deconstructionist interpretation. It is a theoretical manoeuvre, French writes, that ‘tends to efface the history of these ideas and concepts’, thus producing a ‘forgetting of the historical and existential dimensions’.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, emphasising ‘the apolitical loss figured in the methods of deconstruction’, Stoekl calls attention to that which has been ‘stripped’ by this interpretative legacy: ‘the political and social conflict’.<sup>122</sup> In order to counteract this ‘de-contextualisation of his work’, Richardson similarly declares, it is necessary to ‘situate Bataille’s work, and to make it clear that the post-modernist appropriation is not necessarily the only legitimate perspective in which it can be viewed.’<sup>123</sup>

Working from such revisions, a prominent strand in recent scholarship has aimed at re-contextualising Bataille’s oeuvre. The interdisciplinary nature of his writings has led researchers to explore the latter’s critical thought in relation to a wide variety of areas such as sociology (Richman, 2002; Falasca-Zamponi, 2011; Pawlett, 2016), mysticism (Hollywood, 2002), contemporary ecological ethics and politics (Stoekl, 2007), religion and theology (Biles and Brintnall, 2015), and, most recently, psychotherapy (Buse, 2021).

### *Recent Art Historical Interpretations of Documents*

Although Derrida’s 1967 interpretation of Bataille’s critical oeuvre has been subject to revision, the deconstructionist identification of *Documents* has remained prevalent in art historical scholarship.<sup>124</sup> In *La Ressemblance informe ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (1995), written by the French art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman, the journal was again, albeit through a slightly different route, fashioned as a deconstructive force. And, again, ‘formless’ played an instrumental role.<sup>125</sup> To Didi-Huberman, *Documents* poses as a radical montage, characterised by perpetual ‘conflict’ rather than synthesis. Throughout its pages, a ‘play of cruel

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 1-3.

<sup>122</sup> Stoekl, xvii.

<sup>123</sup> Richardson, 5.

<sup>124</sup> Not all accounts of *Documents* subscribe to this deconstructionist interpretation, see e.g.: John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography, and the Everyday Life* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002). Roberts writes: ‘Krauss in effect places the surrealist’s textual use of photography outside the social demands of the archive’. (111). See also Joyce Suechun Cheng, ‘Documents,’ in *The International Encyclopedia of Surrealism: Volume 1*, edited by Michael Richardson (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 453. For interpretations emphasising the relation to ethnography, see n14p19.

<sup>125</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris: Éditions Macula, 2019). Originally published in 1995. On the conflict between Bois/Krauss and Didi-Huberman, see *Formless: A User’s Guide*, 67-86 and the ‘Postface’ in the 2017 edition of Didi-Huberman’s *La Ressemblance informe*. For a discussion of both, see Brent Hayes Edwards, ‘Ethnics of Surrealism’, *Transition*, no. 78 (1998): 84-135.

resemblances' is identified: misleading and destabilising juxtapositions across image and text that put the very notion of mimesis under pressure.<sup>126</sup> Forms de-form and resemblances rupture: a 'phenomenon' that Didi-Huberman labels 'entirely heterogenous to signification.'<sup>127</sup>

Inspiring this unsettling display tactic was, Didi-Huberman elaborates, Sergei Eisenstein's theory of montage. The Soviet filmmaker had delivered a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1930, attended by Bataille and other *Documents*-collaborators.<sup>128</sup> Didi-Huberman writes:

above all, Bataille found in Eisenstein's theory of montage – it is of little importance that he only knew of it partially, because its essence was heard in all discussions, visible in all films – something akin to a new, 'overwhelming' type of dialectal principle, at once very concretely specific to cinematic montage and very easily displaced to all productions of signs, forms, gestures or representation, in short, to all 'communication'. I will call this principle a *dialectic of attraction and of conflict*. It denotes precisely the play of contact and contrast, the play of cruel resemblances, ways of lacerating by means of touching, all that which, when reading *Documents*, one cannot cease to find and see develop in its structural principle of figuration.<sup>129</sup>

To exemplify, Didi-Huberman draws our attention to the 'incurable conflict' between severed hooves at the slaughterhouse of La Villette and the female legs in a Hollywood-still, both appearing in *Documents* (6:1929), (Fig. 4 and 5): 'there is a resemblance, but a cruel one: no synthesis will ever be completed, each image remains alone, exasperated, in the laceration that is produced as it nonetheless *touches* the other image...'<sup>130</sup> Didi-Huberman speaks of a resulting

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<sup>126</sup> Didi-Huberman, 336. 'Ce principe, je nommerai une *dialectique de l'attraction et du conflit*. Il dit exactement le jeu du contact et du contraste, le jeu des ressemblances cruelles, des façons de déchirer en faisant se toucher, tout ce que nous n'avons cessé, en parcourant *Documents*, de découvrir et de voir s'organiser en principe structural de figurabilité.'

<sup>127</sup> Didi-Huberman, 307. 'C'est un phénomène (...) absolument hétérogènes de signification.'

<sup>128</sup> The event was referred to three times in the journal: 'Six conférences d'Eisenstein' (7:1929); Bataille, 'Les écarts de la nature' (2:1930); Desnos, 'La Ligne générale' (4:1930). See also: Rebecchi Marie, *Paris 1929 : Eisenstein, Bataille, Buñuel* (Paris: Éditions Mimesis, 2018).

<sup>129</sup> Didi-Huberman, 336. 'surtout, Bataille découvre dans la théorie eisensteinienne du montage - peu importe qu'il l'ait connue partiellement, car l'essentiel était audible en chaque partie des discours, visible en chaque séquence des films – quelque chose comme un principe dialectique d'un genre nouveau, 'bouleversant', à la fois très concrètement spécifique au montage cinématographique, et très aisément déplaçable à tout production de signes, de formes, de gestes ou de représentations, bref à toute 'communication'. Ce principe, je le nommerai une *dialectique de l'attraction et du conflit*. Il dit exactement le jeu du contact et du contraste, le jeu des ressemblances cruelles, des façons de déchirer en faisant se toucher, tout ce que nous n'avons cessé, en parcourant *Documents*, de découvrir et de voir s'organiser en principe structural de figurabilité.'

<sup>130</sup> Didi-Huberman, 386. 'Il en est de même dans *Documents*: entre les pattes d'animaux de la Villette et les jambes féminines du Moulin-Rogue, entre le poisson qui dévore son semblable et l'homme qui dévore son propre visage dans une tête de mort, une *resemblance* a bien lieu, mais cruelle: une *synthèse* n'aura jamais vraiment lieu, chaque image demeurant seule, exaspérée, dans la *déchirure* qui la fait pourtant *toucher* l'autre image...'

‘wound’: ‘a wound in the object of knowledge, in the subject of knowledge, a pervasive wound that makes *knowledge open itself up*, split itself, dilapidate.’<sup>131</sup> On the level of meaning-production, the decomposing effect of this ‘perpetual warping’, of ‘resemblance opening onto dissemblance’, amounts to a ‘paradoxical ‘semiotics’ where ‘that which is signified remains *unknown*,’ being ‘at once a sign of laceration and a laceration of the sign.’<sup>132</sup> The radical result is ‘*an image capable of transgressing the image*’: ‘a *symptom* capable of shattering the screen (the repressive device) of representation.’<sup>133</sup>

Akin to Krauss, then, Didi-Huberman sought to unveil logocentric assumptions looming within the art historical discipline and to align its discursive practices with poststructuralist theory. Didi-Huberman’s prime target is the discipline’s pervasive and unjustified overreliance on mimetic resemblance. At stake in his oeuvre is nothing less than to undercut and sabotage any treatments of *resemblance* as a transcendental signifier. As Chari Larsson writes: ‘Didi-Huberman’s principal achievement is to criticize, destabilize and correct the monolith that is representation and has become a proxy in art historical thinking.’<sup>134</sup> And, similarly to Krauss, Didi-Huberman too mobilised *Documents* as one of the platforms on which to perform such destabilisation of the art historical discipline: singling it out as a deconstructionist antidote; as a subversive montage that manages to deny and displace any uncalled for, logocentric attempts to identify mimesis as a stabilising source of presence in visual representation.

In 2006, the catalogue of *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents*, published in relation to an exhibition with the same name organised by Simon Baker and Dawn Ades the Hayward Gallery, once more identified the journal as ‘an active force’ that ‘undermined categories and the search for meaning’.<sup>135</sup> Although the catalogue provides a richer socio-historical context for *Documents* – in particular in the section modelled after the journal’s ‘Critical Dictionary’-segment which includes a series of short entries on various topics related to the journal – this

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<sup>131</sup> Didi-Huberman, 388. ‘une blessure dans l’objet du savoir, dans le sujet du savoir, une blessure généralisée qui fait en sorte que *le savoir s’ouvre* lui-même, se scinde, se dilapide.’

<sup>132</sup> Didi-Huberman, 387, 391, 395. ‘un perpétuel mouvement *déformant* (...) le semblable s’ouvre au dissemblable (...) il engage une ‘sémiotique’ paradoxale (...) ce qu’il signifie demeure *inconnu* (...) à la fois signe de déchirure et déchirure du signe.’

<sup>133</sup> Didi-Huberman, 63, 64. ‘produisait pour finir *une image capable de transgresser l’image* (...) Le ‘document’, au sens bataillien, (...) cherche, dans une certaine présentation ou construction visuelle, à produire dans l’image une ‘insubordination matérielle’, un *symptôme* capable de briser l’écran (l’appareil refoulant) de la représentation.’ On the symptom, Chari Larsson writes: ‘Against this semiotic readability of the sign, Didi-Huberman accentuates the dynamism and the movement of the symptom. Unlike the sign, the symptom is not a stable visual object. It is the point of instability, contention and crisis in the image. (...) Rather than a stable, readable image, the symptom is in perpetual motion, governed by a rhizomatic chain of associations, infinitely deferring synthesis.’ (*Didi-Huberman and the Image* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 41).

<sup>134</sup> Larsson, 2. ‘With no single point of origin, the symptom undermines the mimetic reliance on the origin and copy. It has significant consequences for Didi-Huberman, because throughout his work it is possible to detect a mistrust of origins’ (ibid., 40).

<sup>135</sup> Dawn Ades and Fiona Bradley, ‘Introduction,’ in *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents*, eds. Dawn Ades and Simon Baker (London: Hayward Gallery, 2006), 14-15.

contextualising impulse appears to be contradicted by the overall characterisation of *Documents* as a deconstructionist endeavour.<sup>136</sup>

In the opening essay, Baker draws on both Krauss and Didi-Huberman to argue that the journal worked to ‘deny the symbolic function of aesthetic objects’.<sup>137</sup> Again, ‘formless’ is identified as an operational force. Echoing Krauss, Baker writes: ‘it is important to acknowledge that like ‘formless’ and other words in the Critical Dictionary, the images in DOCUMENTS do indeed have tasks. They genuinely work: destabilising, undermining, and debunking.’ This work, however, is never the work of representation. On the contrary, Baker explains, these images have been ‘abandoned’, ‘purposefully and effectively stranded’, and it is ‘whilst waiting for the occasion when they might be called upon as illustrations, they begin to do other work, entering into a strange play of visual echoes.’ Now borrowing from Didi-Huberman, Baker identifies a series of ‘delayed juxtapositions’ where ‘forms de-form themselves under the pressure of destabilising comparisons.’ Through this ‘formless resemblance’, Baker concludes, ‘objects and images fail to hold on to their own resemblances and stop looking like themselves.’<sup>138</sup>

Once more mirroring Didi-Huberman, Baker finds one example of formless resemblance in the uncanny relationship between the hooves of la Villette and the legs of the Hollywood-still. Another example of such destabilising juxtaposition is found in the pairing of a 1929 painting by Fernand Léger and a prehistoric rock painting discovered in present-day Zimbabwe found in *Documents* (4:1930). As ‘no aesthetic or art-historical judgement is offered in support of this correlation’, Baker elaborates, ‘the DOCUMENTS reader is encouraged to reach the conclusion that finding affinities between prehistoric rock art and avant-garde painting is symptomatic of a disruptive glitch in the process of representation.’ ‘Formless’, he concludes, ‘undoes the notion of resemblance by revealing it as redundant, stopping it from working.’<sup>139</sup>

In 2017, *Documents*’ criticality was again defined in Derridean terms. This time as part of Linda Steer’s analysis of the function of appropriated photographs in Surrealist periodicals, examining *Documents* alongside *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924-1929) and *Minotaure* (1933-1939).<sup>140</sup> Using Derrida’s thought on the instability of the frame as theoretical scaffolding, Steer argues that this

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<sup>136</sup> See e.g.: Yve-Alain Bois’ review of the exhibition published in *Artforum* (October 2006): ‘In short, as Bataille would have wanted, the images in the exhibition performed a deconstructive task.’

<sup>137</sup> Simon Baker, ‘Doctrines: The Appearance of Things,’ in *Undercover Surrealism*, 39.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>140</sup> Linda Steer, *Appropriated Photographs in French Surrealist Periodicals, 1924-1939* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

act of appropriation – or, of *reframing* – is not only quintessentially surrealist, but moreover, quintessentially deconstructionist. In what was fundamentally a critique of Kantian aesthetics, Derrida identified the frame as an element perceived to be capable of separating what is intrinsic to the work from anything extrinsic. Working to differentiate an inside from an outside, the frame enables the work of art to appear ‘autonomous’ and ‘singular’. As Kant wrote in his *Critique of Judgement*:

Even what we call *ornaments* (*parerga*), i.e., what does not belong to the whole presentation of the object as an intrinsic constituent, but [is] only an extrinsic addition, does indeed increase our taste’s liking, yet it too does so only by form, as in the case of picture frames, or drapery on statues, or colonnades around magnificent buildings.<sup>141</sup>

In his deconstruction of such metaphysics of presence, Derrida mobilises the frame as a destabiliser, blurring the distinction between an inside and outside: ‘What would Kant have said about a frame which frames a painting representing a building surrounded by columns (there are many examples) in the form of the draped human figure (...) – what is their frame?’<sup>142</sup> Far from an innocent line of division, Derrida’s frame is always complicit. It is neither simply inside nor outside. Instead, it ‘touches, plays with, brushes, rubs, or presses against the limit and intervenes internally only insofar as the inside is missing.’<sup>143</sup> The frame cannot be ‘determined, localized, situated, *halted*’. It is always itself framed by another frame.<sup>144</sup> Rather than stabilising the identity of the work, thus, the frame subjects it to the destabilising processes of difference and deferral. Derrida concludes: ‘There *is* a framing, but the frame *does not exist*.’<sup>145</sup>

Understanding reframing in these Derridean terms, Steer concludes that ‘surrealist appropriation and redeployment of photographs is thus a significant attack on the frame’.<sup>146</sup> Shifting from one frame to another, the act of appropriation ‘highlights the instability and mutability of photographic meaning’.<sup>147</sup> Identifying *Documents* as ‘a kind of photographic montage that brought together disparate images’, Steer concludes the critical effect of this appropriation of images –

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<sup>141</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 72.

<sup>142</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘The Parergon,’ trans. Craig Owens, *October* (Summer, 1979): 26.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>146</sup> Steer, 8.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

from pop culture, ethnography, science, fine-arts, etc. – as one working ‘to disrupt the system of photographic representation’ by demonstrating the ‘undecidability’ of the visual sign.<sup>148</sup> To illustrate this disruption, Steer turns to the colonial photography of Ernest Robin reproduced in *Documents* (4:1929), (Fig. 5). These late nineteenth-century images, shot in the French colony of New Caledonia, show a group of barely clothed Kanak boys, armed with weapons. These images therefore disseminate a firmly colonial iconography where, Anne Maxwell notes, ‘nudity’ and ‘aggressiveness’ were tropes frequently mobilised as part of imperial attempts to present the colonised as ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’.<sup>149</sup> To Steer, however, the ‘transformation’ from one frame to another sabotages the legibility of representational codes: ‘Even though Robin’s photograph was clearly positioned as an ethnographic document in its original discursive location, when published in *Documents* its meaning became difficult to pin down.’<sup>150</sup> She continues:

it erupts out of the transformation from ethnographic document to avant-garde image, refusing to submit to the rules of the parergon and revealing the lack that is inside. How can a photograph possibly represent such broad and significant concepts as race and colonialism? (...) The appropriation and re-framing of ethnographic photographs as avant-garde creates a distinct sense of disorientation. The readers struggle to decipher meaning of the photographs as it appears in *Documents*; it becomes impossible to read.<sup>151</sup>

The critical force of the appropriated images, thus, is not fuelled by their participation in regimes of representation or their productive role within a colonial nexus of power and knowledge. To Steer, the act of re-framing never generates or re-disseminates meaning. Instead, Steer explains, it reveals ‘the gap, to use Derridean terms, in photographic signification: it is always already separated from its referent. (...) As a representation, it is removed from the real.’<sup>152</sup>

*Documents*, thus, holds a curious role in art historical discourse. The short-lived journal has, time and again, been called upon as a deconstructionist tool, mobilised to re-interpret, retrospectively, the criticality of the avant-garde in deconstructionist terms. ‘Formless’ – understood as an analogue to ‘différance’ – is often mobilised as a theoretical aid. In this interpretative tradition,

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 51-53.

<sup>149</sup> Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of the ‘Native’ and the Making of European Identities* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), 20.

<sup>150</sup> Steer, 54.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 76, 79.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 106.

the criticality of *Documents* is identified in Derridean terms, enacting – in the words of Krauss, Baker, Steer, and Didi-Huberman – a ‘reduction of meaning’, ‘a disruptive glitch in the process of representation’, thus, laying bare the ‘undecidability’ and ‘laceration of the sign’.<sup>153</sup> The limits of this deconstructive reading of *Documents* are the same as those of Derrida’s project at large. Therefore, it can be subject to the long-standing critique mounted against deconstructionism by an array of noteworthy scholars: decontextualisation, dehistoricisation. Indeed, by placing its critical focus solely on collapsing and sabotaging the stability and irrefutable validity of meaning, deconstructionism misses out on other forms of less reliable and more questionable but nonetheless experienced levels of meaning-production.

### *A Critique of Deconstruction*

In 1983, Edward Said pointed out that Derrida’s ‘work embodies an extremely pronounced self-limitation, an ascesis of a very crippling sort.’ ‘Derrida’, he continued, ‘has chosen the lucidity of the undecidability in a text, so to speak, over the identifiable power of the text.’<sup>154</sup> ‘Recent critical theory’, Said elaborated:

has placed undue emphasis upon the limitlessness of interpretation. It is argued that, since all reading is misreading, no one reading is better than any other, and hence all readings, potentially infinite in number, are in the final analysis equally misinterpretations. A part of this has been derived from a conception of the text as existing within a hermetic, Alexandrian textual universe, having no connection with actuality. This is a view I do not agree with, not simply because texts in fact are in the world but also because as texts they place themselves – one of their functions as texts is to place themselves – and indeed are themselves, by soliciting the world’s attention.<sup>155</sup>

The same year, Frank Lentricchia wrote:

Deconstruction’s useful work is to undercut the epistemological claims of representation, but that work in no way touches the real work of

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<sup>153</sup> In order: Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 63-64; Baker, ‘Doctrines,’ 37; Steer, 51-53; and Didi-Huberman, 395.

<sup>154</sup> Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press: 1983), 214.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

representation – its work of power. To put it another way: deconstruction can show that representations are not and cannot be adequate to the task of representation, but has nothing to say about the social work that representation can and does do. Deconstruction confuses the act of unmasking with the act of defusing, the act of exposing epistemological fraud with the neutralisation of political force. Deconstruction, then, is a ‘critical’ philosophy, but only in the slimmest sense of the word – it may tell us how we deceive ourselves, but it has no positive content (...) It has nothing to say.<sup>156</sup>

Giorgio Agamben too agrees that overemphasis on ‘the infinite deconstruction of a text’ is constricting.<sup>157</sup> As ‘Derrida enters into the Paradise of language’, Agamben writes, ‘he experiences the exile of terminology, its paradoxical subsistence in the isolation of all univocal reference.’<sup>158</sup> The result is nihilistic, divorced from meaningful political engagement and stuck at, Agamben writes, an ‘empty, zero degree, signification and with history as its infinite deferment’.<sup>159</sup> As such, he argues, Derrida unwittingly ends up producing that which he sought to deny: a metaphysical claim. ‘Deconstruction’, Agamben thus announces, ‘is a thwarted messianism, a suspension of the messianic.’<sup>160</sup> Indeed, although his responses are marked by a forceful denial of truth or reliability, the philosophical questions that Derrida answers are nonetheless always questions of absolutes, posed somewhere far away from socio-political realities and cultural complexities. In this way, Art Berman notes, Derrida’s description of language end up being similar to Kant’s description of the aesthetic object:

What legitimates this strategy is the treatment of all language as if it were the Kantian aesthetic object, detached from ‘purpose’, experienced with ‘disinterest’ (irrelevant to action or ethics) (...). The aesthetic detachment in Kant and Derrida permits ‘free play’.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 50-51.

<sup>157</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, edited and translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 209.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>159</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, translated by Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 104.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 103. ‘In Agamben’s view, Derrida focuses exemplary attention on this barrier [between the signifier and signified] but becomes transfixed by what he sees. (...) Derrida remains, for Agamben, in exile because he has found an aporia he considers supreme. Because he sees no way to clear the path, no way out of that exile, he misses what is for Agamben the most obvious, and necessary, response to our state of affairs.’ (Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 186, 190).

<sup>161</sup> Art Berman, *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 216-217.

The deconstructive reading of *Documents* is fettered by similar restrictions. Preoccupied with locating the criticality of the journal in an ability to sabotage stable signification, the unstable but nonetheless experienced socio-cultural currencies the various motifs carried in culture, and the ways in which these currencies fuelled the avant-garde strategy at play, are left unexamined. The ‘social work’ of the sign is ignored, ‘the lucidity of the undecidability in a text’ is prioritised over ‘the identifiable power of the text.’<sup>162</sup> Denied any socio-cultural significance, the criticality enacted by the various signs circulated throughout the journal never stems from participation in regimes of representation or processes of meaning-production, but only from collapsing them. The deconstructionist interpretation of *Documents*, thus, ends up dehistoricising and decontextualising the journal’s critical work.

This thesis is concerned with filling this gap in current literature. Seeking to produce a historicised understanding of the journal’s critical work, this thesis wrests *Documents* from such ‘hermetic, Alexandrian textual universe’, such deconstructionist ‘exile of terminology’ and re-inserts it into the visual culture of interwar France.<sup>163</sup> Once returned to the messy complexities of culture, the criticality of *Documents* will be reinterpreted. Focussing on those aspects left unexamined by the deconstructionist reading, this thesis resituates various signs mobilised in *Documents* within their socio-cultural contexts, excavates the currency they carried and subsequently explores how the journal acted as an avant-garde text by critically partaking in – rather than collapsing – cultural processes of signification.

### *Visual Culture Studies*

In her 2005 archaeology of visual culture studies – tracing its origins, methods, and practices – Margaret Dikovitskaya identifies it as symptomatic of a broader shift, emerging across social sciences and humanities in the late 1970s and early 1980s in response to the postmodernist collapse of old explanatory models: the cultural turn.<sup>164</sup> As Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt write in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (1999): ‘the cultural turn itself came out of a general dissatisfaction with the paradigms, many of them positivistic, that had presided over the establishment of academic disciplines since the end of the nineteenth

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<sup>162</sup> Lentricchia, 50-51; Said, 214.

<sup>163</sup> Said, 39-40; Agamben, *Potentialities*, 209.

<sup>164</sup> Margaret Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2005). The book also comprises interviews with key visual culture scholars.

century.<sup>165</sup> ‘The cultural turn,’ they explain, ‘only reinforced the sense of breakdown.’<sup>166</sup> Indeed, departing from modernist methods, the validity of which had been firmly disrupted by the emergence of postmodernism, the cultural turn instead moved towards radically re-evaluating the status of ‘the social’, towards a renewed consideration, in David Chaney’s words, for ‘how we as ordinary members of society routinely trade upon and begin to express our sense of meaning, value and significance in everyday practice.’<sup>167</sup>

This shift engendered a series of new practices, one of which was cultural studies: an interdisciplinary field of inquiry promoting a radically inclusive concept of culture, defined in Raymond Williams’ famous words as ‘a whole way of life’.<sup>168</sup> Stuart Hall, a founding cultural studies scholar and key theorist of the New Left, explains:

What has come to be called the ‘cultural turn’ in the social and human sciences, especially in cultural studies and the sociology of culture, has tended to emphasize the importance of meaning to the definition of culture. Culture, it is argued, is not so much a set of things – novels and paintings or TV programmes and comics – as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings – the ‘giving and taking of meaning’ – between the members of a society or group.<sup>169</sup>

Influenced by Althusser’s revision of Marxist theory, which displaced the classic reflection theory for a more complex view of power as an active force at play in all aspects of society, Hall promoted a similar reconceptualisation of culture, positing it not as a static mirror but rather as

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<sup>165</sup> Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, ‘Introduction,’ in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> David Chaney, *The Cultural Turn: Scene-setting Essays on Contemporary Cultural History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 2. Dikovitskaya describes this cultural turn in the following manner: ‘The previous paradigm, based on a belief in the objective nature of social scientific inquiry, was subsequently displaced by a standpoint that reveals culture – a representational, symbolic, and linguistic system – to be an instigator of social, economic, and political forces and processes rather than a mere reflection of them’ (48).

<sup>168</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘Culture is Ordinary,’ in *Raymond Williams on Culture and Society: Essential Writings*, ed. Jim McGuigan (London: SAGE Publications, 2014), 3. For a general account of cultural studies, see: *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (London: Unwin Hyman, 1980); Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, ed. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016); Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays* (2 vols.), ed. David Morley (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>169</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 2.

the very site where meaning-production occurs.<sup>170</sup> Like Althusser, Hall locates these mechanisms everywhere in culture: in its practices and processes, representations and rituals.<sup>171</sup>

Hall, thus, sets off from a premise not too dissimilar from that of Derrida's deconstructionist project: there is no non-discursive outside that grants culture stable meaning. After such shared statement of scepticism towards old models of explanation, however, Hall departs from Derrida. In a lecture from 1983, Hall explains that culture should not be understood:

in terms of 'difference' alone – the rallying cry of Derridean deconstruction – but instead in terms of the necessity of thinking unity *and* difference, difference *in* complex unity, without this becoming a hostage to the privileging of difference as such. If Derrida is correct in arguing that there is always a perpetual slippage of the signifier, a continuous 'différance,' it is also correct to argue that without some arbitrary 'fixing' or articulation, there would be no signification or meaning at all. What is ideology but, precisely, this work of fixing meaning through establishing, by selection and combination, a chain of equivalences?<sup>172</sup>

Hall's definition of culture then is not characterised by a perpetual failure of signification, but rather by a complex process of semiosis taking place *within* such constantly fluctuating terrain. Hall speaks of stabilisers, 'shared conceptual maps' and 'codes', that govern the relationships of translation and enable signification within cultures.<sup>173</sup> The object of culture studies therefore becomes the role and function of things within, to paraphrase Hall, 'the production and exchange of meanings'.<sup>174</sup>

Visual culture studies, emerging in the 1990s, focus on the function of *visuality* within such complex and all-encompassing cultural processes and practices, taken to be intrinsically bound up with meaning-production and discourses of power.<sup>175</sup> Visual culture, as Douglas Crimp puts

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<sup>170</sup> 'For Hall, the relationship between base and superstructure is not rigid or one way and he calls for a 'freer play' between them. The superstructure determines the base as much as the other way round' (James Procter, *Stuart Hall* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 18).

<sup>171</sup> For an example of Althusser's influence: Stuart Hall, 'Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates,' *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 2 (1985): 91-114.

<sup>172</sup> Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983*, 122.

<sup>173</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 21.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>175</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, a founding visual culture theorist, defines *visuality* as 'the visual in the overlap between representation and cultural power'. (Dikovitskaya, 60). Further, Dikovitskaya explains: 'The cultural turn brought to the study of images a reflection on the complex interrelationships between power and knowledge. Representation began to be studied as a structure and process

it, is 'a narrower area of cultural studies'.<sup>176</sup> Indeed, describing the emergence of movement, Griselda Pollock, an art-historian-turned-visual-culture-theorist, explains:

The story goes like this: turning our backs on the idea of absolute and universal values that sustain an unquestioned canon viewed through the cold war lens of formalism or humanist iconography, certain scholars decamped from an aesthetically based Art History to have the freedom to analyse wider 'regimes of representation' in methods defined by theoretical resources and interdisciplinary concepts arising from New Leftism's cultural turn.<sup>177</sup>

Working from such reconceptualised, inclusive view of culture, visual culture studies explores visibility as an interdisciplinary field radically exceeding traditional categories and hierarchies; as a phenomenon whose cultural, social, and political significance thus cannot, and should not, be contained within the parameters and canons of any singular academic subject.

Fine art is effectively moved out of the secluded grand halls of art history and placed within a wider visual culture, where it is forced to cohabit with all sorts of visual experiences – highbrow or lowbrow, exclusive or popular: advertisement, body ideals, architecture, moving images, fashion, medical imagery, political propaganda and more. No longer studied in relation to old trajectories of authorship, authenticity and artistic intention, the focus is redirected onto the cultural and social function of visibility. Within this framework, there simply is no such thing as the autonomy of art.<sup>178</sup> Instead, visual culture studies embodies a 'horizontal thinking' that 'offers to viewers new perspectives for perceiving and apprehending the work and its significance'.<sup>179</sup>

Visual culture studies was not embraced by everyone. A poignant source of early criticism was Rosalind Krauss. Indeed, an unavoidable moment in the history of visual culture studies is the 1996 questionnaire published in *October*, asking numerous scholars to respond to the emerging

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of ideology that produces subject positions (...) In short, visual studies – the study of representation – pays close attention to the image but uses theories developed in the humanities and the social sciences to address the complex ways in which meanings are produced and circulated in specific social contexts.' (48, 53).

<sup>176</sup> Douglas Crimp, 'Getting the Warhol We Deserve,' *Social Text* (Summer, 1999): 52.

<sup>177</sup> Griselda Pollock, 'Visual Culture and its discontents,' *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2:2 (2003): 255. Pollock identifies Michel Foucault as a particularly significant influence on the emergence and development of visual culture studies: 'it is the work of Michel Foucault that provides the most amenable model: genealogical, case study-based, focusing on power/knowledge, defining the formation of discourses and regimes of truth. (...) It is precisely in that often unsatisfactory but challenging play between historical formation and structural formation that Foucault's legacy created a dynamic and transformative procedure for interrupting the fixities of author/object based interpretation and curation.' (255-256).

<sup>178</sup> 'As a result, the concept of autonomy of art was replaced by the concept of intertextuality.' (Dikovitskaya, 49).

<sup>179</sup> Louis Kaplan, 'Horizontal Thinking and the Emergence of Visual Culture,' in *A Concise Companion to Visual Culture*, edited by A. Joan Saab, Aubrey Anable and Catherine Zuromskis (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2021): 21-39.

field of study. The questions were openly sceptical, referring to visual culture as an ahistorical concern for ‘disembodied’ images and a method no longer organised on the model of history but on the model of anthropology.<sup>180</sup> In the subsequent answers, visual culture studies was bombarded with critique. Martin Jay spoke of a ‘pseudopopulist levelling of all cultural values’ and, similarly, Tom Crow rejected it as a ‘misguidedly populist impulse’, fearing that ‘to surrender a history of art to a history of images will (...) mean a de-skilling of interpretation, an inevitable misrecognition and misinterpretation of one realm of profound human endeavor.’<sup>181</sup>

In 1997, the same year as the catalogue for *Formless: A User's Guide* was published, Krauss, upon visiting her alma mater, was interviewed by the student magazine – *The Harvard Crimson*. When asked about ‘visual culture’ cropping up in curriculums across America, with reference to Harvard’s own course entitled ‘Introduction to Art and Visual Culture’, Krauss replied: ‘I hate visual culture.’ ‘In fact,’ she continued:

*October* magazine, which I coedit and cofounded in 1976, recently did a special issue that was an attack on the visual culture project. Like cultural studies, visual culture is aimed at what we could call pejoratively, abusively, deskilling. (...) So what I have against ‘visual studies’ is the project of getting rid of the disciplines. People say ‘film studies, what’s that?’ or ‘art history, je ne connais pas’.<sup>182</sup>

Despite the radical critique, however, the questionnaire nonetheless helped situate the slippery scope of visual culture in a wider trajectory. Indeed, as the inaugural visual culture theorist W.J.T. Mitchell stated in a 2019 interview, the ‘notorious’ questionnaire ‘did visual studies the favor of denouncing it as a dangerous deviation from art history’:

The heady days when visual culture was deemed worthy of denunciation by the editors of *October* are long gone. We should be grateful that they took us seriously enough to attack us and helped in this way to launch us as a mildly insurrectionary movement.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Svetlana Alpers et. al. ‘Visual Culture Questionnaire,’ *October*, (Summer, 1996): 25-70.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Scott Rothkopf, ‘Krauss and the Art of Cultural Controversy,’ *The Harvard Crimson* (16 May 1997).

<sup>183</sup> ‘An Interview with W.J.T. Mitchell,’ *A Concise Companion to Visual Culture*, 40, 44.

Returning *Documents* to the visual culture of interwar France thus opens another door, enabling an alternative to the interpretative cul-de-sac of Derridean deconstruction. Indeed, when confronted with the perpetual absence of presence, shockingly unveiled by deconstructionists, visual culture scholars took this lesson on board and turned their attention elsewhere. The critical focus was moved towards exploring – ‘horizontally’ – the various unstable, ever-changing, and even questionable roles and functions that visualities play within the fluctuating conditions of culture, defined as, in Hall’s words, ‘the production and exchange of meanings’.<sup>184</sup> In this way, visual culture studies enables a theoretical platform for a contextualist analysis of visual material in a post-Derridean paradigm. Working from such interpretative framework thus permits this thesis to focus on an analysis of the journal’s role in the visual culture of interwar France and examine how the motifs, images, and texts published across its pages generated meanings through the function they served in a broader socio-cultural context.

### *Visual Culture Methodologies*

Although the cultural turn and its epistemological revisions are widely identified as having paved the way for visual culture studies, exactly what ‘visual culture’ *is* and exactly what ‘visual culture studies’ *should do* has been debated. Since its 1990s formation, visual culture scholars have mobilised a variety of theoretical frameworks and methodologies. Mitchell elaborates:

visual culture is deeply indebted to feminism, gender and ethnic studies, critical theory, cultural studies, and other disciplinary movements. It would not exist without these movements. But it would also not exist without psychoanalysis, semiotics, linguistics, literary theory, phenomenology, aesthetics, anthropology, art history, and film studies, disciplines in a rather different sense, organised around theoretical objects rather than social movements. Visual culture is among other things, a convergence and outgrowth of these two kinds of disciplines (...).<sup>185</sup>

Indeed, to Mitchell, the emergence of visual culture studies represent a ‘pictorial turn’ in a variety of disciplines, marked by a renewed concern not only with the social construction of the visual,

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<sup>184</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 2.

<sup>185</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, ‘Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture,’ *Art Bulletin*, vol. 76, no. 4 (December 1995): 542.

but also the visual formation of the social field, or ‘visual sociality’.<sup>186</sup> ‘Whatever the pictorial turn is’, Mitchell adds, ‘it should be clear that it is not a return to naive mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial ‘presence’’. Rather, it is a ‘rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality’.<sup>187</sup>

Whether this visual character of culture is a particularly modern condition or something that can be applied historically has also been debated. Nicholas Mirzoeff, another foundational author on the topic, opts for the former and links visual culture with a ‘new remarkable ability to absorb and interpret visual information’ that ‘is the basis of industrial society and is becoming even more important in the information age’.<sup>188</sup> David N. Rodowick, in turn, sees it as a trans-historical phenomenon where, similarly to a Foucauldian historiography, different epistemes are marked by different dynamics of power/knowledge and, therefore, by different visual cultures:

For me, this is what visual culture is all about: how these different notions of power and knowledge change across different strategies of visualisation and expression and how they are imbricated with one another in different, relatively distinct, historical areas.<sup>189</sup>

The interest in historically and culturally situated visualities has long marked a significant branch of visual culture research. Indeed, when the term of ‘visual culture’ first appeared in Michael Baxandall’s *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972), it was mobilised to describe a paradigmatic visibility – a ‘period eye’ – that characterised Italian Renaissance culture and, therefore, the way that Renaissance painting was interpreted and received.<sup>190</sup> Baxandall’s work had a formative impact on the modernisation of social art history that took place in the early 1970s.<sup>191</sup> The second time ‘visual culture’ was used, a similarly historical approach was taken. In *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (1973), Svetlana Alpers worked to differentiate the Dutch usage of ‘realism’ from that of Renaissance Italy by mapping out a

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<sup>186</sup> Dikovitskaya, 57.

<sup>187</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 16. Mitchell explains: ‘Vision itself is a cultural construct’ (Dikovitskaya, 57).

<sup>188</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 5.

<sup>189</sup> Dikovitskaya, 263.

<sup>190</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in 15th Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

<sup>191</sup> However, his interdisciplinary approach to visual experience – including analyses of traditional dances, conventional body gestures etc. – was criticised by T.J. Clark for being too apolitical and for lacking structure. See e.g.: A. Langdale, ‘Aspects of the Critical Reception and Intellectual History of Baxandall’s Concept of the Period Eye,’ in *About Michael Baxandall*, ed. A. Rifkin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999), 29.

particular Dutch ‘visual culture’ that was permeated with a certain scientific interest in optics. Mobilising examples such as Johannes Kepler’s scientific theory of vision, northern European map-making and a general interest in mirrors, lenses, and camera obscura, Alpers argued that ‘realism’ in the Dutch context was part of a wider cultural concern for visual *description*, that is, a very different usage than that of the narrative and idealising traditions in Renaissance Italy.<sup>192</sup>

Visual culture studies can therefore be summed up as an interdisciplinary exploration of what John Berger, oft-cited as a proto-visual-culture-theorist, in 1972 identified as ‘ways of seeing’.<sup>193</sup> Alternatively, it can be thought of as an inquiry into what Irit Rogoff has called ‘viewing apparatuses’: that is, those technologies – ideological, cultural, mechanical – that shape, inform, condition, and materialise the way we *see* things.<sup>194</sup> Given the expanded, inclusive scope of visual culture studies, borrowing tools from a variety of methodologies – Marxism, psychoanalysis, queer theory, social history, postcolonial studies, semiotics, feminism, and more – these ways of seeing, these viewing apparatuses, can be individual or collective, historical or contemporary, marginalised or mainstream.<sup>195</sup>

Rather than posing a problem, however, there seems to be a sense of pride in this methodological multiplicity. Indeed, Mitchell elaborates, ‘its most important identity is, as I’ve suggested, as an ‘indiscipline,’ a moment of turbulence at the inner and outer borders of established disciplines.’<sup>196</sup> This lack of fixity is therefore inherently different from that found in deconstructionism. Here, it is not caused by the stifling invalidity of any one method but rather the overwhelming and overlapping productivity of *too many* methods. It is a direct result of its interdisciplinary reach. For the purposes of this thesis, seeking to produce a historicised understanding of *Documents’* critical work, a semiotic approach – that is, the study of signs based not on some immanent value but on their function in a wider structure – will be employed.

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<sup>192</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>193</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972). Another theorist, oft-cited as a forebearer of visual culture studies, is Erwin Panofsky and his iconographical interpretation of images. In Panofsky’s analysis of visual experience, W. J. T. Mitchell writes, ‘vision, space, world-pictures, and art-pictures all weave together as a grand tapestry’. (Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 19).

<sup>194</sup> Irit Rogoff, ‘Studying Visual Culture,’ in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>195</sup> As Joanne Morra and Marquard Smith write: ‘As a result of these borrowings or convergences, visual culture studies offers us a variety of interpretative ways of engaging with our past and present visual cultures (...). Sometimes these analyses within visual culture studies are diachronic (...), while at other times they are synchronic studies that consider a singular historic moment from the history of visual culture.’ (‘Visual Studies/Visual Culture/Visual Culture Studies,’ in *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. Michael Ryan (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).) For a broad account of the various methodological and theoretical influences that fuel *visual culture studies*, see Morra and Smith’s multivolume *Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>196</sup> Mitchell, ‘Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture,’ 542.

## *Semiotics and Visual Arts*

With the emergence of structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to visual arts, semiotics became an increasingly favoured method of analysis.<sup>197</sup> The predominantly used model was that developed by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), whose work not only founded modern language studies but also acted as a catalyst for the development of structuralism, led by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>198</sup>

Saussure's most famous publication, *Cours de linguistique générale* (1913), is a compilation of lectures held at the University of Geneva between 1907 and 1911, published posthumously by his colleagues and students. In these sessions, Saussure put forward a radical critique of the standard practices of linguistics. Arguing against the prevailing, historical – or *diachronic* – explanation models, Saussure made the case for a structural – or *synchronic* – analysis. Language, Saussure explained, is best conceived as a system of signs: 'a system of pure values which are determined by nothing except the momentary arrangement of its terms'.<sup>199</sup> When analysing the workings of a language, therefore, one's focus should be on the function of the sign within such 'momentary' structural arrangement, rather than on historical developments. Saussure explains: 'the diachronic identity of two words as different as *calidum* and *chaud* ('hot') means simply that one passed from the former to the latter through a series of synchronic identities'.<sup>200</sup>

This ahistorical approach to the study of language is a direct result of another key premise in Saussure's argument: the arbitrary nature of the sign. To Saussure, the sign is bipartite: the signifier (the spoken or written word) and the signified (the material or immaterial concept referred to). The relation between these entities, Saussure explains, is not natural but arbitrary:

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<sup>197</sup> A good example is Roland Barthes' ground-breaking semiotic analyses of pop culture and photography. For earlier art-historical uses of semiotics, see Jan Mukařovský's 1934 essay 'Art as Semiological Fact'. Along with Roman Jakobson and others, Mukařovský was part of what has been called the Prague Linguistic Circle, a group that, working from Saussure's revolutionary premise of the non-essential nature of language, sought to mobilise a more contextualising model by proposing a non-opposing relation between the diachronic and synchronic approaches. Applying this to visual analysis, Mukařovský's essay firmly rejected the Kantian notion of an intrinsic aesthetic value in favour of a more socio-historical analysis of the reception of art. He writes: 'there is no definite borderline between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic.' (Jan Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1970), 1.) Another early example is Meyer Schapiro's 1969 essay 'On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs'. Here, the aim was to analyse the function of abstract or 'non-mimetic' elements in the constitution of the image-sign.

<sup>198</sup> For a general account of Saussure, see e.g.: Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986).

<sup>199</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 80.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

The word *arbitrary* also calls for a remark. It must not lead one to think that the signifier is left up to the speaker's free choice (we will see below that it is not in the individual's power to change anything in a sign once it is established in a linguistic group). Rather, we mean that it is *unmotivated*, that is, arbitrary with respect to the signified, to which it has no natural attachment in reality.<sup>201</sup>

To Saussure, there is no essence or positive substance of the sign that ensures its meaning. Rather, meaning is relational, generated only from a play of difference within the synchronic system of signs:

The ultimate law of language is, dare we say, that nothing can ever reside in a single term. This is a direct consequence of the fact that linguistic signs are unrelated to what they designate, and that therefore *a* cannot designate anything without the aid of *b* and vice versa, or, in other words, that both have value only by the differences between them, or that neither has value, in any of its constituents, except through this same network of forever negative differences.<sup>202</sup>

When transferred onto the analysis of visual art, however – as noted by another art-historian-turned-visual-culture-theorist, Norman Bryson – this semiotic model can be used for two wholly different ends: a formalist analysis and a social analysis.<sup>203</sup> An example of the former can be found in the work of Krauss, where Saussurean theory is used to refuse historical models of explanation in favour of a purely synchronic approach. Any notion of a persisting substance residing within the sign is swapped for an arbitrary entity, operating through negative difference within a closed system. Krauss explains:

With this definitive rejection of 'positive terms' Saussure blocked the way for meaning to be understood as the outcome of a correlation between a sound (or word) and an object for which the word is the label. (...) One of the methodological corollaries of this conception of meaning is that it is a function

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>202</sup> Saussure quoted in Culler, 64.

<sup>203</sup> Norman Bryson, 'The Politics of Arbitrariness,' in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, eds. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 95-100.

of the system at a given moment in time – the system synchronically displayed – rather than the outcome of a specific development or history.<sup>204</sup>

The formalist repercussions of this interpretative model are played out in Krauss' reading of series of collages produced by Pablo Picasso between 1912-1914.<sup>205</sup> Indeed, when approached synchronically, the structural condition for representation is never a natural or motivated link between the pictorial sign and an external referent but rather the absence of such connection. As a result, the *f*-shaped violin sound holes, frequently appearing in Picasso's collages in this period, are not taken as representatives of a real-life violin. Instead, the significance of the pictorial sign is generated through a formal logic of difference played out within the synchronic structure of the collage. Krauss elaborates:

This structural condition of absence is essential to the operations of the sign within Picasso's collage. As just one from among the myriad possible examples, we can think of the appearance of the two *f*-shaped violin soundholes that are inscribed on the surface of work after work from 1912-1914. The semantic interpretation of these *f*s is that they simply signify the presence of the musical instrument: that is, they label a given plane of the collage-assembly with the term 'violin.' But there is almost no case from among these collages in which the two *f*s mirror each other across the plane surface. Time and again their inscription involves a vast disparity between two letters, one being bigger and often thicker than the other. With this simple, but very emphatic, size difference, Picasso composes the sign, not of violin, but of foreshortening: of the differential size within a single surface due to its rotation into depth.<sup>206</sup>

Whilst breaching with two key principles in Greenberg's model – the historical, or *diachronic*, mode of explanation as well as the persistence on a self-motivated essence of art – the fundamentally formalist outlook of Greenbergian modernism thus remained intact in Krauss' use of Saussurean semiotics. Indeed, Krauss, one might say, mobilised Saussure for fundamentally anti-contextualist ends.<sup>207</sup> She elaborates: 'it is at the heart of the sign that arbitrariness reigns, an

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<sup>204</sup> Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 3.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-40.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>207</sup> See e.g.: Patricia Leighton, 'Cubist Anachronisms: Ahistoricity, Cryptoformalism, and Business-as-Usual in New York', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1994): 91-102.

arbitrariness that dictates that the operation of the sign is dependent on its total independence from the object world for the establishment of its meaning.<sup>208</sup>

The dehistoricising effect of Krauss' interpretation surfaces in her critique of Linda Nochlin's socio-political reading of Picasso's *The Scallop Shell*, a cubist painting from 1912 whose greyish colour scheme is interrupted in the bottom-right corner by the inclusion of a red-white-and-blue pamphlet with the words: 'Notre Avenir est dans l'Air', (Fig. 6).<sup>209</sup> This pamphlet was originally disseminated to promote the development of aviation for military use and, for this reason, Nochlin reads the painting against such situated discourses of French nationalism: 'if Picasso's intentions in a work like *The Scallop Shell* were purely formal (whatever that means), one might wonder why he chose the precise colors of the French flag to carry them out.'<sup>210</sup> The inclusion of the pamphlet, which, Nochlin writes, Picasso 'evidently went to great pains to reproduce exactly', is thus symptomatic of 'a desire to reintroduce elements of experienced reality into the hermetic world of Cubism'.<sup>211</sup> To Krauss, this interpretation not only implies a false, external motivation of the pictorial sign but also mobilises a *diachronic* model to explain such motivation. Instead, Krauss suggests, the signification of this painting should be identified synchronically: as formally inaugurating the invention of the collage and of opening up of cubism to colour.<sup>212</sup>

Using Saussurean terminology to decontextualising ends, Krauss thus rigorously limits the system of analysis to that of the picture plane, arguing that the frequently used *f*-holes never signify a those of a real-life violin, but only its formal properties of foreshortening.<sup>213</sup> Indeed, Bryson writes, in the 'formalist' elaboration, 'one need only examine the representation in itself, without any references to the external world: just by looking at the deployment of data within the four sides of the frame'.<sup>214</sup> It is a matter, therefore, of where the synchronic delineation is placed, of where one considers the system of signs to end and begin.<sup>215</sup> And, as such, Bryson's latter option of 'social' analysis opens the door onto a different problem: namely, how to discuss and

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<sup>208</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'Using Language To Do Business As Usual,' in *Visual Theory*, 83.

<sup>209</sup> Linda Nochlin, 'Picasso's Color: Schemes and Gambits,' *Art in America* (December, 1980): 105-185.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-109.

<sup>212</sup> Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 31.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>214</sup> Bryson, 98.

<sup>215</sup> A telling example of how Saussurean semiotics can be mobilised in radically different ways is a comparison between Hall and Krauss' uses of Saussure's model. To Hall, the synchronic sphere is *culture* - endlessly complex and all-encompassing - whilst for Krauss it is, echoing her formalist mentor, the frame of the artwork. As such, depending on *where* one draws the line, Saussurean semiotics result in a fundamentally contextualising analysis or in a fully formalist one. (See e.g.: Hall, *Representation* and Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*).

determine ‘historical context’ without falling back into logocentric assumptions.<sup>216</sup> To avoid such interpretative impasse, this thesis mobilises a different semiotic model altogether, one that allows for a firmly situated notion of semiosis, whilst still taking into account the permanent instability of ‘context’: that is, the semiotic model developed by the American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce.<sup>217</sup> As we will see, what makes such stance possible for Peirce is the same element that separates his theory of semiotics from that of Saussure, namely, the act of making the reception of signs central to the process of meaning-making. Indeed, as Theresa de Lauretis writes, Peirce’s model enables a naming of the “missing link’ between signification and physical reality’: ‘human action’.<sup>218</sup>

Where the Saussurean model of the sign – which Derrida made it his critical task to destabilise – relies on a dualistic relation between the signifier and signified, Peircean theory adds a third element – *interpretation* – as a necessary condition for semiosis to take place. Peirce thus envisions an endless semiosis: a socio-historically embedded chain of interpretation and re-interpretation, where the social use of signs adds to and alters their meaning. The instability of meaning is relocated to the unfixed nature of social use and interpretation: always changeable and questionable but nonetheless situated in a cultural context. Historical context, for Peirce, is not a source of unwarranted presence but rather the very terrain that keeps meaning-production unfixed. For this reason, the art historian and visual culture theorist Keith Moxey has in his 1994 book *The Practice of Theory* – which explores the fate of art historical interpretation of in the aftermath of poststructuralism – hailed Peircean semiotics as being particularly well suited for ‘historical interpretations that seek to understand the working of the sign within the entire spectrum of its cultural and social complexity’.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> For an account of the issue of ‘context’, see Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, ‘Semiotics and Art History,’ *The Art Bulletin* (June 1991): 174-208. To avoid logocentric assumptions, Bal and Bryson suggest a *narrative* semiotic: that is, an analysis that is not so much concerned with a historical context but with the way the visual *addresses* the viewer through rhetorical means. The method of ‘narratology’, a concept further developed in other writings by Bal, thus, not only appears more effective in relation to narrative or representative art. It is also, Bal admits, a method concerned with literary ‘construction’ over historic ‘reconstruction’. (Mieke Bal, ‘Close Reading Today: From Narratology to Cultural Analysis,’ in *Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999), 19.)

<sup>217</sup> Although nowhere near as popular as Saussure, Peirce’s theory of signs has been utilised in the study of visual material before. In the world of film, see e.g.: Theresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1984); Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Within the art historical discourse, both Margaret Iversen and Keith Moxey have suggested Peirce’s semiotic system as a viable model: Margaret Iversen, ‘Saussure vs. Peirce: Models for a Semiotics of Visual Art,’ in *The New Art History*, eds. A. L. Rees and Frances Borzello (London: Camden Press, 1986); Keith Moxey, ‘Semiotics and the Social History of Art,’ *New Literary Theory*, vol. 22, no. 4 (Autumn 1991): 985-999; Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>218</sup> de Lauretis, 176.

<sup>219</sup> Moxey, *The Practice of Theory*, 32.

## *The Pragmatist Semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce*

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) was a scientist and philosopher active in the turn-of-the-century circle around the Harvard Metaphysical Club. Alongside William James, Peirce is considered a founder of American pragmatism. Reacting against transcendental and a priori models of explanation, found in both theology and modern science, the pragmatists sought to mobilise a theory of meaning that was devoid of absolutism and instead focused on the practical outcome of things.<sup>220</sup> In Peirce's words: 'We must not begin by talking of pure ideas, – vagabond thoughts that tramp the public roads without any human habitation, – but must begin with men and their conversation.'<sup>221</sup>

Peircean semiotics differ from Saussure in two fundamental ways. First, Peirce was not a linguist. Therefore, his theory of signs was not one of language alone but rather a general theory of meaning-production within a universe that, according to Peirce, is 'perfused with signs'. His idea of the sign is thus interdisciplinary and includes 'pictures, symptoms, words, sentences, books, libraries, signals, orders of command, microscopes, legislative representatives, musical concertos...'.<sup>222</sup> The Peircean sign, James Jakób Liszka explains, 'can be nearly anything: real or unreal, historic or present.'<sup>223</sup> Second, Peirce's characterisation of the sign is fundamentally different from Saussure's. As we have seen, Saussure's sign is split in two parts: signified and signifier. The relation between these is arbitrary. Meaning, thus, is generated by means of a differential logic played out within a closed, synchronic system. Peirce's sign, however, contains three parts: sign, object, and interpretant. Not only must the sign represent some object or concept, but to work as a sign, it must also be received as a sign. 'Nothing is a sign', Peirce writes, 'unless it is interpreted as a sign'.<sup>224</sup> It only begins to signify when it is consumed, when it, Peirce explains, 'stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.'<sup>225</sup> 'Peirce's notion of the Interpretant', Moxey therefore writes, emphasising its viability within practises of social art history, 'insures that our understanding of the sign is always a mediated one.'<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Morris Dickstein, 'Introduction,' in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, ed. Morris Dickstein (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 7.

<sup>221</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958), 8.112.

<sup>222</sup> Peirce quoted in James Jakób Liszka, *A General Introduction to the Semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996), 20.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, 21. Moxey celebrates this 'broad' and 'universal notion of the sign' in 'Semiotics and the Social History of Art', 989.

<sup>224</sup> Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 2.172.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid, 2.228.

<sup>226</sup> Moxey, 'Semiotics and the Social History of Art', 989.

In Peirce's model, therefore, the relation between the object and the sign is not arbitrary but tied together by the sign-user's interpretation of the sign. To demonstrate a few variants of this triadic relation, Peirce established a taxonomy of different sign-types: the icon, the index, and the symbol.<sup>227</sup> The icon is a mimetic sign. It is received by the interpretant as visually similar to the referent. The index signifies by means of contingency. It generates meaning, Liszka writes, through 'its singularity, its position 'here and now' vis-à-vis the object.'<sup>228</sup> Lastly, the symbol connects the sign to its referent by means of interpretative convention. It is a sign, Peirce explains, 'which is constituted a sign merely or mainly by the fact that it is used and understood as such'.<sup>229</sup> Within a single sign, different representational qualities can be mobilised at once. In fact, Peirce argues, 'the most perfect signs are those in which the iconic, indicative, and symbolic characters are blended as equally as possible.'<sup>230</sup>

Including the reception of a sign into the very process of semiosis, however, also opens it up to change, movement, and growth. This makes for the third point of difference from Saussure's closed, synchronic system. Indeed, to Peirce, the act of interpretation is simultaneously an act of translation. It is a process, therefore, that produces a *new* sign. In Peirce's words: 'a sign is not a sign unless it translates itself into another sign'.<sup>231</sup> Once the new sign is produced, it is itself subjected to interpretation, translation, and change. Peirce notes: 'there is an infinite regression here (...) the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handled along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series.'<sup>232</sup> Fluctuation and instability, thus, sits at the heart of Peirce's model. Once received, the sign inevitably develops. It is never static. Peirce writes: 'every symbol is a living thing, in a very strict sense that is no mere figure of speech. The body of the symbol changes slowly, but its meaning inevitably grows, incorporates new elements and throws off old ones.'<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> It should be noted that Krauss mobilises this triadic taxonomy of sign-types, with emphasis on the index, in her writings on photography. However, in the case of Krauss, it seems that this is an act of simply taking Peirce's much more complex vision of the sign and inserting it in an otherwise deconstructionist approach to signification. In her two-part essay 'Notes on the Index', Krauss begins by quoting Peirce and his identification of the photographic process with the index, that is, with a process of signification generated by a *physical* connection to the referent. Subsequently mobilising a Barthesian definition of such photographic process, Krauss goes on to identify the index as an inherently 'empty' sign, signifying only a presence that is now lost. Defined by such absence, Krauss can finally conclude the index to be identical to the Derridean 'trace', which – in Derrida's words – 'is not only the disappearance of origin' but 'a nonorigin'. In this way, Krauss subjects the Peircean index – by means of Barthes and Derrida – to an infinite chain of difference and deferral. (*The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 196-219.)

<sup>228</sup> Liszka, 38.

<sup>229</sup> Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 2.307.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.448.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.132.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.339.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.222.

Suggestions of an unlimited process at play triggered Derrida to celebrate Peirce as a proto-deconstructionist of sorts:

Peirce goes very far in the direction that I have called the deconstruction of the transcendental signified, which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign. (...) Peirce considers the indefiniteness of reference as the criterion that allows us to recognize that we are indeed dealing with a system of signs. *What broaches the movement of signification is what makes its interruption impossible.*<sup>234</sup>

However, being a pragmatist, Peirce does impose an interruption to this unlimited semiosis: the practical *use* of the sign. By anchoring meaning-production in the act of interpretation, Peirce's sign is always situated. Peirce explains: 'of the myriads of forms into which a proposition may be translated, what is that one which is to be called its very meaning? It is, according to the pragmatist, that form which the proposition becomes applicable to human conduct'.<sup>235</sup>

Surfacing here are the different criteria listed in a pragmatist versus a deconstructionist theory of meaning-production. Despite starting off from a similar position of scepticism, assuming that there is no a priori truth, when Derrida subsequently draws the conclusion that this automatically renders all meaning unstable, the pragmatists instead lower the conditions necessary for semiosis. Rather than positioning 'meaning' as something that demands validation from some external source of presence to be realised or to exist, pragmatism turns down the epistemological intensity and posits 'meaning' as something simply generated by *use* in a social setting. The 'pragmatist lesson', Christopher Norris writes, is therefore really a re-thinking around the role of philosophy:

philosophy is really best treated as a kind of edifying narrative, a history which hangs together in various interesting ways but no longer seriously claims to deliver any kind of ultimate or authentic *truth*. If philosophers would only accept this scaled-down version of their intellectual role, then they would find themselves in touch with a whole range of adjacent cultural activities. (...) It is only the old, deluded hankering for absolute truth – the idea that knowledge

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<sup>234</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 49-50.

<sup>235</sup> Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.427.

can ultimately ‘cut nature at the joints’ – which prevents philosophers from seeing all this.<sup>236</sup>

This difference has spurred a long-standing clash between pragmatist and deconstructionist camps. In his 1977 essay ‘Signature Event Context’, Derrida targeted J. L. Austin’s pragmatic theory of language put forward in *How To Do Things With Words* (1962). Sketching a model of communication based on the *performative* nature of the utterance, or *speech-act*, Austin argued that successful communication is not dependent on the statement’s veracity but rather on what it does in a performative context. Austin explains: ‘to *say* something is to *do* something’.<sup>237</sup> In a classically deconstructionist manner, Derrida begins 1977 his essay by collapsing the communicative function of the word ‘communication’. Derrida asks: ‘Is it certain that to the word *communication* corresponds a concept that is unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable: in a word, communicable?’<sup>238</sup> And his answer is, of course, *no*. After taking the reader down the winding roads of *iterability* and *différance*, Derrida can conclude: ‘there is no experience consisting of *pure* presence but only of chains of differential marks.’<sup>239</sup>

Less interested in its status as ‘true’ or ‘false’ – validated or invalidated – pragmatists thus instead place their critical focus on the questionable but nonetheless experienced production of meaning, generated through the social use and function of signs. This pragmatist ‘meaning’ is never stable or absolute but nonetheless present in the world. As the postmodern pragmatist, Richard Rorty, illustrates:

Derrida tells us, over and over, that *différance* is ‘neither a word nor a concept.’ This is, however, not true. The first time Derrida uses that collocation of letters, it was, indeed, not a word, but only a misspelling. But around the third or fourth time he used it, it had *become* a word. (...) Any word that has a use automatically signifies a concept. It can’t *help* doing so.<sup>240</sup>

Such lowering of necessary conditions, equating ‘meaning’ with something as commonplace as practical use within social setting, is embodied in what Peirce calls *the final interpretant*. This notion signals the ‘ultimate effect of the sign’, marking the moment when the interpretation become the

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<sup>236</sup> Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (London: Fontana, 1987), 151.

<sup>237</sup> J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 12.

<sup>238</sup> Derrida, ‘Signature, Event, Context’, 1.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>240</sup> Richard Rorty, ‘Deconstruction and Circumvention,’ *Critical Inquiry* (Sept., 1984): 18.

habitual basis for actions by taking on the shape of a norm or discourse.<sup>241</sup> This, Peirce elaborates, is a necessarily social process: ‘unless we make ourselves hermits, we shall necessarily influence each other’s opinions, so that the problem becomes how to fix belief, not in the individual merely, but in the community.’<sup>242</sup>

The word *final*, therefore, is not referring to a finite interpretation of the sign. Rather, it signals that moment when the receptions and usages of signs begin to take the form of a temporary *consensus* within a given culture. The final interpretant is the establishment of, in the words of the self-proclaimed ‘Peircist’, Umberto Eco, ‘an *intersubjective* meaning which acquires a privilege over any other possible interpretation spelled out without the agreement of the community.’<sup>243</sup> Eco elaborates: ‘In a world without interpretants a sickle and hammer would only mean a sickle crossed with a hammer. And Leonardo’s Last Supper would only be a very gloomy dinner or a meeting between thirteen unshaved men.’<sup>244</sup> Whilst the possibility of signification is unlimited, the actual process always occurs in a socio-historical context and is, therefore, always limited by discourse. Whilst an ‘unlimited universe would comprise the whole realm of the logically possible’, Peirce wrote: ‘Our universe seldom relates to this universe: we are either thinking of the physically possible, or of the historical existent, or of the world of some romance, or of some other limited universe.’<sup>245</sup>

By tying together the sign’s meaning with the sign’s use, thus, Peirce’s system of signs is never a detached and free-floating play of difference. Rather, by means of the interpretant, it is inextricably interwoven with social practice. We are faced not with an infinite deferral of meaning but rather, through this process of interpretation and re-interpretation, with an infinite *production* of meaning where each sign is the result of another. Peirce’s theory, therefore, is not only a necessarily social theory of signs but also a fundamentally historical one. ‘The Peircean notion of interpretant’, Eco explicates, ‘takes into account not only the synchronic structure of semiotic systems but also the diachronic destructuralisation and restructuralisation of those systems.’<sup>246</sup> Re-inserting *Documents* into the visual culture of interwar France and subsequently re-interpreting its critical work using Peircean semiotics will therefore allow for a contextualised and

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<sup>241</sup> Peirce quoted in Liszka, 28.

<sup>242</sup> Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.378.

<sup>243</sup> Umberto Eco, *Drift and Unlimited Semiosis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 15.

<sup>244</sup> Umberto Eco, ‘Peirce’s Notion of Interpretant,’ *MLN* (December 1976): 1471.

<sup>245</sup> Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 2.519.

<sup>246</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 195.

historicised reading of its critical work, without falling into the logocentric traps of equating historical context with a static source of metaphysical presence.

As we have seen, the prevailing interpretation identifies *Documents* as a Derridean ‘force of dislocation’ that, under the spell of the ‘formless’, enacted a radical collapse of the very process of meaning-production. Framed as an avant-garde text that never participated but only wrecked, never signified but only disrupted, the criticality of *Documents* is equated with and limited to the deconstructive act of destabilising semiosis. By doing, they are *un*-doing. However, once reviewed through the theoretical grasp of Peirce and visual culture studies, once recontextualised and rehistoricised, a different critical strategy emerges across its pages. Indeed, once *social use of signs* – that is, circulation, reception, and consumption – is mobilised as the sole condition necessary for semiosis, *Documents* must be seen to participate, like any other part of social life, in the accumulative production and exchange of meanings that is culture: adding and altering, interpreting and re-interpreting the social signification of signs. To paraphrase Rorty, it simply cannot ‘help doing so’.<sup>247</sup> As we will see, the strategy that emerges is one entrenched in and powered by the cultural processes within which it partakes, subversively re-circulating heightened signs and motifs wrapped up in and charged by deep-seated Third Republican anxieties concerning nothing but the very power, strength, and future of France.

### *Framing the Third Republic*

When the Third Republic (1871-1940) was installed, France was fragile. Indeed, the humiliating military defeat against Prussia, leading to the abdication of Napoleon III, the collapse of the Second Empire, and the establishment of the Third Republican regime, had radically exacerbated deep-seated fears of French decline.<sup>248</sup> Whilst once having been the unquestionable power of Europe, France had become ‘a thoroughly average great power’ by the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>249</sup> Discomforted by the nation’s weakened status, Napoleon III – dubbed emperor after an 1851 *coup d’état* – set off on a mission to restore French grandeur. Other nations were advancing too, however, and one whose strength was growing particularly fast was that of Otto von Bismarck.

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<sup>247</sup> Rorty, 18.

<sup>248</sup> For a general account of conflicts and debates that characterised the Third Republic, see e.g.: William Fortescue, *The Third Republic in France, 1870-1940: Conflicts and Continuities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); James R. Lehning, *To Be a Citizen: The Political Culture of the Early French Third Republic* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001). Lehning dubs the Third Republic an ‘insecure Republic’ (1).

<sup>249</sup> Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

When the rivalry between Prussia and France finally escalated in 1870, the war presented a final opportunity for France to re-establish itself as the natural power of Europe. The defeat was instead perceived as painful proof of French *dégénérescence*.<sup>250</sup>

France's diminished power on the world stage was not the only cause for worry. With a multiplicity of seemingly irreconcilable visions of 'France' and 'Frenchness' fighting over the hegemonic right to define their national identity – Republican, Bonapartist, Orléanist, Bourbonist, and more – the French nation appeared internally splintered too.<sup>251</sup> The clash between Republicans and Catholics, which would become a dominant feature in the Third Republic, was described by Charles Renouvier in 1872:

There are two Frances in France, that of the clericals and that of the liberals... there are no longer virtually any ideas or sentiments in common between the two groups, between these two people obliged none the less to live under the same civil law.<sup>252</sup>

Installed amid such chaotic conditions, a primary objective of the Third Republic was to stabilise and unify the nation. To mould a France that would be fused together, rather than divided, by the revolutionary doctrine. To cement a Third Republican self-image of order and progress.<sup>253</sup> A series of homogenising processes were rolled out. As is well-known, the secular education reforms, implemented by Jules Ferry during the first decade of the new regime, worked as an effective tool to produce a unified group of Republican *citoyens*.<sup>254</sup> Schools emerged as an all-important infrastructure with which to exchange a fragmented France – manifesting itself not only in political and religious difference but also in broad regional variations of language and history – for a nation fused together by a singular moral, laic and thus universal in reach. The Third Republican education reforms, as Eugene Weber writes, helped France 'civilize a

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 1-40. The loss of Alsace/Lorraine posed as a particularly painful marker of decline.

<sup>251</sup> James McMillan, *Modern France, 1880-2002* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1-11.

<sup>252</sup> Charles Renouvier quoted in McMillan, *Modern France*, 6.

<sup>253</sup> John R. Bowen writes that, in the Third Republic, it was 'a matter of national self-defense to create a new, universal social morality'. (*Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 24-25.) Stanley Hoffmann notes that this occurred across political board. Their emphasis may have been different (Maurras stressed the example given by France as the oldest national state whilst Jaurès and others preferred to identify France with civilization), but it was always the same underlying belief – that France was a pace-setter for the world. (Stanley Hoffmann, 'Paradoxes of the French Political Community', *France: Change and Tradition* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1963), 20.)

<sup>254</sup> Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: the modernization of rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976); Phyllis Stock-Morton, *Moral Education for a Secular Society* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988); Dana Kristofor Lindaman, *Becoming French: Mapping Geographies of French Identity, 1871-1914* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

citizenry'.<sup>255</sup> Himself a child of the Third Republic, Georges Bataille – along with many of his *Documents*-colleagues – belonged to one of the first generations going through this new education system.<sup>256</sup>

In schools, and other public spaces, religious symbols were swiftly exchanged for secular imagery, addressing all French subjects. Statues were erected and streets were renamed in honour of various Republican heroes. Bastille Day was installed as the national day and the revolutionary *La Marseillaise* dubbed the national anthem. The Third Republic, in James McMillan's words, was to be 'the incarnation of the democratic myth and the fulfilment of the dreams of the revolutionaries of 1789.' Yet, despite allegoric references to rebellious rupture, the political aim of the Third Republic primarily that of 'conservative stability of order and good government'.<sup>257</sup> The rowdy, disruptive legacy of the revolution was to be celebrated only from the safe distance of symbolism.

Behind this carefully crafted self-image, however, anxieties were lurking, sabotaging its coherency and its power to persuade. Unsettling signs of trouble were surfacing. Contagious diseases, bulging slums, and declining birth-rates fuelled anguished speculations of French *dégénérescence*. The unification of Germany, rapidly growing across the north-west border, only added to the long list of perceived perils weakening the nation. Despite being on the winning side in 1918, the First World War, producing one and a half million dead and as many wounded, firmly exacerbated Third Republican anxieties.<sup>258</sup> Moreover, with much of the male population on the front, the war also marked a significant decline in birth rates, an estimated added loss of 1.400.000 lives.<sup>259</sup> French fears of a feeble population were once more fuelled.

With entire regions devastated, the war provoked severe material losses too. In *Le déclin de l'Europe* (1920), Albert Demangeon described demolished areas as 'good soil' having been 'transformed into desert, into a wild steppe, into a field of eruptions'.<sup>260</sup> Certain cities, such as Reims, had been razed to the ground. Georges Bataille, who had moved to Reims with his

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<sup>255</sup> Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 366.

<sup>256</sup> On the relationship between the French avant-garde and Third Republican education systems, see e.g.: Jack J. Spector, *Surrealist Art & Writing: 1919/1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Molly Nesbit, 'Ready-Made Originals: The Duchamp Model,' *October* (Summer, 1986): 53-64.

<sup>257</sup> McMillan, 4.

<sup>258</sup> See e.g.: Philippe Bernard and Henri Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic, 1914-1938*, translated by Anthony Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Jean-Jacques Becker and Serge Berstein, *Victoire et frustrations : 1914-1929* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990).

<sup>259</sup> Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), 12.

<sup>260</sup> Demangeon (1920) quoted in *Victoire et frustrations*, 169. 'la bonne terre a transformée en désert, en une steppe sauvage, en un champ d'éruptions.'

mother and father around 1900, fled the city with his mother in 1914, leaving his syphilitic, paralysed father behind. The traumatic events are dramatically recalled in his first novel, *Histoire de l'œil*, published in 1927.<sup>261</sup> Despite ambitious plans to rebuild and regenerate the nation, action was plagued by perpetual postponement. France, having paid for the war by leaving the gold standard, borrowing, and printing money, had been left with exhausted reserves and massive debts owed primarily to America. The subsequent US-designed Dawes Plan of 1924, negotiating war debts and restitutions, firmly announced, Maurice Agulhon writes, 'the triumph of American economic and financial imperialism.'<sup>262</sup> The war had rigorously rattled old world orders.

After the franc hit an all-time low in the summer of 1926, Raymond Poincaré managed, in the end, to stabilise the country's currency. But it came at a cost. In July of 1928, the franc was realigned with the gold standard, at a fifth of its original value.<sup>263</sup> Another dual signifier: a sigh of relief and a terrible blow to the national self-image. Haunted by crippling inertia and anguished fears of a France in decline, thus, the hoped-for 'republican synthesis' of stability, progress, and order had morphed into what Stanley Hoffman famously dubbed a 'stalemate society', provoking disbelief in the parliamentary system altogether.<sup>264</sup> The equilibrium of the Third Republic finally shattered as the thirties ended, heralding the instalment of the Vichy regime in 1940.<sup>265</sup>

### *Historicising Documents*

Interwar France was laced with anxieties. The fate of the nation was continuously debated and envisioned in popular as well as political discourse. Endeavours to rectify, regenerate, or rebuild the image and idea of France echoed not only across the domain of the official establishment and the increasing number of political organisations and lobby groups, but throughout modernist and avant-garde discourses too. Across the pages of the Parisian avant-garde journal *Documents*, these national fears were highlighted. Strategically re-circulating charged signs wrapped up in

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<sup>261</sup> Surya, 14-17. Bataille was drafted but discharged in 1917 for health reasons. (ibid., 24).

<sup>262</sup> Agulhon, 116. On the relationship between America and France, see e.g.: David Strauss, *Menace in the West: The Rise of French Anti-Americanism in Modern Times* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978), Philippe Roger, *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism*, trans. Sharon Bowman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), Frank Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion: American Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations with Europe, 1919-1933* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984).

<sup>263</sup> Bernard and Dubief, 93-101; Maurice Agulhon, *The French Republic, 1879-1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 147-178.

<sup>264</sup> Hoffmann, 3-21. On the political violence of the interwar period, which Hoffman identifies as key to the downfall of the Third Republic, see e.g.: Chris Millington, *Fighting For France: Violence in Interwar French Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). The 'stalemate' thesis has since been revised and nuanced. Importantly, Kevin Passmore has emphasised the role of the Third Republic in the engendering of fascist politics, see e.g.: Kevin Passmore, 'The French Third Republic: Stalemate Society or Cradle of Fascism?' *French Historical Studies* 7:4 (1993).

<sup>265</sup> Hoffmann, 25.

French unease concerning the power, strength, and future of the nation, painful points of Third Republican fragility, lurking behind and destabilising that sought-after self-image of stable order and progress, were pressurised, prodded, and agitated. Focussing on three areas where these French interwar anxieties were particularly felt, this thesis explores ways in which *Documents* positioned itself as an avant-garde journal by negotiating and repurposing various signs inhabiting such anguished terrains, charged by their repeated use in discourse, to critical ends.

‘Chapter One: *Documents* and Hygiene’ investigates ways in which *Documents* subversively roused long-standing Third Republican anxieties concerning the seemingly brittle health of France. The first segment, ‘Spittle, Dust, and Flies: Tuberculosis Microbes and the National Threat of Contagion’, explores *Documents*’ critical treatment of tuberculosis, the deadliest of diseases plaguing France. Perceived as a particularly pertinent signifier of French feebleness, tuberculosis would become, the hygienist and soon-to-be health minister, Paul Strauss, announced, an ‘obsessive’ question for the Third Republic. Once identified, the primary vehicles of its microbial transmission – spittle, dust, and flies – featured widely in public health campaigns, political discourse, and popular culture, framed as lethal threats to French health and progress. When reproduced in the dissident avant-garde journal *Documents*, these motifs were not hygienically warned against but, on the contrary, transformed into anti-idealist artillery. The significance they denoted in culture, generated through repeated use in discourse, was subversively redirected, aimed directly at its established order and neatly pasteurised self-image.

The second segment, ‘Enfants ‘monstrueux’: Depopulation, Pronatalism, and French Eugenics’, analyses *Documents*’ intervention into French fears of national depopulation. This longstanding conviction was central to theories of *dégénérescence* and helped engender a politically powerful pronatalist movement in the Third Republic. With the aid of Adolphe Pinard and the doctrine of *puériculture*, these pronatalist ideals soon merged with those of eugenics, increasingly proliferating across early twentieth-century Europe. The motif of ‘healthy and beautiful babies’, widely circulated in the interwar period, became synonymous with idealised anticipations of a prosperous France. In *Documents*, the charged currencies it denoted in discourse was capitalised on, the ultra-utopian logic it purported was inverted. Alongside a series of teratological illustrations of ‘monstrous’ infants, a critique of the eugenicist rationale, penned by Bataille, was published. Contrary to its idealist intentions, Bataille announced, eugenics only proves that every human being is, ‘to a certain degree, a monster.’<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘The Deviations of Nature,’ in *Visions of Excess*, 53-56.

‘Chapter Two: *Documents* and Hollywood Talkies’ outlines the critical strategy at play within the journal’s subversive embrace of American talking film. The first segment, ‘Hollywood, Americanisation, and the Arrival of Talking Films in Interwar France’, situates the arrival of Hollywood talkies within French anti-Americanism – a longstanding trajectory of that, as we will see, was radically boosted in the aftermath of the First World War. Indeed, to the Third Republican establishment, the new sound technology posed as a painful marker of America’s interwar dominance – financial as well as cultural. Warning against an ‘intellectual colonisation’, French politicians attempted, in vain, to curb the influx of Hollywood talkies.<sup>267</sup> When *Documents* entered the debate, publishing across the fifteen issues appearing between 1929 and 1931 numerous references to Hollywood talkies, the social and political anxieties surrounding the novel format were exploited to avant-garde ends. In the hands of the dissident journal, talking film was framed not as a menacing vehicle of offensive but inescapable Americanisation, damaging and destabilising France and its national identity, but, on the contrary, as a liberating corrective to a ‘narrow-minded’ modernity.<sup>268</sup>

The second segment, ‘A ‘barbaric invasion’: Talkies and the Cinematic Avant-Garde in Interwar Paris’, continues to excavate the subversive currency that talking film carried in interwar France by examining the agony its arrival engendered within Paris’ avant-garde circles, to whom the genre-blurring inclusion of speech, a feature normally housed in theatre, was perceived as a severe disruption to the artistic essence of the filmic medium. The extra-cinematic excess of spoken dialogue, they feared, would transgress its medium-specific domain, and destabilise its long-fought-for identity as an autonomous art form. Subverting such lofty discourse, well-disseminated across both specialised and popular press in interwar France, *Documents* turned to eulogise precisely those elements that troubled the cinematic avant-garde: the excessive impurity, uncurbed theatricality, and radical lack of elevation, framing the new sound technology as a necessarily noisy antidote to a culture plagued by ‘seriousness, nobility, morality’.<sup>269</sup>

‘Chapter Three: *Documents* and Architecture’ traces the journal’s subversive interventions into the built space of Paris, a topic widely debated in the interwar period. The first segment, ‘Skyscraper Paris: Third Republican Preservationism and Le Corbusier’s Purist City’, excavates the critical

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<sup>267</sup> ‘2e séance du 9 Décembre 1929,’ *Journal officiel de la République française. Débats parlementaires. Chambre des députés : compte rendu in-extenso*, no. 107, (10 December 1929): 4174. ‘C’est un immense effort de colonisation intellectuelle, implacable, qui nous menace.’

<sup>268</sup> Michel Leiris, ‘Talkie,’ in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, assembled and introduced by Alastair Brotchie, translated by Ian White (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 83.

<sup>269</sup> Michel Leiris, ‘Fox Movietone Follies of 1929,’ in *Brisées: Broken Branches*, trans. Lydia Davis (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989): 38-40.

currency of a particular sign, broadly disseminated across both image and text in political as well as popular discourse: the skyscraper. To the increasingly preservationist Third Republic, the image and idea of Parisian towers was perceived as a jarring intrusion into the traditional urban fabric of the capital, threatening to dilute and displace its aesthetic identity at a time of particular fragility. Indeed, as a marker of American modernity, erecting skyscrapers on French soil signified a seemingly self-inflicted capitulation to U.S. dominance. To modernist utopians such as Le Corbusier, on the other hand, the skyscraper loomed as an all-encompassing panacea to Parisian problems. Superimposing his Purist rhetoric, peddled since 1918, into the fabric of interwar Paris, Le Corbusier's plan to raze the historic centre to the ground, and erect in its place eighteen towers, sought to create a geometrically ordered capital, that would produce, in turn, rational and ordered citizens dutifully obeying the 'universal order'.<sup>270</sup> When *Documents* turned to define the skyscraper, the anguished stakes embedded within the motif were accentuated and put under pressure. Whilst embracing skyscrapers as 'modern and marvelous symbols', thus snubbing the prevailing preservationist dictum, *Documents* subsequently turned to exploit Le Corbusier's idealist rhetoric to radically anti-idealist ends, framing the skyscraper as a signifier of a universal humanity marked not by rationality and geometric order but by inherent incoherence and violent urges towards 'joyful demolition'.<sup>271</sup>

The second segment, 'The Irrepressible Excess of Base-Paris: Statues, Sewers, Slaughterhouses, and the Slums of Saint-Merri', further elaborates how *Documents* engaged with the built space of Paris to stage a radical dethronement of modern civilisation. Moving across a number of Parisian structures – Third Republican statuary programmes, the *tout-à-l'égout* sewerage system, the abattoir at la Villette, and, finally, the notorious slum lurking at the heart of historical Paris, Saint-Merri – *Documents* strategically accentuated areas that troubled the image of a glorified capital to unveil a radically revised and decidedly defiled counter-image. Attacking architecture, as Bataille explained in his dictionary-entry on the topic, enabled the staging of 'as it were, an attack on man'.<sup>272</sup>

Within *Documents*' critical gesture, there was therefore also a constructive element at play. The strategic re-dissemination of anxiety-inducing signs, the critical currency of which was fuelled by their fraught use in culture, not only sabotaged, disqualified, and collapsed the Third Republican self-image, carefully crafted through official discourse. It also critically re-defined it, added to and

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<sup>270</sup> Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), 31.

<sup>271</sup> Michel Leiris, 'Skyscraper,' in *Encyclopaedia Acepbalica*, 69-72.

<sup>272</sup> Georges Bataille, 'Architecture,' in *Encyclopaedia Acepbalica*, 35-36.

altered it, unveiling, throughout the pages of *Documents*, a different portrayal altogether of a France de-idealised, dethroned, debased. Contagious tuberculosis microbes, ‘monstruous’ infants, Hollywood talkies, skyscrapers, or Parisian slums – repeatedly framed as enemies to the health, power, and future of France – posed as ideal weapons to employ as part of such critical programme set to recalibrate and to redefine.

This was a critical program concerned with promoting, as Bataille writes in the first issue of the journal’s second year (1930), that which is ‘external and foreign to ideal human aspirations’, that which ‘refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations.’ It is, Bataille continues, ‘the image of this base matter that alone, by its incongruity and by an overwhelming lack of respect, permits the intellect to escape from the constraints of idealism.’<sup>273</sup> The ‘Critical Dictionary’, that recurring segment in *Documents*, proved an ideal environment for such unadorned unveiling of things. Singling out words that carried weight in contemporary culture – be that the weight of false glorification or of ideologised use – only to critically redefine them against the grain, in a move that was equally ridiculing as it was revealing, the ‘Critical Dictionary’ sought – as Bataille himself declared – ‘to bring things down in the world’.<sup>274</sup> The entry on ‘Materialism’ thus denies any elevating synthesis:

The time has come, when employing the word materialism, to assign to it the meaning of a direct interpretation, *excluding all idealism*, of raw phenomena, and not of a system founded on the fragmentary elements of an ideological analysis elaborated under the sign of religious relations.<sup>275</sup>

Another illustrative example of the journal’s strategy to sabotage any attempt at aggrandisement is the dictionary definition of ‘Man’. Putting that frank anti-idealist base-materialism to use, *Documents* starkly revalues human worth by calculating the monetary value of its chemical composition. The ‘bodily fat of a normally constituted man would suffice to manufacture seven cakes of toilet soap’, there is iron ‘to make a medium-sized nail’ and enough ‘sugar to sweeten a cup of coffee’. There is also ‘a little potassium and sulphur’, although ‘in an unusable quantity’. Fully dethroned, firmly denied access to its traditionally elevated seat, humanity is – ‘costed at current prices’ – valued at an approximate of twenty-five francs.<sup>276</sup> When *Documents* prodded

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<sup>273</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘Base Materialism and Gnosticism,’ in *Visions of Excess*, 51.

<sup>274</sup> Bataille, ‘Formless’.

<sup>275</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘Materialism,’ *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, 58.

<sup>276</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘Man,’ *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, 56-57.

French wounds – be that those caused by felt feeble health, increasing American influx, or a deteriorating edifice of Paris – it was as part of the same critical project, set to reevaluate human existence.

Once returned to the visual culture of interwar France and reinterpreted through Peircean semiotics, then, a strategy very different from that identified by the dominant deconstructionist reading emerges. This is a strategy that did not seek to sabotage meaning-production but to critically participate in such cultural processes. A strategy whose criticality stemmed not from an unveiling of the ‘undecidability’ of signs but, on the contrary, from radical re-dissemination of the heightened meaning those signs carried in culture. Subversively circulating signs that pressurised and agitated deep-seated Third Republic anxieties, *Documents* not only undermined its idealist self-image of order, stability and progress, but radically revised it. Across the pages of *Documents*, thus, the irreconcilable contradiction, perpetual paradox, transgressive excess, and incongruous heterogeneity, eagerly promoted by Bataille and his *Documents*-colleagues, is played out not on the level of language, where its criticality is constricted to semantic disruption, as Derrida and his followers would have it, but on the level of experience, *within the fabric of life*, exposing a fully de-idealised self-image of mankind: a base-reality, a base-France, inhabited by base-*citoyens*.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Patrick ffrench describes Bataille’s fictional writing in these words: ‘it is not so much external events themselves, the litany of what bodies do to other bodies, that drive Bataille’s texts, as the inner experiences to which they give rise. (...) they are phenomenologies of shame, disgust and betrayal, all states consistent in their focus on the distance between the common measure, the orthodox appearance of things, the social norm, and the truth of transgression, the extremities of human desire and abjection. (...) In his fictions Bataille seeks to reach that place where a being is undone’. (‘Bataille’s Literary Writings’, in *Georges Bataille: Key Concepts*, ed. Mark Hewson and Marcus Coelen (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 195-196.) For further detail on Bataille and affectivity, see e.g.: ffrench, *After Bataille*, 11-62.

# Chapter One: *Documents and Hygiene*

In the first issue of *Documents*' second year (1930), a definition of 'Hygiene' was published in the journal's 'Critical Dictionary'. The entry, written by Michel Leiris, pinpoints this ideologised topic in a satirical manner:

The man who rubs his skin with a friction-glove until it is a vivid red, cleans his teeth with an American product, or indeed takes a cold shower after some physical exercise, imagines he is acting with the sole aim of keeping himself in good health, thanks to a properly understood hygiene, the admirable benefit of this century of reason. '*Mens sana in corpore sano*,' say those in favour of Latin tags. (...) He hardly suspects, that clean-shaven man with his neatly combed hair, that he is accomplishing a magical rite (...) a rite of purification, a wholly moral purification, addressing itself exclusively to mystical forces. (...) In our time, now that religious values find themselves on the decline, religions, to save themselves, are increasingly tending to merge with hygiene. (...) those who are clean can go on believing they are pure in heart, and the world goes on turning (...) everyone will soon be moral, thanks to Cadum soap (...).<sup>1</sup>

In the Third Republic, committed to regenerating a fragile France, the idea and ideal of hygiene gained a heightened role in official discourse.<sup>2</sup> Supported by ground-breaking scientific and medical discoveries – in particular that of bacteriology which, spearheaded by the likes of Louis Pasteur, Robert Koch, and Joseph Lister, settled the divisive etiological dispute, enabling a definitive shift from miasmatic theories of disease to a modern germ theory – public health became an increasingly central tenet of political policy in the secular Republic.<sup>3</sup> In 1902, following debates stretching over two decades, France's first public health law was consolidated,

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Leiris, 'Hygiene,' in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, 52-53.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of the role of *hygiène* in the Third Republic, see e.g.: Lion Murard and Patrick Zylberman, *L'hygiène dans la République: La santé publique en France ou l'utopie contrariée, 1870-1918* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g.: John Waller, *The Discovery of the Germ: Twenty Years That Transformed the Way We Think About Disease* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

demanding all large cities to establish municipal health departments.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, young *citoyens* across the nation were drilled in hygienic behaviour through the new Third Republican education system, where *hygiène* was listed as a mandatory subject for children between the ages of six and thirteen following a legislation passed in 1882.<sup>5</sup> As such, Georges Vigarello explains, ‘the originality’ of this cultural climate, was not so much a ‘passing from nonhealth to health, but rather a deepening of health itself, imagining its indefinite growth’: ‘Never before had normal health seemed so modifiable, so perfectible, so inclined toward the future and toward progress.’<sup>6</sup>

Tellingly, the revised second edition of *Le tour de la France par deux enfants* – a staple textbook in French schools – published in 1906, the year after the separation between Church and State, an epilogue including a segment entitled ‘Les découvertes de Pasteur’ was added, eulogising the microbiologist as a hero of modern progress and *hygiène* as a triumphant manifestation of a civilising process.<sup>7</sup> The educational novel, originally published in 1877, follows two young *garçons*, André and Julien, who, left orphaned after the Franco-Prussian war, depart from their native Lorraine, now under German annexation, and set off on a journey across their *patrie*, France, in search for their uncle. An emblematic text of Third Republican efforts to rewrite the national self-image, *Le tour de la France par deux enfants* – dubbed ‘the little red book of the Republic’ – helped introduce French *écoliers* to a unified image of the geography, history, and culture of their nation.<sup>8</sup> In the new epilogue, Guillaume, a character encountered on their journey, announces: ‘How could we neglect hygiene, the mother of strength?’<sup>9</sup> To which Julien dutifully responds: ‘You have taught us that hygiene is necessary for the preservation of one’s health, and we practice it to our best abilities.’<sup>10</sup> Then André chimes in: ‘As for me, I do not stop repeating: if, everywhere in France, even in the smallest corner, everyone fulfils their duty, the nation will become great, happy, and prosperous.’<sup>11</sup> ‘Bravo, my dear André,’ Guillaume confirms: ‘That is a beautiful way to preach progress. Indeed, alongside hygiene, progress takes on its true form.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g.: Ann F. La Berge, *Mission and Method: The Early Nineteenth-Century French Public Health Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> J. Palméro, *Histoire des institutions et des doctrines pédagogiques par les textes* (Paris: Sudel, 1958), 312.

<sup>6</sup> Georges Vigarello, *Histoire des pratiques de santé: Le sain et le malsain depuis le Moyen Âge*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), 272. ‘L’originalité n’est pas de passer de la non-santé à la santé, mais plutôt d’approfondir la santé elle-même, imaginer son accroissement indéfini. (...) Jamais la normalité sanitaire n’avait à ce point semblé modulable, perfectible, tendue vers le futur et le progrès.’

<sup>7</sup> G. Bruno, *Le tour de la France par deux enfants*, expanded edition (Paris: Belin Frères, 1922).

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Ozouf and Mona Ozouf, ‘Le tour de la France par deux enfants: The Little Red Book of the Republic,’ in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. 2, *Traditions*, ed. Pierre Nora, trans. Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 125-150. By 1901, the book had sold in more than six million copies and was the single most popular item in French libraries.

<sup>9</sup> Bruno, 303. ‘Comment négligerions-nous l’hygiène, mère de la force?’

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. ‘Ce que nous vous avez appris sur la nécessité de l’hygiène pour conserver sa santé, nous l’avons pratiqué de notre mieux.’

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. ‘Pour moi, je ne cesse de le répéter: si, partout en France, même dans le moindre coin, chacun veut remplir son devoir, la patrie deviendra grande, heureuse, prospère.’

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. ‘Bravo, mon cher André. Voilà une belle manière de prêcher le progrès. D’ailleurs, du côté de l’hygiène, le progrès se réalise vraiment.’

This chapter sets up a critical relation between *Documents* and the ideologically charged terrain of hygiene, investigating ways in which the Parisian avant-garde journal highlighted, and subversively pressurised, Third Republican concerns regarding the seemingly feeble health and strength of France. Part One, ‘Spittle, Dust, and Flies: Tuberculosis Microbes and the National Threat of Contagion’, re-examines the critical function enacted by a specific set of signs that, as we will see, was used extensively and repetitively in the visual culture of interwar France: spittle, dust, and flies. Indeed, once identified as the primary vehicles of tuberculosis microbes, these motifs featured widely in public health campaigns, political discourse, and popular culture, appearing across the pages of the Parisian avant-garde journal *Documents* too. The journal’s ‘Critical Dictionary’ provides definitions for both ‘Spittle’ (7:1929) and ‘Dust’ (5:1929). As we have seen, a photograph of an open mouth, wet with saliva, was published (5:1930), (Fig. 2). A series of images displaying flies are also found (8:1930), (Fig. 7 and 8). Although, here, as we will see, this canon of signs was recirculated with a very different end goal in mind, as part of an opposing, anti-idealist programme: one that did not set out to protect but to attack, not to prevent but spread; a subversive avant-garde programme, that is, set to critique the very Third Republican culture whose endless obsession with hygiene had imbued them with such heightened meaning.

Part Two, ‘Enfants ‘monstrueux’: Depopulation, Pronatalism, and French Eugenics’, sheds new light on a series of teratological illustrations featuring ‘monstrous’ infants published in *Documents* (2:1930), (Fig. 9-11), reinterpreting them in relation to what Robert Nye has dubbed the ‘master pathology’ of *dégénérescence*, that is, the deep conviction that France was on the verge of being depopulated. Rapidly cementing a practically unopposed pronatalist dictum in Third Republican discourse, the motif of the *child* posed as a charged and widely disseminated sign in political as well as popular culture. Indeed, conditioned by such seemingly unshakable conviction, French eugenicist discourse too anchored its rhetoric in this anguished terrain, promoting – unlike their European counterparts – not the restriction of ‘unwanted’ births but instead the cultivation of ‘healthy and beautiful babies,’ as declared by the president of the *Société française d’eugénique* in 1920.<sup>13</sup> When *Documents*, alongside a scathing take-down of the eugenic rationale, published six teratological illustrations of ‘monstrous’ infants plagued by various physical pathologies, the currency the motif of the *child* carried in interwar France was redeployed against the grain, the ultra-utopian ideals of eugenics were firmly undermined. In the words of

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<sup>13</sup> Edmond Perrier, ‘Eugénique et Biologie,’ in E. Apert et al. *Eugénique et sélection* (Paris: Librairie Félix-Alcan, 1922), 1-2. ‘avoir de robustes et beaux enfants.’

Bataille: 'each individual form escapes this common measure and is, to a certain degree, a monster.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bataille, 'The Deviations of Nature'.

## Spittle, Dust, and Flies: Tuberculosis Microbes and the National Threat of Contagion

### *The Birth of the Third Republic, Fears of Degeneration, and a Political Belief in Science*

To uncover the critical currency that the chief carriers of tuberculosis contagion – spittle, dust, and flies – denoted in interwar France, it is necessary first to return to the early days of the Third Republic. Indeed, the terror caused by tuberculosis can partly be explained by how it locked into dystopian prophecies of French *dégénérescence*, stipulating the possibility that France was heading in the opposite direction of progress, doomed to a future of national regression, (Fig. 12).<sup>15</sup>

Tuberculosis, being not only the deadliest illness, but worse, an illness that seemed to kill more in France than elsewhere, posed as a perfect piece in that narrative puzzle: a sign of a particular French fragility, a symptom of national decline.<sup>16</sup>

As historians have pointed out, a remarkable feature of these theories was their ability to conflate seemingly disparate defects into a single and, thus, overwhelmingly convincing storyline.

Mobilising a medicalised language when seeking to make sense of the long list of perils threatening the Third Republican organism, it was possible to, rhetorically and conceptually, move freely and flexibly between micro and macro perspectives, between the national whole and the individual body and, thus, to seamlessly interweave any perceived signs of weakness – be they military, political, cultural, or biological – into a totalising diagnosis of French degeneracy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See e.g.: Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984); J. Edward Chamberlain and Sander L. Gilman, eds., *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); William H. Schneider, *Quantity and Quality: The Quest for Biological Regeneration in Twentieth-Century France*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> See e.g.: Allan Mitchell, 'Obsessive Questions and Faint Answers: The French Response to Tuberculosis in the Belle Epoque,' *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* (Summer, 1988): 215-235. For a discussion on the reliability of statistics, see: Allan Mitchell, 'An inexact Science: The Statistics of Tuberculosis in Late Nineteenth-Century France,' *Social History of Medicine*, vol. 3, no. 3 (December 1990): 387-403; David Barnes, 'The Rise and Fall of Tuberculosis in Belle-Epoque France: A reply to Allan Mitchell,' *Social History of Medicine*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1992): 279-290.

<sup>17</sup> Nye writes: 'The thoroughly secular outlook of the new Republican leadership was unusually compatible with a scientific and medical mode of social analysis; under the spur of the internal and external events of the era, a medical model of cultural crisis developed that exercised a linguistic and conceptual imperialism over all other ways of viewing the nation's plight. If this model

Whilst such theories had circulated in France since the 1840s, the event that seemed to undoubtedly confirm their veracity was the military defeat against Prussia in 1871, leading to the fall of the Second Empire and the instalment of the Third Republic.<sup>18</sup>

Taking over the reins in the aftermath of this national humiliation, thus, at the top of the Third Republican docket lay the task of regeneration. Yet, it was not only a weakened position vis-à-vis other nations that caused concern. The Paris Commune, erupting amidst this regime change, revived the deep-seated culture war between Republicans and Catholics that had been severing the nation since the Revolution, making it all too clear that France was internally fractured too.<sup>19</sup> The Third Republican quest to stabilise and unify the nation – to model a society that would be fused together, rather than divided, by the revolutionary doctrine – was therefore to be embarked upon by launching a new *type* of republicanism. This was one no longer rooted in that fertile but all too disruptive soil of unruly romanticism but, instead, in a positivist belief in *science* as a neutral warrant of both universality and liberty *and* orderly and stable progress, in *science* as an embodiment of the revolutionary ideals without any of the debilitating and blood-stained disorder. The Third Republic was characterised by a political faith in science: in the omnipotence of its powers; in its irrefutable promises of progress; in its capacity to, in an orderly and stable manner, regenerate and unify France.<sup>20</sup>

In the interwar period, when *Documents* radically recirculated the motifs denoting the threat of tuberculosis contagion – spittle, dust, and flies – the longstanding national anxieties concerning French *dégénérescence* and the corresponding Third Republican efforts to cement a unified and homogenous identity of scientific order and positivist progress were deliberately agitated, only to expose in its place a different, decidedly depasteurised and heterogenous portrayal of France and its *citoyens*.

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of crisis was *medical* in nature, it served the thoroughly *cultural* aim of explaining to the French the origins of national decadence and the weakness of their population.’ (xii-xiii).

<sup>18</sup> Nye points out Prosper Lucas’ 1847 *De hérédité naturelle* and B.A. Morel’s 1857 *Traité des dégénérescences* as the earliest accounts (121). For accounts of the effect of the defeat on France’s self-image, see e.g.: Claude Digeon, *La crise allemande de la pensée française, 1870-1914* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959).

<sup>19</sup> McMillan, 1-11. On regional fragmentation (linguistic, religious, historical, cultural), see e.g. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g.: Harry W. Paul, *From Knowledge to Power: The Rise of the Science Empire in France, 1860-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Jack D. Ellis, *The Physician-Legislators of France: Medicine and Politics in the Early Third Republic, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Intellectual Founders of the Republic: Five Studies in Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 24-84; Jeremy Jennings, *Revolution and the Republic: A History of Political Thought in France since the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), in particular, chapter 9; Robert Fox, *The Savant and the State: Science and Cultural Politics in Nineteenth Century France* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

## *Positivism in Third Republican Politics*

In its original formulation, first articulated in 1842 by Auguste Comte, positivist philosophy partitions human development into three stages. Having progressed from a theological state to a metaphysical state, humanity was taking the final leap into a scientific or positive state, characterised by the ability to identify objective and natural laws governing society and, thus, to extend the application of scientific method – freed from the justificatory support of religion or other metaphysical frameworks – onto the social whole.<sup>21</sup> In this positive state, Comte declared, society could be organised in the ‘definitive mode of any science’.<sup>22</sup> Responsible for subsequently merging the positivist vision with republican ideals and passing this ideological synthesis onto the new political generation was Émile Littré.<sup>23</sup> Dubbed the ‘intellectual founder’ of the Third Republic, Littré had gained fame with his *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1863), regarded ‘by its contemporaries as (...) a cultural expression of the scientific capacities of the emerging order’ and as a ‘monument to the Republic’.<sup>24</sup> With a strong aversion to the disorderly violence of the Revolution, Littré, echoing Comte, declared: ‘Society is governed by two equally powerful tendencies: order and progress.’<sup>25</sup>

Two ardent receptors of this synthesis were Léon Gambetta and Jules Ferry, both of whom soon became significant political figures in the Third Republic.<sup>26</sup> An avid reader of Littré’s books, the immediate influence of positivism on Gambetta’s politics is evident in an early speech, dating to the late 1860s. Rather than ‘vague propositions,’ he announced, ‘a scientific spirit should be introduced into government’: ‘We want a method and a system.’<sup>27</sup> Later, in an 1872 speech to the newly formed Third Republic, Gambetta announced: ‘there is only one thing which could serve as a foundation to a truly human society (...), and that is science’.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Jennings, 244-387.

<sup>22</sup> Auguste Comte (1824) in *ibid.*, 354.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g.: Émile Littré, *Conservation, révolution, positivisme* (Paris: Ladrangue, 1852). For an account of Littré’s role in the Third Republic, see e.g.: Jennings, 360-363; Hazareesingh, 24-84; John Eros, ‘The Positivist Generation of French Republicanism,’ *The Sociological Review*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1955): 255-277.

<sup>24</sup> Hazareesingh, 24. Similarly, Nord writes that Littré’s *dictionnaire* was part of a ‘republican political culture’ that ‘nursed pedagogical ambitions of a scientific, encyclopedic cast’, (Philip Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 191).

<sup>25</sup> Littré (1850), quoted in Hazareesingh, 37.

<sup>26</sup> Hazareesingh, 59-66. See also: Claude Nicolet, *L’idée républicaine en France (1789-1924) : Essai d’histoire critique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), chapters 6-8.

<sup>27</sup> Gambetta quoted in Eros, 261.

<sup>28</sup> Gambetta quoted in *ibid.*, 265.

The greatest positivist feat of Jules Ferry was the laic reform of France's education system. Through a series of legislations, dating to 1879-1882, religious content was banned from the curriculum. Education was also made mandatory for all French *citoyens*, thereby making it a crucial universalising platform in the Third Republic.<sup>29</sup> As explained by Ferdinand Buisson in 1899, one of the great Republican ideologues of laic education: 'Two conditions must be fulfilled to set a republic on its feet. One is easy: you must provide it with a republican constitution. The other is difficult: you must provide it with a people of republicans.'<sup>30</sup> Indeed, when the traditional, religious justification for government was no longer available, another form of moral foundation was needed. And *laïcité*, Yolande Jansen writes, became the 'ideology that could replace Catholic morality and that would spread the ideal of secular citizen-ship across the country.'<sup>31</sup> Intimately connected with the Third Republican urge to finally unify France by calling to positivist science as a warrant for universality, liberty and progress, the very word '*laïcité*' first appeared in a French dictionary in 1871.<sup>32</sup>

Once cut from the fertile soil of revolutionary nostalgia and re-rooted in the universal principle of positivism, a new type of republicanism thus emerged. Characterised by an unquivering belief in the omnipotent explanatory powers of science, doctors and scientists were trusted with an authoritative voice in all sorts of political and social discussions. Indeed, as Gambetta declared in his 1872 address to the new Third Republic, it was by elevating and expanding the reach of science that the 'the diffusion of light into the deepest layers of society' would be assured.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Bacteriological Revolution: Louis Pasteur and the Birth of the Microbe*

Looming at the heart of this positivist optimism was Louis Pasteur and the birth of the microbe. Although theories involving microorganisms had circulated since the invention of the microscope in the seventeenth century, it was not until Pasteur, in the 1860s, demonstrated the causative power of the microbe in a seemingly endless variety of contexts – from fermentation in

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<sup>29</sup> See e.g.: Louis Legrand, *L'influence du positivisme dans l'oeuvre scolaire de Jules Ferry : les origines de la laïcité* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1961); Mona Ozouf, *Jules Ferry : la liberté et la tradition* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Buisson (1899), quoted in Yolande Jansen, 'Laïcité, or the Politics of Republican Secularism,' in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, eds. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 477.

<sup>31</sup> Jansen, 477. Similarly, Nicollet writes: 'la laïcité peut être considérée comme un nouveau gage d'unité, l'unité spirituelle nécessaire à la République. La laïcité était le seul terrain où ils espéraient trouver cette unité, compte tenu des divisions politiques et morales du pays.' (449). For an account of the political function of *laïcité*, see also: Patrick Weil (ed.), *Politiques de la laïcité au XXe siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007); Jean Baubérot, 'Laicity,' in *The French Republic: History, Values, Debates*, eds. Edward Berenson, Vincent Duclert, and Christophe Prochasson (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 127-135.

<sup>32</sup> The word initially appeared in a supplement to the *Dictionnaire Littré*. Two years later, it featured in the *Dictionnaire Larousse*.

<sup>33</sup> Gambetta quoted in Eros, 265.

wine and beer, to the spread of deadly disease – that the world was convinced of their contagious might.<sup>34</sup> As Bruno Latour writes in *The Pasteurization of France*, ‘Pasteur’s genius’ lay in the construction of a ‘new theatre of truth’ where his conclusions – charged with a ‘visual quality’ – appeared both ‘spectacular’ and ‘indisputable’, (Fig. 13).<sup>35</sup>

Once the *Académie Française*, with the help of positivist dictionary-maker, Émile Littré, coined the word ‘microbe’ to describe these almighty microorganisms in 1878, its use and meaning quickly escaped Pasteur’s microscopic gaze and infiltrated French society at large.<sup>36</sup> Formulated within a culture characterised by a totalising blanket-use of scientific method and language, enabling a narrative conflation between micro and macro perspectives, between individual and national bodies, the ‘microbe’, as a linguistic entity and cultural concept, slipped into well-engrained narratives of national decline. Indeed, fuelled with extraordinary metaphoric powers, it would soon be used to describe *any* perceived threat to the stability, order, and progress of the Third Republican organism.<sup>37</sup> In 1881, the French philosopher Hippolyte Taine diagnosed the impulse towards revolution as a ‘disease’ of ‘epidemic and contagious character’: ‘Everywhere the same fever, delirium, and convulsions mark the presence of the same virus.’<sup>38</sup> In 1885, the French criminologist Alexandre Lacassagne described the criminal as a ‘microbe’.<sup>39</sup> In 1895, Gustave Le Bon lamented: ‘Ideas, sentiments, emotions, and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes.’<sup>40</sup> Anarchism too was conceptualised as an infectious germ. Indeed, when Octave Mirbeau’s *The Epidemic* – a play based on an actual typhoid outbreak – was performed in 1898, it was celebrated by Parisian anarchists as a symbolic assault on the state.<sup>41</sup>

Yet, Pasteur’s method, of course, not only identified debilitating microbes. It also made a promise of curability. The regenerative logic of pasteurisation could be applied to all of France, and Pasteur, Latour concludes, came to symbolise ‘the whole of this universal movement of

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<sup>34</sup> See e.g.: Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1988); Gerald L. Geison, *The Private Science of Louis Pasteur* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Patrice Debré, *Louis Pasteur*, trans. Elborg Foster (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Latour, 85-86.

<sup>36</sup> Debré, 361-364.

<sup>37</sup> On the expanded use of medical language in modernity, in particular that relating to bacteriology, see e.g.: Alison Bashford and Claire Hooker (eds.), *Contagion: Historical and Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Peta Mitchell, *Contagious Metaphor* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012); David Hopkins and Disa Persson (eds.), *Contagion, Hygiene, and the European Avant-Garde* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

<sup>38</sup> Hippolyte A. Taine, *Les origines de la France contemporaine: The Revolution, vol. 2*, trans. John Durand, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1881), 234.

<sup>39</sup> Lacassagne (1885), quoted in Nye, 104.

<sup>40</sup> Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1896), 143.

<sup>41</sup> Stanton B. Garner Jr, ‘Artaud, Germ Theory, and the Theatre of Contagion,’ *Theatre Journal*, vol. 58, no. 1 (March 2006): 6-7.

regeneration.<sup>42</sup> Tellingly, Pasteur had himself described the humiliating 1871 military defeat as French exposure to a ‘Prussian chancre’, the latter being contagious skin sores spreading syphilis, and hailed science as its only cure.<sup>43</sup> Two years after the defeat, the enraged microbiologist called for all French beer made using his patented method of pasteurisation to be named ‘Bières de la revanche nationale’.<sup>44</sup> In the Third Republic, scientific ambitions were firmly fused with *revanchiste* motifs.<sup>45</sup>

In the realm of disease, Pasteur’s overwhelmingly convincing and hope-inducing demonstrations triggered a wave of microbe hunts, set to identify and eliminate the various contagious germs destabilising modern existence. In the prestigious race to track down that responsible for tuberculosis, Pasteur was beaten to the punch by his German rival, Robert Koch, who, in 1882, identified the villainous microorganism, naming it Koch bacillus. Its primary mode of transmission was soon singled out: spittle.<sup>46</sup>

With tuberculosis no longer being constitutional but contagious, caused not by ‘sorrowful passions’, as it had previously been thought, but by a microbe, eliminating the germ became a primary focus.<sup>47</sup> When the Pasteur-disciple Joseph Grancher was called to the *Académie de Médecine* to report on the situation in 1898, his speech – dubbed the first ‘major salvo’ in the Third Republican ‘War on Tuberculosis’ – framed spittle as a microbial archenemy of France.<sup>48</sup> This ‘leper of modern times’, Grancher announced, ‘produces more sickness and deaths than all other contagious diseases’.<sup>49</sup> In France alone, he added, tuberculosis takes ‘150.000 victims every year’: ‘the bacilliferous spittle (...) is the usual vehicle of the germ of tuberculosis! Therefore, that

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<sup>42</sup> Latour, 18. Similarly, Schneider writes: ‘diseases were part of a general pattern of decline, with the assumption that treatment would bring regeneration.’ (*Quantity and Quality*, 46).

<sup>43</sup> Louis Pasteur, *Quelques réflexions sur la science en France* (Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1871), 26. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MFICHE R-45817.

<sup>44</sup> Pasteur (1873) quoted in Geison, 45. Already in the years leading up to 1871, Pasteur publicly declared ‘the necessity of maintaining the scientific superiority of France against the efforts of rival nations’ (Ibid., 31).

<sup>45</sup> No longer the strongest nation in Europe, French ambitions to reassert national superiority was refocused onto other domains. One was colonial expansion. The other was science. ‘At the dawn of the twentieth century, bacteriology and imperialism came to symbolize a new vision of the grandeur of France.’ (Aro Velmet, *Pasteur’s Empire: Bacteriology and Politics in France, Its Colonies and the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1.)

<sup>46</sup> J. N. Hays, *The Burdens of Disease: Epidemics and Human Responses in Western History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 234-241.

<sup>47</sup> In 1826, the French physician René-Théophile-Hyacinthe Laënnec wrote: ‘Among the intervening causes of pulmonary consumption, I know of none more certain than sorrowful passions’ (David S. Barnes, *The Making of a Social Disease: Tuberculosis in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 25).

<sup>48</sup> Barnes, *The Making of a Social Disease*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Grancher, ‘Sur la prophylaxie de la tuberculose,’ *Bulletin de L’Académie nationale de médecine* (1898): 470. ‘on a signalé les méfaits de cette peste, ce fléau, cette lèpre des temps moderne. (...) on a dit, avec raison, qu’à elle seule elle fait plus de malades et de morts que toutes les autres maladies contagieuses. (...) la tuberculose est si répandue (en France, elle fait 150.000 victimes tous les ans)’.

is what we must destroy – straight away’.<sup>50</sup> Within two years, Paris was furnished with placards instructing citizens not to spit, (Fig. 14). Spittoons were installed in public spaces. Anti-tuberculosis postcards circulated, (Fig. 15). Popular satirical journals cheekily asked: ‘Where should we spit?’<sup>51</sup> At the turn of the century, conquering this most deadly of diseases had, the ardent hygienist and soon-to-be Minister of Health, Paul Strauss, declared, become an ‘obsessive question’ for the Third Republic.<sup>52</sup>

Some three decades later, when spittle graced the pages of *Documents*, the felt need to protect *citoyens* from the devastating dangers lingering in mucous had only been further amplified in official discourse, repeatedly rehearsed in an array of government-led anti-tuberculosis campaigns. Indeed, against the grain of a hegemonic sign-use deeply rooted within a cultural logic fuelled by longstanding fears of French fragility, *Documents*, as we will see, mobilised this charged motif to different, decidedly de-idealising ends: seeking not to pasteurise but besmirch, seeking to expose, in the words of Leiris, ‘the incongruous image’ of a ‘spluttering’ humanity and thus to unveil man as nothing but ‘a flabby, bald animal’.<sup>53</sup>

### *Framing Spittle, Dust, and Flies: The First World War and French Anti-Tuberculosis Campaigns*

Despite obsessive, fin-de-siècle efforts to defeat the menacing microbe, on the eve of the First World War, tuberculosis cases were still higher in France than elsewhere.<sup>54</sup> With geopolitical tension building up again, spreading fears of another defeat against the Germans, the health of the Third Republican organism was once more called into question.<sup>55</sup> The war, of course, would not help the situation. Trenches proved ideal conditions for infection, leading to a further rise in cases. As a result, the war years provoked an escalation in the French fight against tuberculosis. In 1916, parliament rolled out the first anti-tuberculosis legislation.<sup>56</sup> In 1917, a national publicity

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 481. ‘le crachat bacillifère apparaît ce qu’il est, le véhicule habituel du germe de la phtisie ! C’est donc lui qu’il faut détruire – sur l’heure’. Grancher also identifies *dust*, feared to be housing dried spittle, as a key threat. One of the three measures agreed upon after the *séance*, therefore, was: ‘Éviter les poussières en replaçant le balayage par le lavage au linge humide’ (527).

<sup>51</sup> Louis Dorimat, ‘Ou crache-t-on?’, *La Lanterne de Boquillon*, (22 July 1900): 13-14.

<sup>52</sup> Strauss (1900), quoted in Mitchell, ‘Obsessive Questions and Faint Answers’, 222.

<sup>53</sup> Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris, ‘Spittle,’ *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, 79-80.

<sup>54</sup> In 1912, over ten percent of deaths were attributed to tuberculosis, a number markedly higher than in other countries (Schneider, *Quantity and Quality*, 136).

<sup>55</sup> The following quote from the French politician, Léon Bourgeois, published on the cover of *Le Matin* (May 22, 1913), is telling: ‘It is not enough to defend our borders / We must defend our race / It is threatened by tuberculosis, by slums, and by alcoholism.’

<sup>56</sup> The law, dubbed ‘loi Bourgeois’, installed a system of anti-tuberculosis dispensaries. See e.g.: Vincent Viet, ‘La Grande Guerre et la lutte antituberculeuse en France,’ *Revue d’histoire de la protection sociale*, no. 9 (2016): 52-67.

campaign was launched, distributing anti-tuberculosis posters, pamphlets, films, and brochures all throughout the nation.<sup>57</sup> While the campaign was new, the message promoted was an intensified version of the well-rehearsed nineteenth-century rhetoric of *dégénérescence*, constructing tuberculosis as one of many, intertwined threats weakening the French. As seen in a poster from 1917, the threat posed by microbial infection is conflated with and, thus, amplified by that posed by military invasion, (Fig. 16): ‘2 PLAGUES: THE GERMANS AND TUBERCULOSIS. THE GERMAN EAGLE WILL BE DEFEATED, TUBERCULOSIS MUST BE TOO.’

Mirroring the emphasis on education as a primary infrastructure for Third Republican regeneration, a favoured trope in these publicity campaigns was a didactic one, instructing citizens on microbial threats to avoid.<sup>58</sup> ‘Children of France!’, a 1918 pamphlet entitled *Aux enfants de France* declared: ‘This little book (...) contains lessons that you must (...) learn by heart (...) in order to overcome one of the greatest enemies of your glorious country, tuberculosis.’<sup>59</sup> The ‘lessons’ were presented both in textual and visual form, (Fig. 17). First: the microbe itself, displayed in a magnifying glass. The accompanying text read: ‘Tuberculosis is caused by a microbe only visible with the help of powerful microscopes.’<sup>60</sup> Next: its modes of transmission. Joining spittle were two other signs, identified as prime villains in airborne transmission: dust and flies. Alongside instructional drawings featured written mandates to ‘destroy all spittle’ and ‘avoid dust as far as possible’ as well as declarations such as: ‘The dirty fly carries microbes.’<sup>61</sup> One of the illustrations depicts a child climbed up on a stool, spitting into a spittoon. In the background looms a large sign, similar to those installed across Paris at the turn of the century: ‘NO SPITTING’.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> See e.g.: Lion Murard and Patrick Zylberman, ‘La Mission Rockefeller en France et la création du Comité national de défense contre la tuberculose (1917-1923),’ *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, no. 2 (April-June 1987): 257-281; Thierry Lefebvre, ‘Les films diffusés par la Mission Américaine, de prévention contre la tuberculose (Mission Rockefeller, 1917-1922),’ *Revue d’histoire du cinéma*, no. 1 (1991): 101-106. The campaign was initiated by the American Rockefeller program, brought to France in 1917. After the war, it was continued by the French state.

<sup>58</sup> On the conflation of morality and hygiene in anti-tuberculosis campaigns, see e.g.: Nancy Tomes, ‘Moralizing the Microbe: The Germ Theory and the Moral Construction of Behavior in the Late-Nineteenth-Century Antituberculosis Movement,’ in Allan M. Brandt and Paul Rozin (eds.), *Morality and Health* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 271-296. Rather than ‘narrowing the range of moral discourse about illness’, Tomes writes, germ theory ‘opened rich new veins of meaning regarding both individual and collective responsibilities for disease prevention (...) hygienic vigilance once deemed necessary only when epidemic disease threatened became a daily requirement for urban living.’ (273-274).

<sup>59</sup> Commission américaine de préservation contre la tuberculose en France, *Aux enfants de France* (Paris: Draeger, 1918), 2. Bibliothèque nationale de France, 16-T-PIECE-737. ‘Enfants de France ! Ce petit livre (...) contient des leçons que vous ne devez pas seulement parcourir, mais retenir. Lisez-le attentivement jusqu’à ce que vous ayez la certitude de l’avoir gravé dans votre mémoire. Suivez ensuite les conseils qui vous sont donnés et vous viendrez à bout d’un des plus grands ennemis de votre glorieux pays.’

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 5. ‘La tuberculose est causée par un microbe qui n’est visible qu’à l’aide de puissants microscopes’.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 19, 13, 8. ‘Il doit détruire tous ses crachats’ (19); ‘Il faut vivre au plein air et éviter autant que possible la poussière’ (13); ‘La sale mouche transporte des microbes’ (8).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 19. ‘DEFENSE DE CRACHER PAR TERRE’.

Warning France of this threatening trio – spittle, dust, and flies – quickly became a central occupation of French anti-tuberculosis efforts. A poster from 1917, featuring an illustration of a giant fly chasing a child, reads: ‘THE DIRTY FLY IS ONE OF THE GREATEST ENEMIES’ and ‘FLIES CARRY MICROBES’, (Fig. 18). In another poster, dating from 1918, the rhetoric is again militarised, conflating microbial infection with military invasion. Under the title ‘COMBAT TUBERCULOSIS’, scenes from French life have been categorised into ‘Allies’ and ‘Enemies’ of the deadly disease, (Fig. 19). Framed as sinister allies, warnings against ‘spittle and splutters’, ‘objects touching the mouth’, ‘dusty and dirty premises’ as well as ‘inhaled or swallowed dust’ are accompanied by illustrations. One features a miserable madame seated in a room covered in dust-laden spiderwebs. Another depicts a gentleman dutifully spitting into a spittoon. At the centre of the poster, a chart compares the debilitating impact of various illnesses. The column representing tuberculosis is the tallest. Underneath the chart, a text reads:

ONE of EIGHT deaths is caused by tuberculosis / Tuberculosis is a national  
peril / The Fight is a patriotic duty / Tuberculosis can and must be defeated /  
The Authorities and private initiatives have taken on the fight against this ill.  
Support them; Help them.

In these initial wartime campaigns, meticulously disseminated throughout the nation, one can thus identify a canon of signs – spittle, dust and flies – given the specific task of signifying the lethal threat posed by tuberculosis to the health and progress of France. Charged by their repeated use in culture, these signs inhabited a conflictual terrain, encompassing longstanding fears of national decline as well as Pasteurian promises of national regeneration; a discursive space fuelled with deep-seated Third Republican anxieties soon to be subversively prodded and pressurised by the avant-garde journal *Documents*.

### *French Anti-Tuberculosis Campaigns in the Interwar Period*

Despite victory in 1918, the war was experienced as a huge blow to the French self-image. Suffering more casualties than others, those engrained fears of national fragility were, yet again, fuelled. As a result, interwar France witnessed a ramped-up anti-tuberculosis campaign, marked by the 1919 creation of the *Comité national de défense contre la tuberculose*. Symptomatic of the Third Republican synthesis of politics and science, the committee comprised of prestigious politicians and physicians. Léon Bourgeois, instigator of the 1916 anti-tuberculosis law, was named its

founder. Among the vice presidents was Albert Calmette, the Pasteur-disciple who would make a name for himself by developing the tuberculosis vaccine in 1921. Dubbed *directeur de la propagande* was Lucien Viberol. Tellingly, his propaganda committee was twice the size of the *conseil de direction*.

In 1923, the *Comité* launched a journal, *La Vie Saine*. On the cover of the inaugural issue, Calmette declared that tuberculosis – the ‘*maladie microbienne*’ – was causing a quarter of all French deaths, a yearly death toll equal to five ‘*corps d’armée sur pied*’ making it, thus, ‘worse than the war’.<sup>63</sup> France, he continued, must now ‘mobilise all national forces against tuberculosis and safeguard the public health.’<sup>64</sup> Thankfully, Calmette concluded, ‘the scientific methods of PASTEUR have equipped us with efficient protection’: ‘Tuberculosis can be defeated’.<sup>65</sup> The campaign strategy was also announced. Through the ‘force of propaganda,’ Viberol declared, an ‘instinct of preservation’ will be instilled into ‘the French mentality’.<sup>66</sup> The ‘great principles of life and health’ – such as ‘*Spitting on the ground is to endanger the life of another*’ – will be repeated ‘non-stop’.<sup>67</sup> And repeated they were, throughout *La Vie Saine*, with the well-known trio of signs – spittle, dust, and flies – circulating at the centre. Sometimes the motifs were given a clear illustrative or instructive role. Other times, they were endowed an almost decorative role: set to establish a pattern and a visual familiarity, used to partition two sections of a text, or even, to fill up space on the page. No matter their shape or form – textual or visual, didactic or decorative – the discursive use of these signs was always the same: to signify an invading threat, weakening the French body and, thus, sabotaging the orderly and stable progress of the nation.<sup>68</sup>

In the inaugural issue, an image of a woman writing a hygienist message on a wall in front of a group of onlookers was published with the caption: ‘An anti-tuberculosis class for adults’, (Fig. 20). The hygienist dictum was familiar: ‘one must not spit on the ground, it is forbidden...’<sup>69</sup> In a

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<sup>63</sup> Albert Calmette, ‘La Tuberculose peut être vaincue,’ *La Vie Saine: organe populaire du comité national de défense contre la tuberculose*, No. 1 (March-April 1923): 1. Bibliothèque nationale de France, JO-61738. ‘Plus terrible que la guerre, la tuberculose tue chaque année 150.000 Français’. The back cover of this inaugural issue, above the subscription form, states in bold type: ‘All spit is suspicious.’

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. ‘un programme de *mobilisation de toutes nos forces nationales contre la santé publique*.’

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. ‘les méthodes scientifiques de PASTEUR nous ont dotés de moyens efficaces pour nous en préserver’.

<sup>66</sup> Lucien Viberol, ‘Le Salut est dans l’éducation de tous,’ in *ibid.*, 2. ‘il créera chez lui l’instinct de la préservation par les habitudes hygiéniques, dont il convient d’imprégner, en quelque sorte, à force de propagande, la mentalité même du peuple de France.’

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 3. ‘La propagande doit souligner sans relâche les grands principes de vie et de santé. (...) *Cracher à terre, c’est attenter à la vie d’autrui?*’

<sup>68</sup> *La Vie Saine* also featured a series of advertisements for microscopes. One that appeared on multiple occasions announced: ‘Armez-vous pour combattre la Tuberculose! Apprenez à reconnaître les Microbes avec les MICROSCOPES de la SOCIÉTÉ FRANÇAISE DES INSTRUMENTS D’OPTIQUE’.

<sup>69</sup> *La Vie Saine: organe populaire du comité national de défense contre la tuberculose*, No. 1 (March-April 1923). ‘faut pas cracher par terre c’est défendu par...’ The same image had been used as a postcard (ca. 1910), circulated by the Parisian Société de Préservation contre la Tuberculose. This time the caption: ‘La tuberculose se communique par les crachats desséchés et réduits en poussière.’

subsequent issue, published in April of 1926, the illustration of an infant obediently spitting into a spittoon in front of a 'NO SPITTING'-sign, initially appearing in the 1918 pamphlet *Aux enfants de France*, was reused to accompany an article on the history of the spittoon.<sup>70</sup> Conflating the moral and hygienic functions of the spittoon, the article announced: 'elegance will reign, and public health too.'<sup>71</sup>

In August of 1926, another oft-disseminated illustration was reproduced, depicting a microbe-laden fly approaching an innocent infant, (Fig. 21). Under the title 'Le Danger des Mouches,' the accompanying text announced: 'The fly loves all that which is dirty'.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, 'full of microbes,' the text continued, the fly 'carries germs of terrible illnesses': 'One must therefore wage a war on the fly.'<sup>73</sup> Two years later, *La Vie Saine* reproduced a poster initially disseminated by the Ministry of Health and the National Office of Social Hygiene, featuring a different image of a fly advancing towards a child, (Fig. 22). The poster read: 'Flies sometimes carry dangerous microbes, it is therefore necessary to destroy them'.<sup>74</sup> On the cover of the March 1929 issue, an image displayed a woman sweeping the kitchen floor, causing a large cloud of dust to rise into the air, (Fig. 23). On the bench, next to the playing children, a man sits with his arms crossed over his chest, spitting on the floor. The captions reads: 'Dry sweeping and spitting on the floor transmits tuberculosis'.<sup>75</sup>

These ominous motifs, however, featured not only across the pages of *La Vie Saine* but also through a continued nationwide dissemination of anti-tuberculosis posters, pamphlets, films, and brochures. A 1930 pamphlet, entitled *Préservons notre santé*, summarises anti-tuberculosis tropes, (Fig. 24). Again, the language is militarised, identifying an 'Army of Microbes' invading the nation, thus calling for France to 'declare war' on spittle, dust, and flies.<sup>76</sup> 'You know now,' the pamphlet reads, 'that the real danger of tuberculosis is *contagion*'.<sup>77</sup> And, again, scientific 'progress' is firmly identified as the only cure, declaring: 'It is important to understand that it is science who

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<sup>70</sup> *La Vie Saine: organe populaire du comité national de défense contre la tuberculose*, no. 7 (April 1926): 7. Bibliothèque nationale de France, JO-61738. 'DEFENSE DE CRACHER PAR TERRE'.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 'l'élégance y gagnera et la santé publique aussi'.

<sup>72</sup> *La Vie Saine: organe populaire du comité national de défense contre la tuberculose*, no. 37 (August 1926): 3. Bibliothèque nationale de France, JO-61738. 'La mouche aime tout ce qui est sale'.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 'remplis de microbes (...) elle apporte souvent les germes de terribles maladies comme (...) la tuberculose (...). Il faut donc faire la guerre aux mouches'.

<sup>74</sup> *La Vie Saine: organe populaire du comité national de défense contre la tuberculose*, (October 1928): 7. Bibliothèque nationale de France, JO-61738. 'Les mouches transportent parfois des microbes dangereux, il faut donc les détruire'.

<sup>75</sup> *La Vie Saine: organe populaire du comité national de défense contre la tuberculose*, (March 1929): 1. Bibliothèque nationale de France, JO-61738. 'Balayer à sec et cracher à terre, c'est propager la Tuberculose'.

<sup>76</sup> Le comité national de défense contre la tuberculose, *Préservons notre santé* (Paris: Le comité national de défense contre la tuberculose, 1930), 5, 16. Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-T-PIECE-4461. 'L'Armée des Microbes (...) Faites la guerre aux crachats. Faites la guerre aux poussières.'

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 16. 'Vous savez maintenant que le véritable danger de la tuberculose est la *contagion*'.

teaches us to preserve and to improve our health: very few things have a higher goal, for its programme summarises itself in one word: **progress**.<sup>78</sup>

Another interwar addition to the Third Republican war on tuberculosis was *Timbre antituberculeux*: gigantic, nation-wide sales of hygienically themed stamps, (Fig. 25).<sup>79</sup> Inaugurated by Gaston Doumergue, the president of the Third Republic, these yearly campaigns, the first of which took place in 1927, helped officialise anti-tuberculosis efforts. Well-known hygienists, such as Paul Strauss, attended the opening ceremony. During the 1929 campaign, a total of 219,042,374 stamps were sold all over France.<sup>80</sup> The flyer introducing the 1930 campaign, also inaugurated by Doumergue, familiarly declared: ‘Spittle and saliva contain the germs of the illness and spitting spreads tuberculosis everywhere! WAR ON SPITTLE!’, (Fig. 26).<sup>81</sup> In interwar anti-tuberculosis campaigns, thus, the use of that canon of signs – spittle, dust, and flies – was not only continued but firmly reinforced.

### *Signs of Contagion Spreading in the Visual Culture of Interwar France*

As a testament to their legibility, these contagious signs soon spilled over into other cultural domains, notably that of advertisement where the anxiety-inducing meaning they carried could be capitalised on to promote sales of the various of hygiene products that had begun to swamp an increasingly bacillophobic market.<sup>82</sup> A 1926 advertisement for a vacuum-cleaner echoes recognisable anti-tuberculosis diction, declaring that the machine ‘removes dust and the microbes that it transmits’ and ‘stops and sterilises 99% of bacteria contained in the air’, (Fig. 27).<sup>83</sup> The advertisement features an illustration of a clean, bourgeois household with large windows overlooking the park – the inverted image, that is, of the derogatory illustrations found in anti-tuberculosis campaigns of dusty and dirty housing in the Parisian *taudis*, or slum, (Fig.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 1. ‘Il faut que vous sachiez que c’est la science qui apprend à conserver et à améliorer la santé ; il en est peu qui aient un but plus élevé, car son programme se résume sans un mot : **le progrès**.’

<sup>79</sup> Arlette Mouret, ‘L’imagerie de la lutte contre la tuberculose : le timbre antituberculeux, instrument d’éducation sanitaire,’ *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques*, 12 (1994): 1-12.

<sup>80</sup> Le comité national de défense contre la tuberculose, *La 3e campagne nationale du timbre antituberculeux* (Paris: Le comité national de défense contre la tuberculose, 1930), 7-10. Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-T-2219 (3).

<sup>81</sup> Le comité national de défense contre la tuberculose, *La 4e Campagne nationale du timbre antituberculeux 1930-1931*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, IFN-100052960. ‘Le crachat et la salive contiennent les germes de la maladie et cracher partout propage la Tuberculose ! GUERRE AU CRACHAT !’

<sup>82</sup> On market responses to cultural desires for cleanliness, see e.g.: Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society Since 1750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986).

<sup>83</sup> *L’Illustration*, (20 November 1926). Bibliothèque nationale de France, 4-LC2-1549. ‘L’Aspirateur LUX est indispensable pour le nettoyage des appartements, car il supprime les poussières et les microbes qu’elles propagent. Son tampon-filtre arrête et stérilise 99% des bactéries contenues dans l’air.’

28).<sup>84</sup> ‘Although it was the hygiene reformers who had wanted to identify dirt as a cause of suffering that could be alleviated only by cleaning’, Adrien Forty writes, ‘it was commerce and manufacturing that turned the idea into reality.’<sup>85</sup>

In advertisements for fly-deterrents, the re-use of the familiar militarised rhetoric is striking. In 1929, one of the largest brands, FLIT, described its product as necessary protection against dangerous invasion, (Fig. 29). ‘Flies are dangerous because of the microbes they carry and spread. Choose a reliable protector,’ the ad reads: ‘Join the army of Flit!’<sup>86</sup> The other major brand, FLY-TOX, identify their product as a ‘scientific soldier’ on a mission to ‘halt’ the ‘dirty fly!’, (Fig. 30).<sup>87</sup> In another advertisement from 1929, (Fig. 31), the well-known iconography, initially appearing in 1917 and later recirculated, (Fig. 16), which had helped conflate the threat posed by German invasion with that posed by tuberculosis, is directly mirrored. Only now the German eagle is replaced with a microbe-laden fly and FLY-TOX is identified as ‘infallible ammunition’.<sup>88</sup>

In the visual culture of interwar France, however, these signs not only circulated widely and repeatedly in French public health campaigns, political discourse, and popular culture. They appeared in the Parisian avant-garde journal *Documents* too. The journal’s ‘Critical Dictionary’ provides definitions for both ‘Spittle’ (7:1929) and ‘Dust’ (5:1929). A photograph of an open mouth, wet with saliva, was published (5:1930), (Fig. 3). A series of images displaying flies are also found (8:1930), (Fig. 7 and 8). Although, here, this triumvirate of signs was disseminated with a very different end goal in mind. In *Documents*, the lethal threat they pose is not warned against but exploited, turned on its head and transformed into a dissident weapon. Charged with debilitating microbes, the motifs are re-disseminated not only to shock a bacillophobic culture but, more specifically, to ridicule its positivist belief in Pasteurian regeneration and, thus, to sabotage its idealist construction of national grandeur. Indeed, in the visual culture of interwar France, these signs – these longstanding microbial enemies to the Third Republican organism –

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<sup>84</sup> A slogan was printed in large letters underneath the illustration: ‘Il vaut mieux prévenir que guérir’. Prevention is better than cure. The very same proverb had been used by Lucien Viberol to outline his propaganda strategy in *La Vie Saine*.

<sup>85</sup> Forty, 181. The ‘history the vacuum cleaner is a good example of the commercial applications of the phobia against dirt, and of the way appearance and styling were affected by the imagery of hygiene.’ (170). Although the vacuum cleaner was invented in 1860, it was not until the first decade of the twentieth century that manageable, hand-held appliances began to appear. By the 1920s – when ‘the fear of germ-laden dust had begun to settle in people’s minds’ – domestic vacuum-cleaners were widely available (175).

<sup>86</sup> *L’Illustration*, (22 June 1929). Bibliothèque nationale de France, 4-LC2-1549. ‘Ralliez-vous à la légion Flit ! (...) Les mouches et moustiques (...) sont dangereux par les microbes qu’ils transportent et propagent. Choisissez un protecteur sûr : le Flit.’

<sup>87</sup> *L’Illustration*, (11 June 1927). Bibliothèque nationale de France, 4-LC2-1549. ‘halte la sale mouche ! Le FLY-TOX (...) est un combattant scientifique.’

<sup>88</sup> *L’Illustration*, (27 July 1929). Bibliothèque nationale de France, 4-LC2-1549. ‘FLYTOX: mitraille (...) infallible!’ FLY-TOX ads also appeared regularly in *La Vie Saine*.

proved to be ideal artillery for an avant-garde assault of official culture, a culture which Georges Bataille scathingly dismissed as one of ‘cowardice’ and ‘spinelessness’; as a ‘humanity entirely suffocated by horror’ and ‘by the terror caused by death or decay, flowing blood, skeletons or insects’.<sup>89</sup>

### *Spittle, Dust, and Flies: Signs of Contagion in Documents*

Let us begin by turning to that full-page close-up of a mouth, wide-open and smothered in contagious spittle, (Fig. 3). Writing in ‘Corpus Delicti’, Rosalind Krauss detects in this photograph, shot by Jacques-André Boiffard, ‘a mechanism for the achievement of *informe*’.<sup>90</sup> The ‘amorphous blur’, she explains, works ‘to undo formal categories, to deny that each thing has its ‘proper’ form, to imagine meaning as gone shapeless’.<sup>91</sup> ‘For Bataille,’ Krauss continues, ‘*informe* was the category that would allow all categories to be unthought’. And ‘spittle’, she elaborates, ‘noxious in its physical formlessness,’ amounts to ‘a simile that would figure forth the noxious, conceptual implications of *informe*; for this term was meant to allow one to think the removal of all those boundaries by which concepts organize reality’.<sup>92</sup> The formal qualities of spittle – its unspeakable consistency, its fluid shapelessness and imprecise excess – are thus woven into the transgressive ‘reduction of meaning’ enacted through ‘the puncturing of the limits around the term’, identified at the heart of *Documents*’ critical work, as detailed elsewhere by Krauss.<sup>93</sup>

Writing in *La Ressemblance informe*, Didi-Huberman too turns to the photograph of a mouth, wide-open and wet with saliva, to demonstrate the destabilising operation identified at play within *Documents*. The extreme close-up, he elaborates, produces a sense of ‘*disproportion*’, an ‘irritant’ enacting a ‘breach against (...) all iconographic ‘agreements’ with the visible world in general.’ The radical result is ‘*an image capable of transgressing the image*’, ‘shattering the screen (the repressive device) of representation’.<sup>94</sup> The deconstructive properties of spittle were subsequently further explored by Yve-Alain Bois in *Formless: A User’s Guide* (1997). Having escaped ‘from geometry’ and ‘the idea’, Bois writes, spittle is ‘not referring to a resemblance but to an operation’:

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<sup>89</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘The Modern Spirit and the Play of Transpositions,’ trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, *Undercover Surrealism*, 241-242.

<sup>90</sup> The motif of ‘spittle’ also appears in Bataille’s short text ‘Formless’: ‘affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit’ (Bataille, ‘Formless’).

<sup>91</sup> Krauss, ‘Corpus Delicti,’ 65, 64.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>93</sup> Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 64.

<sup>94</sup> Didi-Huberman, 62, 63, 64.

The *informe* is what must be (...) spat out (...) because it does not make any sense and because that in itself is unbearable to reason. (...) To say that the universe is *informe* is to say that it makes no sense and thus that it should be (...) expectorated like mucous.<sup>95</sup>

In the deconstructionist interpretation of *Documents'* criticality, thus, spittle, or indeed the act of spitting, is propelled into a kind of poetics of deconstruction, set to enact – akin to Derrida's *différance* – the work of semantic disruption: blurring, unsettling, and ultimately sabotaging the possibility of stable significations or neat closures. Yet again, thus, Bataille's *excess* is morphed into Derridean *écriture*, abstracted to a purely textual realm, far removed from the materiality of lived experience. Once re-inserted into the visual culture of interwar France and reinterpreted through Peircean semiotics, however, a different critical strategy emerges. Radically highlighting motifs that challenged and agitated Third Republican anxieties concerning the seemingly feeble health and strength of France, *Documents* not only sabotaged and undermined its idealist self-image of order, stability, and progress, carefully crafted through official discourse, but critically re-defined it, added to and altered it, to generate a different, decidedly deglorified composition.

In the visual culture of interwar France, Boiffard's close-up of a spittle-smothered mouth circulated alongside official instructions to 'destroy' the national threat posed by microbe-laden mucous. Indeed, the same year that the photograph appeared in *Documents* (5:1930), the anti-tuberculosis pamphlet, *Préservons notre santé* (1930), issued special warnings against the unchecked mouth, reminding readers of the 'terrible', 'murderous', and 'contagious' dangers of ill-disciplined scattering of saliva – be they from letting things touch open mouths, wetting fingers with saliva before turning a page in a book or not covering one's mouth when coughing or sneezing, (Fig. 24).<sup>96</sup> At the same time, the flyer introducing the 1930 *Timbre antituberculeux*-campaign, (Fig. 26), announced: 'Spittle and saliva contain the germs of the illness and spitting spreads tuberculosis everywhere! WAR ON SPITTLE!'

Blatantly breaking government dictum, *Documents'* intention to unsettle is confirmed in the text accompanying Boiffard's photograph, a dictionary-entry on 'Mouth', written by Bataille, launching an anti-idealist attack on modern civilisation and its hygienic preference for safely sealed lips. To conceal the debased, animalistic reality of our existence, he explains, 'civilised

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<sup>95</sup> Bois and Krauss, 79.

<sup>96</sup> Le comité national de défense contre la tuberculose, *Préservons notre santé*, 3-7, 10.

men', suffering from 'narrow constipation of a strictly human attitude', have chosen to cowardly hide behind 'a *closed mouth*, as beautiful as a safe.'<sup>97</sup> Opting not to conform to such polished iconography, Boiffard's photograph and Bataille's text cripple the construction of human grandeur only to instead put forward an opposing, entirely de-idealised portrayal, definitively defiled by microbe-laden mucus. In Bataille's words: 'human life is still bestially concentrated in the mouth'.<sup>98</sup>

A wholesale critique of idealism was a central occupation of *Documents*. Hygiene, an idea and ideal occupying an anguished terrain in the Third Republic, steeped in lofty positivist promises of boundless progress, presented as a fruitful discursive space for *Documents*' discrediting critique. In the fifth issue of the journal's second year (1930), for example, Michel Leiris turned to target a number of hygiene and cosmetic products – soaps, powders, perfumes. Through what resembles a subversive ethnography of modern hygiene, the essay, entitled 'L'homme et son intérieur', sharply exposes the productive function these various products play in the construction of modern civilisation and its sanitised self-image: 'clean and combed, and in a way *dehumanised*, without even a shadow of that turmoil caused, in reality, by the vision of a body.'<sup>99</sup>

Giving special attention to a series of 'dazzling' advertisements for Palmolive soap that circulated in France under the slogan 'Gardez ce teint de jeune fille', Leiris writes that, in '*la cosmétique moderne*', one can find an idealising and scrupulously sterilised viewpoint, akin to that at work in official painting, 'where only the visible structure of bodies is studied, excluding all that which might suggest to us something about their real meaning'.<sup>100</sup> This process of selective exclusion occurs, Leiris explains:

either by pure and simple erasure of the signs of decrepitude, or through the tendency to replace, from a young age, the face, future toy of withering, with a form of fixed mask, separated from time, attractive like the most gracious of all statues, but intangible like an idol.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Georges Bataille, 'Mouth,' in *Encyclopaedia Acepbalica*, 62-64.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Michel Leiris, 'L'homme et son intérieur,' *Documents* (5:1930): 261. 'propre et ratissé, et en quelque sorte *déshumanisé*, sans rien en lui qui évoque même l'ombre de ce trouble qu'engendre dans la réalité la vision d'un corps'.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 'où la structure apparente des corps est seule étudiée, à l'exclusion de tout ce qui pourrait nous suggérer quelque chose quant à leur signification réelle'.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 266. 'soit par effacement pur et simple des signes de la décrépitude, soit par tendance à remplacer, dès la jeunesse, le visage, futur jouet du flétrissement, par une espèce de masque fixe et séparé du temps, attirant comme la plus gracieuse de toutes les statues, mais intangible comme une idol.'

The Palmolive ad-cycle appeared, in slight variation, throughout the interwar period. In a version disseminated in 1930, the correlation to the classicising iconography found in academic painting is explicit, (Fig. 32). Under large letters forming ‘Idéal de Beauté’, a woman is mirrored in the idealised beauty of Venus de Milo, a work central to the prestige of the Louvre. The advertisement reads: ‘Perfection Physique – gardez ce teint de Jeune Fille’. Condemning such fetishistic erasure of the lowly and debased, encountered in hygienic soap ads as well as academic painting, Leiris unveils a subversive, firmly sullied, counter-image: ‘Masochism, sadism and almost all vices, in fact, are only ways to feel more human (...). ‘Humanity’ has nothing to with happiness or goodness: (...) the most atrocious visions, like the most cruel pleasures, are entirely legitimated, if they contribute to the development of such humanity.’<sup>102</sup>

The recurring ‘Critical Dictionary’, as we have seen, proved a privileged platform for such anti-idealist exposure of modern civilisation. In fact, the entry on ‘Materialism’, penned by Bataille, singled out France’s boundless belief in science for particular ridicule. ‘Most materialists, despite wanting to eliminate all spiritual entities,’ Bataille writes, ‘have submitted to an obsession with an *ideal* form of matter’ which, in turn, has ‘permitted science to acquire an apparently unshakeable position, a veritable divine eternity’.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, the *Documents*-dictionary, Bataille declared, sought ‘to bring things down in the world’.<sup>104</sup> Another term brought down was ‘Hygiene’. Squashing its idealising aspirations, Leiris satirised:

In our time, now that religious values find themselves on the decline, religions, to save themselves, are increasingly tending to merge with hygiene. (...) those who are clean can go on believing they are pure in heart, and the world goes on turning (...) everyone will soon be moral, thanks to Cadum soap (...).<sup>105</sup>

In the entries on ‘Spittle’ (7:1929) and ‘Dust’ (5:1929), correspondingly defined against the grain of official Third Republican use, the anxiety-triggering significance they carried in discourse is inverted, and they are presented not as external microbial enemies sabotaging French grandeur

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 264, 266. ‘Le masochisme, le sadisme et presque tous les vices, enfin, ne sont que des moyens de se sentir plus humain – parce qu’en rapports plus profonds et plus abrupts avec les corps –, à la manière dont la vue, terrible pour certains, des rides et des viscères, nous fait faire un pas de plus dans le sens de l’intensification de notre conscience humaine. (...) « Humanité », d’ailleurs, n’a rien à voir avec bonheur, pas plus qu’avec bonté ; nous sommes ici très loin de toute idée de charité : les visions les plus atroces comme les plaisirs les plus cruels sont entièrement légitimés, s’ils contribuent au développement d’une telle humanité.’

<sup>103</sup> Bataille, ‘Materialism’.

<sup>104</sup> Bataille, ‘Formless’.

<sup>105</sup> Leiris, ‘Hygiene’.

but as material evidence of the hypocrisy figuring at the core of that national self-image.<sup>106</sup> ‘Spittle’, co-written by Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris, achieves this destabilising effect in a bipartite move.<sup>107</sup> Griaule begins by playfully attaching the lowly spittle to grander, more elevated registers of life: ‘Saliva is the deposit of the soul; spittle is the soul in movement.’<sup>108</sup> When Leiris takes over, incongruous spittle is subsequently used to subversively besmirch that same human existence:

what value can we attach to reason, or for that matter to speech, and consequently to man’s presumed dignity, when we consider that, given the identical source of language and the spit, any philosophical discourse can legitimately be figured by the incongruous image of the spluttering orator? Spittle is finally, (...) the limp and sticky stumbling block shattering more efficiently than any stone all undertakings that presuppose man to be something – something other than a flabby, bald animal, something other than the spittle of a raving demiurge, splitting his sides at having expectorated such a conceited larva: a comical tadpole puffing itself up into meat insufflated by a demigod.<sup>109</sup>

Similarly, in the dictionary-definition of ‘Dust’, layers of filth are not hygienically removed from human life but demonstratively reinserted. ‘The storytellers have not realised,’ Bataille writes, ‘that the Sleeping Beauty would have awoken covered in a thick layer of dust’.<sup>110</sup> Once more, Third Republican positivism is directly singled out as an explicit target:

When plump young girls, ‘maids of all work,’ arm themselves each morning with a large feather-duster or even a vacuum-cleaner, they are perhaps not completely unaware that they are contributing every bit as much as the most positivist of scientists to dispelling the injurious phantoms that cleanliness and logic abhor.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> In 1931, *Larousse* published a definition of ‘Dust’: ‘N’oublions pas que les poussières de l’atmosphère sont un des meilleurs véhicules des microbes pathogènes.’ (*Larousse mensuel illustré : revue encyclopédique universelle*, no. 298 (December 1931): 867).

<sup>107</sup> Griaule and Leiris, ‘Spittle,’ 79-80.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘Dust,’ *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, 42-43.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

Finally, in the long and hard-fought Third Republican war on dust, Bataille envisions a devastating defeat:

One day or another, it is true, dust, supposing it persists, will probably begin to gain the upper hand over domestics, invading the immense ruins of abandoned buildings, deserted dockyards; and, at that distant epoch, nothing will remain to ward off night-terrors (...).<sup>112</sup>

In the final issue (8:1930), *Documents* composed one last attack on contemporary obsessions with hygiene, a ‘humanity entirely suffocated by’, Bataille writes, ‘the terror caused by death or decay, flowing blood, skeletons or insects.’<sup>113</sup> Illustrating these cutting words is a series of photographs depicting flies which, Bataille explains, ‘reveal the extent of current powerlessness’.<sup>114</sup> The first image, (Fig. 7), is another photographic close-up shot by Boiffard, displaying a group of flies stuck on adhesive flypaper. Apart from being a widely available commercial product, the advertisements of which neatly made use of cultural fears to promote sales, the flypaper had gained a special role in anti-tuberculosis discourse in 1922 when the then sitting Minister of Health, Paul Strauss, composed a *Circulaire relative à la destruction des mouches domestiques* which identified it as a particularly hygienic method to ‘destroy the fly’. ‘The role of the fly in the spread of contagious illness,’ Stauss reminds his citizens, ‘has been highlighted time and again’: ‘This insect makes up a primary threat to the public health’.<sup>115</sup> Stauss’ *Circulaire* – sent out to all prefects, reported on in all large newspapers and still reissued three years later – also included an ‘easy to prepare and cheap’ recipe for homemade flypaper: ‘five parts castor oil, eight parts resin.’<sup>116</sup> Once more, thus, Boiffard disobeyed official communiqués. The dirty fly is placed in a worryingly tight close-up, the uncontrolled blur of which quickly shatters any hygienist hopes in the bacillophobic beholder.

The second representation of the fly is delivered through a series of micrographs displaying various, grossly enlarged parts of the insect, (Fig. 8). Being the visual product of the microscope, the micrograph-aesthetic had become intimately tied to Louis Pasteur, found not only in

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Bataille, ‘The Modern Spirit,’ 241, 243, 242.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> ‘Circulaire relative à la destruction des mouches domestiques,’ *Journal officiel de la République française. Lois et décrets* (22 April 1922): 4191. ‘Le rôle de la mouche dans la propagation des maladies contagieuses (...) a été maintes fois mis en relief. Cet insecte constitue au premier chef un véritable péril pour la santé publique’.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. ‘On peut user également du papier tue-mouches selon la formule suivante, facile à préparer et peu coûteuse (...). Une autre formule de glu pour papier attrape-mouches est la suivante : Huile de ricin, 5 parties, Résine, 8 parties.’

advertisements for pasteurised milk, (Fig. 13), and in anti-tuberculosis campaigns, but in all sorts of eulogies of France's leading scientist and his hope-inducing achievements. In a biography published for the 1922 Pasteur centenary, a big event in the Third Republican calendar, microbe-filled micrographs were not only used as decorative markers throughout the book, which was circulating in its tenth edition by 1926. Nonbiological matter too was framed through the comforting gaze of the microscope, including Pasteur's hometown, Dôle, (Fig. 33).<sup>117</sup> When *Documents* uses the microscope, however, its hegemonic function is disturbed. Pasteur's 'new theatre of truth' has been invaded by contagious signifiers of disease and decay.<sup>118</sup> France's microbial archenemies have assumed control over the space, contaminated it. Defiled excess overflows the neat boundaries of the microscopic gaze. The recognisable Pasteurian aesthetic is depasteurised. Its positivist promises to expel any microbial threats to the Third Republican organism – be they tuberculosis, Germans, or anarchists – are not only mocked but also declared defunct.

In his final tirade, however, Bataille did not stop at rubbing the dirty motifs of disease in the face of the Third Republic, thus, compromising its Pasteurian hopes of national regeneration. The Parisian art scene was implicated too. 'The servitude is continued everywhere', Bataille explained: 'We enter art galleries as we do the chemist's, seeking well-presented remedies for accepted sickness.'<sup>119</sup> The target was his usual avant-garde nemesis: André Breton. Indeed, unveiling the Surrealist leader as idealist, bourgeois and, thus, unrevolutionary was a favourite pastime of Bataille's during the *Documents*-years. One only had to look at the prefix 'sur', Bataille explained, to understand the 'pretentious idealistic aberrations' of the Surrealist mission.<sup>120</sup>

Bataille's text is a response to an article written by Roger Vitrac on the subject of the 1922 'International Congress for the Determination and Defence of the Modern Spirit'.<sup>121</sup> Vitrac had been part of the group of Paris-based modernists, spearheaded by Breton, that – worried by post-war developments in art, dominated either by regressive *rappels à l'ordre* or fragmentation into a plethora of clashing 'isms' – attempted to identify a homogenous 'modern spirit' to clear

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<sup>117</sup> A. Lomont, *Pasteur: Sa vie, son oeuvre, ses continuateurs* (Paris: Libr. Gedalge, 1926). Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-LN267-61136.

<sup>118</sup> Latour, 86.

<sup>119</sup> Bataille, 'The Modern Spirit'.

<sup>120</sup> Georges Bataille, 'The "Old Mole" and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* and *Surrealist*,' in *Visions of Excess*, 32-44.

<sup>121</sup> Roger Vitrac, 'L'Esprit Moderne,' *L'Intransigeant*, (17 March 1931). For a critical discussion of the congress, see e.g.: Michel Sanouillet, *Dada in Paris*, translated by Sharmila Ganguly (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012); Jonathan P. Eburne, 'Dada, Futurism, and Raymond Roussel,' in *1922: Literature, Culture, Politics*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Marius Hentea, 'Federating the Modern Spirit: The 1922 Congress of Paris,' *PMLA*, 130: 1 (2015): 37-44; Effie Rentzou, *Concepts of the World: The French Avant-Garde and the Idea of the International, 1910-1940* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2022).

up current confusions and put art back on a progressive track. As Marius Hentea writes, Breton thus returned to a utopian, Saint-Simonian ideal of the avant-garde, seeking to ‘federate’ its forces, to eliminate any internal differences for ‘the larger political and cultural goal of recharting the future course of society.’<sup>122</sup> The event was advertised in various international avant-garde journals and rumours that Sigmund Freud, Thomas Mann, and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti were going to attend circulated. Tristan Tzara was also penned down as a participant. However, once the ‘positive, almost scientific ambitions became clearer’, Hentea elaborates, Tzara quickly withdrew his name.<sup>123</sup> A vexed Breton, one of the first French converts to Dada and an early admirer of Tzara, responded by labelling the Romanian poet an ‘impostor avid for fame’.<sup>124</sup> The conflict snowballed, sides were picked, and divisions deepened. The event was, in the end, cancelled. Breton famously ‘left’ Dada in 1922. Two years later, the ‘First Surrealist Manifesto’ was published.<sup>125</sup>

The non-event of the ‘Modern Spirit’-congress, as Hentea and Jonathan Eburne have noted, was more than a simple dispute.<sup>126</sup> It poses as a moment of clarification, a fleshing-out of opposing ideas within the interwar avant-garde. Breton wanted a unified movement working towards the marvellous elevation of things. Tzara, on the other hand, had already in 1921 – on the topic of the moral requirements of art – declared: ‘we’re all just a bunch of bastards and so these little differences, a bigger bastard or a smaller bastard, don’t matter at all’.<sup>127</sup> Pointing back to that non-event, thus, Bataille reminds *Documents*-readers not only of a frustrating moment for Breton but also of the idealist function he ascribed art, a function that Bataille firmly denied: ‘What is really loved is loved mainly in shame and I defy any lover of painting to love a picture as much as a fetishist loves a shoe.’<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Hentea, 46, 41.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>124</sup> André Breton et al., ‘Le congrès de Paris,’ *Comoedia* (7 February 1922): 1. ‘Ce qu’on ne permettra pas, c’est seulement que le sort de l’entreprise dépende des calculs d’un imposteur avide de réclame.’ The article was co-signed by Léger, Delaunay, Breton, Auric, Ozenfant, and Vitrac.

<sup>125</sup> See e.g.: Elizabeth Legge, ‘Nothing, Ventured: Paris Dada into Surrealism,’ in *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, ed. David Hopkins (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2016), 89-109.

<sup>126</sup> Hentea, 38-39 and Eburne, 130-131.

<sup>127</sup> Tzara (1921), quoted in Hentea, 40.

<sup>128</sup> Bataille, ‘The Modern Spirit’. For an account of Bataille’s view art’s role, see e.g.: Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*; Briony Fer, ‘Poussière/Peinture: Bataille on Painting,’ in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Kevin Kennedy, *Towards an Aesthetics of Sovereignty: Georges Bataille’s Theory of Art and Literature* (Palo Alto: Academia Press, 2014); Michèle Richman, ‘Art,’ in *Georges Bataille: Key Concepts*, ed. Mark Hewson and Marcus Coelen (London and New York: Routledge, 2016). In *Documents*, writing on African rock paintings, Bataille announced the function of art as: ‘a stupefying negation of man. (...) The blatant heterogeneity of our being in relation to the world that gave birth to it, which we have become so incapable of proving through tangible experience, seems to have been, for those among us who have lived in nature, the basis of all representation’ (‘The Frobenius Exhibit at the Salle Pleyel,’ in *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, edited by Stuart Kendall, translated by Stuart Kendall and Michelle Kendall (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 46.)

The illustrations of flies further isolate Breton as a target. Indeed, in interwar France, the dirty insect threatened not only the health and progress of the Third Republic but Breton's alchemical synthesis too. In his 'Second Surrealist Manifesto', Breton expressed his repulsion over Bataille's interest in the menacing fly, pointing it out as something that made the latter fundamentally un-Surrealist: 'M. Bataille loves flies. Not we: we love the miters of old evocators, the miters of pure linen to whose front point was affixed a blade of gold and upon which flies did not settle, because they had been purified to keep them away.'<sup>129</sup> Through the motif of the fly, therefore, *Documents* was not only able to position itself in critical opposition to the hygienic Third Republic and dogmatic Bretonian Surrealism. It also opened for a radical conflation of the two, unified by their shared disgust for dirt, disease, and decay. Tongue-in-cheek, as always, *Documents* unveiled Breton's vision of the avant-garde as being not too dissimilar from the work of pasteurisation: it too sought to separate the good from the bad, the pure from the impure; it too sought to clean up, to better and to purify. *Documents*, of course, had itself been born, in part, out of another one of Breton's impulses to clean up. Many of the journal's regular contributors had joined Bataille after having had been thrown out of the Surrealist circle in 1929. Indeed, eagerly promoting an unflattering human existence, sullied by contagious microbes, conditioned perpetual paradox and uncontrollable excess, *Documents* was equally incompatible with the Pasteurian Third Republic as with Breton's Surrealist dreams.

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In anti-tuberculosis campaigns, spreading throughout the visual culture of interwar France, the motif of the child occupied a central role, often singled out as the addressee of hygienist messages. *La Vie Saine* even published a special children's section, 'Pages Infantines', where those well-known signs of contagion – spittle, dust, and flies – would be re-packaged into songs or alphabetic rhymes. A series of scripts for short plays, filled to the brim with hygienist lessons, also appeared, encouraging French youth to enact the various didactic scenarios. In 1930, these scripts were published as an anthology.<sup>130</sup> The booklet included a play about kids selling *Timbres antituberculeux* and another about children getting the tuberculosis vaccine. A third circled around Gaston instructing his friend Suzanne on how to dust in a hygienic manner. Suzanne obediently

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<sup>129</sup> Breton, 'Second Manifesto,' 184.

<sup>130</sup> Léon Lambry, *Les enfants jouent la Comédie ! Saynètes comiques & éducatives spécialement écrits pour les jeunes* (Paris: Delrieu, 1930). Bibliothèque nationale de France, 4-YF-309.

responds: ‘Understood! Gaston, I will make an effort and I will condemn the MICROBES to death.’<sup>131</sup>

The child also played a visual role in anti-tuberculosis communication. A wartime poster displaying a mother, dressed in a flowing, red-white-and-blue dress, heroically stomping down a group of vicious snakes whilst, protectively, holding up a child announced: ‘CRUSH TUBERCULOSIS AND SAVE CHILDHOOD’, (Fig. 34). Another anti-tuberculosis poster dating to 1920, as we have seen, featured a giant fly chasing a child, (Fig. 18). The primary motivation, explaining the heightened role that the motif of the child came to occupy in hygienist discourse, was the overwhelming conviction that Third Republican France was on the verge of becoming depopulated.<sup>132</sup> Indeed, following the military defeat in 1871, posing as the ‘geopolitical premise that originated the French obsession with degeneracy’, the issue of depopulation, Nye writes, became an overarching ‘master pathology’ in the medical concept of national decline.<sup>133</sup> As we will see, conditioned by such deep-set conviction, French eugenicist discourse too anchored its rhetoric in this anguished terrain, promoting – unlike their European counterparts – not the restriction of ‘unwanted’ births but instead the cultivation of ‘healthy and beautiful babies,’ as declared by the president of the *Société française d’eugénique* in 1920.<sup>134</sup>

The motif of the child appeared in *Documents* too. Illustrating Bataille’s ‘Les écarts de la nature’ (2:1930) are a series of teratological illustrations reproduced from Nicolas-François and Geneviève Regnault’s 1775 book with the same name, (Fig. 9-11). Alongside the images, depicting *enfants ‘monstrueux’* suffering from various physical illnesses and malformations, Bataille penned a sharp critique of the eugenic rational, with specific reference to its founder, Francis Galton. Indeed, as we will see, when *Documents* turned to negotiate the longstanding, Third Republican obsession with the child, the charged currency this sign carried in interwar culture was subversively redeployed to avant-garde ends and the ultra-utopian ideals of eugenics were firmly undermined. In the words of Bataille: ‘each individual form escapes this common measure and is, to a certain degree, a monster.’<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> ‘Un Goûter Tragique,’ in *ibid.*, 23. ‘C’est entendu ! Gaston, je veux faire un effort et je condamnerai les MICROBES à mort.’

<sup>132</sup> For an account of artistic engagements with this charged motif, see e.g.: Barbara Larsson, ‘Jean Geoffroy and the Conflicted Response to Childhood Epidemics in Fin-de-Siècle France,’ in *Visual Culture and Pandemic Disease Since 1750*, ed. Marsha Morton and Ann-Marie Akehurst (New York: Routledge, 2023).

<sup>133</sup> Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics*, 322, 140.

<sup>134</sup> Perrier, 1-2.

<sup>135</sup> Bataille, ‘The Deviations of Nature’.

## Enfants ‘monstrueux’: Depopulation, Pronatalism, and French Eugenics

### *Depopulation and Degeneration in the Early Third Republic*

France of the *ancien régime* had been not only the most powerful nation in Europe but also the most populous. As the nineteenth-century set off, however, breeding rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, French birth-rates soon began to decline. While pre-1789 rates sat comfortably at around 38/1000, by 1851, these had reduced to 26.3/1000.<sup>136</sup> In 1854, the number of deaths exceeded the number of births for the first time in France. Making explicit the increasingly felt correlation between declining birth-rates and *dégénérescence*, the conservative politician Claude-Marie Raudot anxiously announced: ‘France is in full decay’.<sup>137</sup>

With the rivalry between nation states intensified in the latter half of the century, particular attention was called to the comparative size, strength, and power of the national body. In 1868, the French writer Lucien Prévost-Paradol declared:

Any projects or hopes to keep France in its relative rank in the world must be considered to be absolutely chimerical if they do not take as their point of departure this maxim: the number of French must rise rapidly enough to maintain a certain equilibrium between our power and that of the other great nations of the world.<sup>138</sup>

The defeat against Prussia in 1871 once more verified dystopian prophecies, substantiating the perceived correlation between *population size* and *military power*, thus violently affirming French

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<sup>136</sup> Joseph J. Spengler, *France Faces Depopulation: Postlude Edition, 1936-1976* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1979), 53.

<sup>137</sup> Claude-Marie Raudot, *De la décadence de la France*, (Paris: Amyot, 1850), 7. ‘la France est en pleine décadence.’

<sup>138</sup> Lucien Prévost-Paradol, *La France nouvelle* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1868), 413. ‘Il faut donc considérer comme *absolument chimérique* tout projet et toute espérance de conserver à la France son rang relatif dans le monde, si ces espérances, ces projets, ne prennent pas pour point de départ cette maxime : *le nombre des Français doit s’augmenter assez rapidement pour maintenir un certain équilibre entre notre puissance et celle des autres grandes nations de la terre.*’

fears of a nation in decline. It was broadly recognised that France, formerly the unquestioned power of Europe, was being glaringly superseded. And it was going fast. Between 1850 and 1910, France grew by 3.4 million whilst Germany grew by some 25 million, 1.6 million of which had resulted from the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine.<sup>139</sup> The ‘German menace’, Claude Digeon writes, ‘was regarded a sign of French decadence.’<sup>140</sup>

As the Third Republic was installed in the aftermath of the humiliating defeat, what Virginie de Luca Barrusse describes as an ‘anxious, even anguished *pensée démographique*’ took root in French thought.<sup>141</sup> The issue of depopulation – perceived as both a cause and a symptom of French *dégénérescence*, and a particularly measurable manifestation at that – became a central theme in political as well as popular discourse, capable of synthesising the long list of perceived perils threatening the nation – be they military, political, cultural, or biological.<sup>142</sup> Although demographic transition was a universal effect of modernisation, France’s stagnant population growth was therefore interpreted as a national problem, as marker of a uniquely *French* fragility, causing cracks in the Third Republican self-image of order and progress.

A sea of literature emerged on the topic, discussing causes of and possible remedies to depopulation. With support from the newly installed Republican regime, a powerful pronatalist movement began to form.<sup>143</sup> France’s first pronatalist legislation passed in 1874.<sup>144</sup> The *Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française*, consisting of physicians, academicians, and politicians – including, notably, Paul Strauss – was launched in 1896. Its founding president, Jacques Bertillon, was the chief statistician in the City of Paris. His *La dépopulation de la France*, published in 1911, would describe declining birthrates as ‘a sickness *absolutely unique to our country*’ and, thus, an ‘agonizing problem’ that ‘should occupy all French minds’.<sup>145</sup> In addition to working as a lobby group, promoting legislation that would encourage births, such as financial

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<sup>139</sup> Karen Offen, ‘Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France,’ *The American Historical Review*, vol. 89, no. 3 (June 1984): 650-651.

<sup>140</sup> Digeon, 341.

<sup>141</sup> Virginie De Luca Barrusse, *Population en danger ! La lutte contre les fléaux sociaux sous la Troisième République* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), 296. ‘une pensée démographique, anxieuse voire angoissée’.

<sup>142</sup> Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics*, 140.

<sup>143</sup> The literature of the French pronatalist movement is vast, see e.g.: Richard Thomlinson, ‘The Disappearance of France 1896-1940: French Politics and the Birth Rate,’ *Historical Journal*, 28:2 (1985): 405-415; Catherine Rollet-Echalier, *La politique à l’égard de la petite enfance sous la IIIe République* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990); Virginie De Luca Barrusse, *Les familles nombreuses en France: une question démographique, un enjeu politique (France 1880-1939)* (Rennes: PUR, 2008).

<sup>144</sup> Alisa Klaus, *Every Child a Lion: The Origins of Maternal and Infant Health Policy in The United States and France, 1890-1920* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 56-62. See also Rollet-Echalier, 123-136.

<sup>145</sup> Jacques Bertillon, *La dépopulation de la France: ses conséquences, ses causes: mesures à prendre pour la combattre* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1911). ‘le mal est *absolument spécial à notre pays* ! (3); ‘Un problème angoissant devrait seul occuper toute la pensée des Français : « Comment empêcher la France de disparaître ? Comment maintenir sur terre la race française ? ». (1). Bertillon also labels neo-Malthusians promotion of contraceptives as ‘criminal’.

relief for large families via tax reforms, allowances, and marriage loans, the *Alliance* also organised public conferences as well as produced and disseminated vast amounts of literature, posters, pamphlets, postcards, and other propaganda materials.<sup>146</sup> The discursive impact of these fervent campaigns is evidenced in the following observation from 1910: ‘One can hardly open a newspaper or a review without finding an article on depopulation, on its causes and its effects, and on the remedies which must be implemented.’<sup>147</sup>

By the time *Documents* intervened in France’s ‘anguished *pensée démographique*’ two decades later, the Third Republic’s pronatalist dictum was still reverberating loudly in French discourse. Indeed, when the journal reproduced teratological illustrations of ‘monstruous’ children, subject either to infant mortality or stillborn, it amounted to a subversive gesture, aiming to rattle longstanding fears of French depopulation, which, as we will see, had only been further exacerbated in the aftermath of the disastrous experience of the First World War.

### *The First World War: The Child as a ‘Graine de Poilu’*

In the years leading up to the First World War, as European rivalries were once more sharpened, the causative link between national *birth rate* and national *military power* was reactivated as a trope in French discourse. ‘The danger is all the greater as the population of all other countries is growing very fast,’ a 1913 *Alliance* pamphlet declared: ‘every time that we give birth to 2 future soldiers, there are 3 born in Italy, 4 in Austria-Hungary, 5 in Germany!’<sup>148</sup> Decorating the cover of the publication, entitled *Comment sauver la France: si j’ai des enfants, l’avenir est à moi!*, was an illustration featuring Marianne carrying a large red-white-and-blue flag in one hand and a young child in the other.

Positing the child as a future soldier was to become a well-exercised motif in French pronatalist imagery. A postcard dating to the war years shows a soldier watering a bed of cabbages alongside his wife, (Fig. 35). From the leafy legumes, smiling children crop up. The postcard thus refers to

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<sup>146</sup> For a detailed account of the *Alliance*’s activities, see e.g.: Virginie De Luca Barrusse, ‘Des liaisons avantageuses : l’Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française et les fonctionnaires (1890-1914),’ *Annales de démographie historique*, no. 116 (2008): 255-280.

<sup>147</sup> Joshua Cole, ‘There are Only Good Mothers’: The Ideological Work of Women’s Fertility in France before World War I,’ *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Spring, 1996): 640. See also: Joshua Cole, *The Power of Large Numbers: Population, Politics, and Gender in Nineteenth-century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000).

<sup>148</sup> Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française, *Comment sauver la France* (Paris: E. Pigelet, 1913), 1. Bibliothèque nationale de France, 16-LL1-764. ‘chaque fois qu’il naît chez nous 2 futurs soldats, il en naît 3 en Italie, 4 en Autriche-Hongrie, 5 en Allemagne !’

the myth, richly illustrated in French literature and visual culture, that infants are born from cabbage heads – a tale that, Gina Greene writes, ‘seems to speak to a fantasy, unique among the French, that the fertile soil itself was capable of producing crops of healthy infants.’<sup>149</sup> Above the cabbage-field, a sign reads: ‘Graine de Poilu’. *Poilu* being a nickname for First World War-soldiers, the French newborns are labelled as a soldier-grains, grown and nurtured in national soil. Another postcard, dating to 1915, shows two scenes: the first depicts a group of French *poilus* in battle, the second illustrates a newborn child, emerging from a head of cabbage, (Fig. 36). Alongside the infant, a text reads: ‘Alas, I arrive too late!’.

Despite victory in 1918, marked by the recuperation of Alsace-Lorraine, the war was, demographically speaking, perceived as nothing but a loss. With over 1.4 million Frenchmen diseased and more than one million permanently injured, France had not only suffered more casualties than others. Birth rates too had plummeted radically. Compared to pre-war statistics, the number of children born in France had been halved by 1919.<sup>150</sup> As a result, after the war, afflicted by a harrowing mixture of agonising long-term perils of *dégénérescence* and the more explosive, short-term devastation of war, the depopulation of France seemed more palpable than ever. As Georges Clémenceau, France’s wartime prime minister, declared during a parliamentary debate concerning the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles on 11 October 1919:

The treaty does not say that France must undertake to have children, but it is the first thing which ought to have been put in it. For if France turns her back on large families, one can put all the clauses one wants in a treaty, one can take all the guns of Germany, one can do whatever one likes. France will be lost because there will be no more Frenchmen.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Gina Greene, ‘In the Garden of Puériculture: Cultivating the Ideal Infant in Real and Imagined Landscapes of Care (1895-1935),’ *Change Over Time*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Fall, 2016): 193.

<sup>150</sup> Schneider, *Quantity and Quality*, 117-119.

<sup>151</sup> Clémenceau (1919), quoted in Paul Haury, *La vie ou la mort de la France* (Paris: Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française, 1923), 7. ‘Le traité de Versailles ne porte pas que la France s’engage à avoir beaucoup d’enfants, mais c’est la première chose qu’il aurait fallu y inscrire. Car si la France renonce aux familles nombreuses, vous aurez beau mettre dans les traités les plus belles clauses que vous voudrez, vous aurez beau prendre tous les canons de l’Allemagne, vous aurez beau faire tout ce qu’il vous plaira, la France sera perdue, parce qu’il n’y aura plus de Français.’

## *The Interwar Period: 'Without children today, no France tomorrow!'*

In the aftermath of the war, unanimously interpreted as a demographic disaster, the pronatalist dictum was energised and magnified in French political discourse.<sup>152</sup> In September of 1919, the first annual conference on French birth rates was held. At the start of 1920, a *Conseil supérieur de la natalité* was set up by the newly elected government. Acting as an advisory body, the *Conseil* was given the official task of researching 'all possible measures to combat depopulation and increase birth rates' as well as to examine 'proposals for legislation'.<sup>153</sup> Within months, a law criminalising the sale and promotion of contraceptives, as well as any incitement to abortion, was passed with an overwhelming majority of five hundred votes against fifty-three.<sup>154</sup>

With practically no political opposition, receiving strong support from all ends of the spectrum, pronatalist activity mushroomed in the interwar period. In addition to the *Alliance*, eight national associations, sixty-two regional associations, and eleven federations of large families were active in France by 1922.<sup>155</sup> 'One of the defining paradoxes of interwar France', Caroline Campbell writes: 'was the coexistence of a deep-rooted belief in national decadence with the development of a wide range of innovative organisations, cumulatively mobilising millions of people, as a means of fighting this supposed decline.'<sup>156</sup> Having been granted official patronage by president Poincaré in 1914, however, the *Alliance* remained the most powerful organisation. With memberships growing tenfold between 1920-1925 and a close relationship to the sitting government, the *Alliance* continued to lobby for pronatalist legislation as well as produce and circulate propaganda, with the aim of creating – as their new monthly mouthpiece, *Natalité*,

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<sup>152</sup> On interwar pronatalist activities, see e.g.: Françoise Thébaud, 'Le mouvement nataliste dans la France de l'entre-deux-guerres: l'Alliance nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française,' *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, no. 32 (April-June 1985): 276-301; Marie-Monique Huss, 'Pronatalism in the Inter-War Period in France,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 25, no. 1 (January 1990): 39-68; Kristen Stromberg Childers, *Fathers, Families, and the State in France, 1914-1945* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>153</sup> Décret du 27 janvier 1920, quoted in Virginie De Luca Barrusse, 'Premiers jalons d'une politique familiale,' *Informations sociales*, n°189 (2015): 23. 'de rechercher toutes les mesures susceptibles de combattre la dépopulation, d'accroître la natalité (...); de procéder à l'examen des dispositions intéressant la natalité pouvant être introduites dans tous les projets ou propositions de lois'.

<sup>154</sup> Andrés Horacio Reggiani, 'Procreating France: The Politics of Demography, 1919-1945,' *French Historical Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Spring, 1996): 731. See also: Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994); Sian Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996); Karen Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>155</sup> Spengler, 128.

<sup>156</sup> Caroline Campbell, 'Gender and Politics in Interwar and Vichy France,' *Contemporary European History*, 27:3 (2018): 482.

launched in 1925, declared – ‘a vast current in public opinion in favour of pronatalist and family politics.’<sup>157</sup> Some posters circulated in numbers of up to two million copies.<sup>158</sup>

The interwar years, however, experienced not only an expanded, more focussed pronatalist effort. The rhetoric had also been ramped-up. In the period leading up to the war, as the correlation between *population size* and *military potency* was reactivated as a trope in French discourse, the issue of depopulation was foremost recognised as a threat to France’s relative power on the world stage. Deliberately whipping up nationalist sentiments, pre-1918 pronatalist propaganda tended to position the child as a future soldier – a ‘graine de poilu’. In the aftermath of the war, however, uniformly received as having worsened France’s demographic prospects, the stakes were dramatically raised. In a shell-shocked France, sluggish birthrates signalled not merely deteriorating military potency but – much worse – an existential threat. ‘France,’ a 1924 *Alliance* pamphlet declared, ‘is confronted today with this Shakespearian dilemma: ‘to be or not to be’.<sup>159</sup> Written by one of the *Alliance*’s founding members, Dr Eugène Ledoux, the pamphlet went on to make a dystopian forecast for the future of France. Having had a population of 39 million in 1922, France’s size will – at current rates – diminish to 35 million by 1940. In 1965, it will have shrunk to 25 million. Set to ‘slowly sink into nothingness’, France is, Ledoux anxiously announced, ‘not to be’.<sup>160</sup>

In *Future Tense: The Culture of Anticipation in France Between the Wars* (2009), Roxanne Panchasi suggests that the *future* poses as a particularly effective category of analysis for interwar France – a society where, Panchasi writes, ‘anxieties and hopes for ‘the future’ shaped concerns of the present’. In this ‘culture of anticipation’, Panchasi continues, representations of futures expressed ‘a kind of cultural ‘premourning’, a nostalgic longing for French values and cultural phenomena that *had not yet disappeared*.<sup>161</sup> To exemplify, Panchasi lists utopian trends in design and urban planning, prophecies of the next war, visions of Esperanto as a future language, and so on. Another candidate for this list, not discussed by Panchasi, is – I will suggest – the friction-fuelled discursive space that children came to occupy in French interwar culture, acting as an embodied

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<sup>157</sup> ‘Qu’est-ce que l’Alliance nationale?’ *Natalité*, no. 2 (May, 1925). Bibliothèque nationale de France, JO-46085. ‘L’Alliance Nationale cherche à créer un vaste courant d’opinion en faveur d’une politique nataliste et familiale’. Five of its members were ministers in the 1920 government.

<sup>158</sup> Huss, 43.

<sup>159</sup> Dr. Eugène Ledoux, *Le problème de la population française* (Besançon : impr. de Dodivers, 1924), 1. Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-L31-283. ‘France est en face d’un redoutable danger : la diminution progressive de sa population. Elle se heurte aujourd’hui à ce dilemme shakspearien [sic] : « être ou ne pas être ».’

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. ‘ « Ne pas être, » disparaître, s’enfoncer lentement dans le néant.’

<sup>161</sup> Roxanne Panchasi, *Future Tense: The Culture of Anticipation in France Between the Wars* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 8, 5.

site onto which an array of anguished anticipations for the *future of France* could be projected and negotiated in the present. As we have seen, the future tense was frequently employed in the prevailing pronatalist climate. Already in 1919, setting the tone for the interwar years to come, Clémenceau had declared: ‘France will be lost because there will be no more Frenchmen’.<sup>162</sup> Five years later, Dr Ledoux predicted that France’s Shakespearian dilemma would end a tragedy: ‘France will soon no longer be France’.<sup>163</sup>

This mechanism operated visually too. In the profusion of pronatalist imagery, the motif of the child was repeatedly mobilised to materialise, in Panchasi’s words, ‘anxieties and hopes for ‘the future’’. It was a visual sign particularly productive in such interwar processes of ‘premourning’ a France that ‘*had not yet disappeared*’.<sup>164</sup> An early example of this visual operation is an *Alliance* poster dating to 1920, featuring a group of six French newborns: rosy-cheeked, smiling, and well-wrapped in white fabric, (Fig. 37). The background, covering the top of the poster, is dark blue. A slab of bright red colour envelops its base. No longer identified as a ‘graine de poilu’, the propagation of which is needed to defend the French flag and its military power, the materiality of child instead merges into and becomes the *tricolore* flag itself. In its interwar articulation, thus, further weight had been added to the familiar pronatalist motif. The child, as an image and an idea, embodied not merely a future soldier, but the *future of France* itself. In bold type font, the poster reads: ‘WITHOUT CHILDREN TODAY, NO FRANCE TOMORROW!’<sup>165</sup>

Another iteration of this interwar iconography – presenting the image of the child as an embodied prognosis or blueprint for the nation’s future form – is a particular type of comparative, demographic illustrations, well-disseminated in interwar France, visualising national birthrate statistics through differently sized infants. The more children born, the larger the body of the illustrated infant. The motif of the child amounts to an allegory of sorts, envisioning the *future* national body. Anguished anticipations are mapped directly onto the image of the infant. As seen in the comparative row of international infants gracing Paul Haury’s *La vie ou la mort de la France* – winner of the 1923 *Alliance nationale Prix Michelin* for best written piece on the depopulation issue – the allegorical representation of the future of France, stunted by dreadful demographic statistics, materialised as a puny child, (Fig. 38). ‘France of Louis XIV’, Haury explains, ‘was the most populous in Europe.’ ‘We no longer have this power; the loss has cost us

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<sup>162</sup> Clémenceau (1919), quoted in Haury, 7.

<sup>163</sup> Ledoux, 1.

<sup>164</sup> Panchasi, 8, 5.

<sup>165</sup> This illustration also circulated on postcards as well as appeared on the cover of a report on pronatalist politics, requested by and presented to the cabinet in 1924.

and is still costing us very expensively'.<sup>166</sup> The French infant is by far the smallest, reaching only the bellybutton of its neighbouring rival of Germany. 'The sickness that is killing France,' Haury prophesied, 'is the suicide of a great population!'<sup>167</sup> A similar aesthetic formula featured in a 1923 *Alliance* poster. Under the alarmist rubric – 'The depopulation is the ruin of the nation' – two young children are displayed. The one representing Germany is almost twice the size of that personifying France, (Fig. 39).<sup>168</sup>

In the Third Republic, thus, fuelled by deep-set convictions that France was on the verge of depopulation, the image and idea of the child posed as a heightened sign in political as well as popular discourse. Rattled by the demographic disaster of the First World War, the interwar period saw this well-disseminated sign burdened with further anxiety-fuelled significance. Indeed, supplemented and enriched with fears of an existential threat, the motif of the child was discursively framed as an embodied prophecy, employed to envision the future form of France. In the avant-garde journal *Documents*, these longstanding Third Republican anxieties were agitated. The anguished significance embedded within the motif of the child, generated from sustained circulation in pronatalist discourse, was re-disseminated against the grain, to decidedly disruptive ends.

In the second issue of the journal's second year (1930), as the *Alliance* reported a record peak of memberships, six illustrations of infants appeared across three full pages, (Fig. 9-11).<sup>169</sup> Published alongside Bataille's essay 'Les écarts de la nature' – or, in English, 'The Deviations of Nature' – the images, reproduced from a teratological album dating to 1775, displayed 'monstruous' children, suffering from various physical malformations, victims of either infant mortality or stillborn. Swapping the idealised image of a rosy-cheeked infant, repeatedly circulated as part of a bid to save France from demographic ruination, for a rigorously more troubling vision, *Documents* thus refused to conform to the established sign-use only to, in turn, invert the desperate yet decidedly hopeful pronatalist logic that the motif of the child upheld in interwar France. Indeed, far from that envisioned by the official Third Republic, in the hands of *Documents*, the future of France was set to be excessively heterogenous and *monstruous*.

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<sup>166</sup> Haury, 1. 'la France de Louis XIV ou de 93 était le plus peuplé de grands pays d'Europe. Cette force, nous ne l'avons plus ; sa perte nous a coûté et nous coûte encore terriblement cher'.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. 'LE MAL QUI TUE LA FRANCE (...) c'est le suicide d'un grand peuple !'

<sup>168</sup> The poster also reads: 'Born in 1922: 760.000 Frenchmen, 1.450.000 Germans (...) 274.000 less French births than in 1868.'

<sup>169</sup> Huss, 43.

The government-supported pronatalist dictum, however, was not the sole target of *Documents'* anti-idealist attack. Part of the journal's embrace of the monstrous child was a pointed critique, sharply aimed at a particular French tradition of eugenic thought, that, as we will see, grew out of the doctrine of *puériculture*, or 'the art of raising children' – a discipline renewed and redefined at the turn of the century by a Parisian obstetrician particularly obsessed with the state of French children, Adolphe Pinard.<sup>170</sup> Indeed, concerned not only with the quantity of French offspring but also with their quality, Pinard's *puériculture* soon entered the terrain of racial hygiene, where it would become, as William Schneider writes, 'the French equivalent of eugenics'.<sup>171</sup>

The eugenic activity initially emerging in France thus differed from that emerging in neighbouring countries like Britain and Germany. Conditioned by fears of depopulation and, as we will see, a widespread belief in Lamarckian heredity, positing the genetic transmissibility of acquired characteristics, French eugenicists tended to promote not the restriction of births but instead the cultivation of, as the president of the *Société française d'eugénique*, Edmond Perrier, declared in 1920: 'healthy and beautiful babies'.<sup>172</sup> Indeed, six years later, when Pinard, in the role of vice-president of the French Eugenic Society as well as *député de la Seine*, proposed France's first concrete eugenic legislation – obligatory medical exam prior to marriage to prevent the birth of, in Pinard's words, 'monsters' – Louis Forest, editor of *Le Matin* and fervent campaigner of the premarital medical certificate, even suggested that the French Eugenics Society should consider changing its name to the 'French Society for the Production of Beautiful Children'.<sup>173</sup>

Pinard's proposal, marking a radical shift away from positive measures towards a restrictive, negative programme, provoked – as we will see – a vigorous debate that lasted throughout the interwar period, generating 1929 headlines such as 'To Have Beautiful Children: Would the premarital certificate give serious warranty to married couples?' or 'For Parents with Children to

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<sup>170</sup> The literature on Pinard, *puériculture*, and the development of eugenics in France is vast, see e.g.: William H. Schneider, 'Toward the Improvement of the Human Race: The History of Eugenics in France,' *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 54, no. 2 (June 1982): 268-291; William H. Schneider, 'Puericulture, and the Style of French Eugenics,' *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences*, vol 8, no. 2 (1986): 265-277; Nadine Lefaucheur, 'La puériculture d'Adolphe Pinard,' in Patrick Tort (ed.), *Darwinisme et société* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992); 413-435; Anne Carol, *Histoire de l'eugénisme en France: Les médecins et la procréation, XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1995); Marius Turda and Aaron Gillette, *Latin Eugenics in Comparative Perspective* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); François Secco, *L'eugénisme de la Puériculture d'Adolphe Pinard : modeler l'individu pour améliorer l'humanité* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2021).

<sup>171</sup> Schneider, 'Puericulture, and the Style of French Eugenics,' 265. Similarly, Anne Carol writes that *puériculture* was 'the French doublet of eugenics.' (38).

<sup>172</sup> Perrier, 1-2.

<sup>173</sup> Louis Forrest, 'Propos d'un Parisien: À la société d'eugénique,' *Le Matin* (9 May 1926). 'Pour que la Société d'eugénique si intéressante trouve de l'écho dans le public, je vais lui proposer ici d'ajouter à son nom un sous-titre. Qu'elle s'appelle Société d'eugénique ou Société pour l'amélioration de la race humaine. (...) elle pourrait s'appeler encore : Société pour la fabrication, en France, de beaux gosses !'

Marry: Will the Prenuptial Certificate Guarantee Beautiful Infants?'.<sup>174</sup> When *Documents*, at the height of these discussions, turned to negotiate the longstanding Third Republican obsession with the child, it was therefore as part of a wider critique of the eugenic mission, which in interwar Europe, Marius Turda writes, was 'increasingly being adopted by various authorities of social and cultural life as well as by national propagandists.'<sup>175</sup> Indeed, in the essay accompanying the teratological illustrations of 'monstruous' children, Bataille exposed a methodological error of sorts, looming at the heart of the eugenic rationale. Seeking to obtain a 'perfect *type*', to 'give a kind of reality to the necessarily beautiful Platonic ideal', Bataille writes, eugenics ends up, unwittingly, achieving the opposite effect, namely, positing *all of humanity* as a deviation: 'each individual escapes this common measure and is, to a certain degree, a monster.'<sup>176</sup>

### *Adolphe Pinard and the Doctrine of Puériculture*

*Puériculture*, the etymological root of which stems from the Latin word for child – *puer* – was coined in 1858 by the Parisian physician Alfred Caron.<sup>177</sup> When expanded upon in 1865, Caron explained: 'PUÉRICULTURE IS TO THE HEALTH OF CHILDREN WHAT AGRICULTURE IS TO THE FERTILITY OF THE SOIL.'<sup>178</sup> The same year, Émile Littré listed the word in his *Dictionnaire*, defined as 'the art of raising children'.<sup>179</sup> It was only in 1895, however, when Pinard, head of the Baudelocque clinic and chair of clinical obstetrics at the Paris School of Medicine, revived and refined the term in a speech to the *Académie de médecine* – of which he had been an elected member since 1892 – that *puériculture* began to gain real traction.

In addition to plummeting birth rates, fin-de-siècle France was, to the despair of Third Republican demographers, simultaneously suffering from soaring infant mortality.<sup>180</sup> This 'grave problem of hygiene and politics', Albert Balestre wrote in 1891, is a 'serious cause of

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<sup>174</sup> 'Pour avoir de beaux enfants : Le certificat prénuptial donnerait-il des garanties sérieuses aux époux ?,' *Paris-Soir* (4 December 1929); 'Pour les parents qui ont des enfants à marier : Le Certificat Prénuptial assurera-t-il de beaux gosses ?,' *Le Midi* (5 December 1929).

<sup>175</sup> Marius Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 60. 'It was largely due to the demographic changes brought about by the war that political elites turned to eugenics as a means of promoting social and biological revivalism amidst a disillusioned political environment.' (57). 'The First World War was a defining moment in the crystallisation of European eugenic thinking.' (121).

<sup>176</sup> Bataille, 'The Deviations of Nature'.

<sup>177</sup> V. Wallich, 'A propos de l'histoire de la puériculture,' *Annales de gynécologie et d'obstétrique* (1906): 19–23.

<sup>178</sup> Alfred Caron, *Introduction à la puériculture et l'hygiène de la première enfance* (Paris: Chez l'auteur, 1865), 14. 'LA PUÉRICULTURE EST A LA SANTÉ DES ENFANTS CE QUE L'AGRICULTURE EST A LA FERTILITÉ DU SOL'. Following year, an expanded edition was published under the title: *La Puériculture, ou la Science d'élever hygiéniquement et physiologiquement les enfants*.

<sup>179</sup> Wallich, 19. 'art d'élever les enfants'.

<sup>180</sup> Rollet-Echalier, 21-108.

depopulation'.<sup>181</sup> Ten years later, in his famous study, *Étude sur la mortalité de la première enfance*, the shocking statistics were seamlessly sown into the familiar pronatalist rhetoric, framing the French child as a future soldier: 'We let 30.000 children die each year. (...) 15.000 soldiers! (...) it is a gradual weakening, it is the decadence, it is the fall of the homeland.'<sup>182</sup> Pinard's 1895 speech – dusting off the doctrine of *puériculture* as part of a report on his recent discovery that mothers cared for prior to delivery produced bigger and healthier children, and, as a result, a 'strong and vigorous population' – thus fell into a fertile anxious, fin-de-siècle discourse and was soon embraced by the official establishment.<sup>183</sup>

In 1901, the avid hygienist and senator Paul Strauss, declared that *puériculture* 'constitutes the strongest and surest work for national defence', and 'should be at the forefront of national and humanitarian politics'.<sup>184</sup> The following year, Pinard was appointed to the Commission on Depopulation with the task of preparing a report on the causes of infant mortality, alongside Charles Richet.<sup>185</sup> In 1906, Victor Wallich, an obstetrician and professor at the *Faculté de médecine de Paris*, announced that following Pinard's timely 'renaissance of puériculture', the term has become 'common use: everyone employs it, and everyone understands it.'<sup>186</sup>

The doctrine soon entered the Third Republican education system too. By 1905, 'puériculture' had been added as a taught subject of *écoles normales*. In 1909, it entered the curriculum of *écoles primaires supérieures*. The course material, set by the Ministry of Public Instruction, was pulled from Pinard's *La Puériculture du premier âge* (1904), (Fig. 40).<sup>187</sup> The book announced the task of *puériculture* as twofold: '1° to *preserve* them, that is to say: to prevent them from dying; 2° to do all that is possible in order for them to *develop* for the better, that is to say: they will grow well and become vigorous.'<sup>188</sup> In 1911, the Paris' city council and the *département de la Seine* founded the

<sup>181</sup> Albert Balestre, *Cours d'hygiène pratique : hygiène individuelle, hygiène scolaire, hygiène publique* (Paris: Paul Delaplane, 1891), 178, 180. Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-TC2-27. 'La mortalité de l'enfance soulève un des problèmes plus graves de l'hygiène et de la politique (...). La mortalité de l'enfance est une cause grave de dépopulation'.

<sup>182</sup> Albert Balestre, *Étude sur la mortalité de la première enfance dans la population urbaine de la France de 1892 à 1897* (Paris: Octave Doin, 1901), 42. Bibliothèque nationale de France, NUMM-81349. 'Nous laissons mourir tous les ans 30.000 enfants. (...) 15.000 soldats ! (...) c'est l'affaiblissement graduel, c'est la décadence, c'est la chute de la patrie.'

<sup>183</sup> Adolphe Pinard, 'Note pour servir à l'histoire de la puériculture intra-utérine', *Bulletin de l'Académie nationale de médecine*, 34 (1895): 594-597. 'une population forte et vigoureuse'.

<sup>184</sup> Paul Strauss, *Dépopulation et puériculture* (Paris: Eugène Fasquelle, 1901), 6-7, 9. 'Puériculture (...) doit être au premier plan d'une politique nationale et humanitaire. (...) La puériculture constitue (...) l'œuvre la plus forte et la plus sûre de défense nationale.'

<sup>185</sup> Schneider, *Quantity and Quality*, 102. Charles Richet was to be a founding member of the French Eugenics Society and would feature as its vice-president from 1919. In a 1910 article, Richet compared puericulture to the work of Ploetz's new International Society for Race Hygiene in Germany and the Eugenics Education Society in London.

<sup>186</sup> Wallich, 21, 19. 'Dans la période qui s'écoule de 1866 à 1895, entre la chute et la renaissance de la puériculture' (21); 'Le mot puériculture est aujourd'hui entré dans l'usage courant : tout le monde l'emploie, et il est compris de tous.' (19).

<sup>187</sup> Linda Clark, *Schooling the Daughters of Marianne: Textbooks and the Socialization of Girls in Modern French Primary Schools* (Albany: State University Press, 1984), 83-84.

<sup>188</sup> Adolphe Pinard, *La Puériculture du premier âge*, 18<sup>th</sup> edition (Paris: A. Colin, 1934), xi. Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-T-4553. '1° de les *conserver*, c'est-à-dire : les empêcher de mourir ; 2° de faire tout ce qui sera possible, afin qu'ils se *développent* pour le

*Institut de puériculture* – a centre for study and research set to ‘popularise infant hygiene’.<sup>189</sup> Two years later, its first director, Gaston Variot, published *La Puériculture pratique ou l’art d’élever les enfants au premier âge*. Circulating in a revised, fifth edition by 1930, the instructional treatise included forty-four illustrations. Photographs of children suffering from various physical deformations, such as rickets, appeared alongside didactic drawings showcasing the practise of *pédiométrie*, (Fig. 41). The introduction announced: ‘The future and greatness of France depends on our birthrate, which must not remain in decline!’<sup>190</sup>

In 1930, when *Documents* reproduced teratological illustrations of ‘monstruous’ infants, suffering from various physical malformations, the journal thus participated in an established, puéricultural image tradition, set to promote the cultivation of a ‘vigorous’ France by exposing its *citoyens* to horrifying visions of its supposed anathema: a fragile nation, inhabited by fragile Frenchmen. In the hands of *Documents*, however, this imagery was not reproduced to encourage improvement, elevation, or homogenisation but, on the contrary, to reverse the cultural logic it upheld and enthusiastically expose monstrous heterogeneity at the heart of humanity. As we will see, this critical gesture was to become even more pointed when situated within the particular characteristics of eugenic thought in France.

### *Puériculture and the Development of a French Brand of Eugenic Thought*

The *puériculteurs*’ remarkable devotion to French children sought to improve more than prenatal care and infant hygiene regimes. Their doctrine was a categorically and self-professedly eugenic programme, seeking to address and ameliorate the hereditary constitution of future generations and to, in Pinard’s words, ‘preserve and improve the species’.<sup>191</sup> A crucial premise, consolidating claims of a causative connection between *improved individual health* and an *improved species* was a Lamarckian theory of heredity, which was enjoying a widespread revival in the Third Republic. Indeed, as Darwinian models began to gain foothold across Europe, the French – boosted by nationalist reaction to the 1871 defeat – opted instead to revitalise the homebred tradition of

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mieux, c’est-à-dire : qu’ils grandissent bien et deviennent vigoureux.’ The book, selling in almost 100,000 copies, circulated in its 6<sup>th</sup> print by 1913.

<sup>189</sup> ‘L’Institut de Puériculture,’ *Le Rappel* (10 June 1911): 2. ‘La vulgarisation de l’hygiène infantile’.

<sup>190</sup> Gaston Variot, *La Puériculture pratique, ou l’Art d’élever les enfants du premier âge*, 5th edition (Paris : Octave Doin, 1930), xxxix. Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-T-2185. ‘L’avenir et la grandeur de la France dépendent de notre natalité, qui ne doit pas rester défaillante.’ Variot was also a founding member of the French Eugenics Society.

<sup>191</sup> Adolphe Pinard, ‘De la conservation et de l’amélioration de l’espèce,’ *Revue scientifique* (1899): 167-174.

evolutionary *transformisme*, based on the theories of the eighteenth-century naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck.

A central feature of the Lamarckian framework is the belief in hereditary transmission of acquired characteristics.<sup>192</sup> Peter J. Bowler writes: ‘Lamarckism is based on the assumption that changes of structure produced by the activity of the adult organism can be reflected in the material heredity and passed onto the next generation.’<sup>193</sup> Contrary to the relative fixity of Darwin’s model, thus, Lamarckian theory endows the individual with the power to alter and affect their transferrable genetic mass through what Lamarck called ‘the influence of circumstances’.<sup>194</sup> In ‘selection theory’, Bowler continues:

life or death was predetermined by the genes one inherited. The individual could do nothing to mitigate bad heredity. Lamarckism, in contrast, allowed the individual to choose a new habit when faced with an environmental challenge and shape the whole future course of evolution.<sup>195</sup>

The prospect of an immediately pliable genetic constitution, capable of acquiring and subsequently transferring both wanted and unwanted traits, spurred equal measures of optimism and pessimism. On the one hand, it fuelled a fundamental belief in the power of intervention, through public health reform and education. On the other hand, Nye writes, it meant that ‘each case of individual pathology was both a symptom and a cause: a symptom that a syndrome of degeneracy was unfolding, and a cause of the future – worse – cases.’ The ‘degenerate’, Nye continues, was ‘endowed with a double power: a painful reminder of the weakness of the ‘race’ and a living assurance of its continued decline.’<sup>196</sup> Lamarckism, thus, chimed well with the Third Republican zeitgeist, where deeply pessimistic projections of seemingly insurmountable French decay could sit alongside idealistic and hopeful calls for immediate national improvement.

During an 1898 lecture at the Baudelocque, Adolphe Pinard, a staunch neo-Lamarckian, announced: ‘I am absolutely convinced today that every pathological state (...) has a manifest

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<sup>192</sup> Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics*, 119-121.

<sup>193</sup> Peter J. Bowler, *Theories of Human Evolution: A Century of Debate, 1844-1944* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 257.

<sup>194</sup> See e.g. Jean Baptiste Pierre Antoine Lamarck, ‘On the Influence of Circumstances on the Actions and Habits of Animals, and that of the Actions and Habits of Living Bodies, as Causes which Modify their Organization,’ trans. Dr. E. E. Galt, *The American Naturalist*, vol. 22, no. 264 (1888): 960-972.

<sup>195</sup> Bowler, 367.

<sup>196</sup> Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics*, 143. Similarly, Schneider writes: ‘if neo-Lamarckism warned of the increased possibility of negative influences on the quality of the population, it also held out the promise of improving it quickly.’ (*Quantity and Quality*, 74-75).

influence on the product of conception and on its future development.<sup>197</sup> Having observed families where ‘a degenerate, a cripple, or an idiot’ is born amongst ‘healthy’ siblings, and discovering that, in most cases, one parent ‘had been, in the moment of procreation, either *ill* or *convalescent*,’ Pinard went on to explain that there are two types of hereditary transmission.<sup>198</sup> In the first case, dubbed ‘*homologue*’ or ‘*similaire*’, the child inherits the same afflictions affecting the parents. In the second type, named ‘*hétérologue*’ or ‘*dissemblable*’, the child inherits ‘the *pathological state* of the parents, in the moment of conception’. The ‘the range of influences’, Pinard added, ‘is variable’: ‘sometimes it will only produce a simple degradation whilst, other times, it will provoke a monstrosity.’<sup>199</sup> ‘I dare to hope,’ he continued, ‘that when these facts are well-known and well-disseminated, parents will abstain from procreating other than in the best possible physiological state.’<sup>200</sup>

Pinard’s address, marking an important step in what Schneider has called ‘the evolution of puericulture towards eugenics’, concluded: ‘It is by pursuing this path that we will react against the degeneracy of the race and that, in due course, the atavism will transmit to future generations only selected elements rather than those of decadence.’<sup>201</sup> The speech was published the following year. The article, entitled ‘On the Preservation and Improvement of the Species’, has been dubbed ‘an all-encompassing programme of medical eugenics’ by historians Marius Turda and Aaron Gillette.<sup>202</sup>

The French style of eugenics, growing out of *puériculture*, thus differed from that emerging in neighbouring countries. The longstanding conviction that France was becoming depopulated, engendering an unopposed pronatalist dogma in both popular and political discourse, combined

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<sup>197</sup> Pinard, ‘De la conservation et de l’amélioration de l’espèce,’ 174. ‘Je suis absolument convaincu aujourd’hui que tout état pathologique, toute dépression physique et morale, toute déchéance physiologique, en un mot, de l’un des générateurs ou des deux, a une influence manifeste sur le produit de conception et sur son développement futur.’

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 174. ‘Dans 23 familles parmi lesquelles je trouve, au milieu d’enfants bien portants, l’existence d’un dégénéré, d’un infirme ou d’un idiot, 22 fois j’ai pu constater et faire constater aux parents que l’un des deux était, au moment de la procréation, ou malade ou convalescent.’

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 172. ‘soit par hérédité similaire (homologue), soit par hérédité dissemblable (hétérologue). Dans le deuxième, l’enfant hérite bien encore de l’état pathologique des parents, au moment de la conception (...) la gamme de son influence sur le produit de conception est variable, à ce point que là il ne produira qu’une simple déchéance, tandis qu’ailleurs il déterminera une monstruosité.’

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 174. ‘Combien peu se demandent s’ils sont aptes à procréer, et songent aux conséquences si graves de cet acte ! (...) j’ose espérer que, lorsque ces faits seront bien connus et vulgarisés, nombre de parents, dans bien des circonstances, s’abstiendront de procréer autrement que dans un état physiologique aussi bon que possible.’

<sup>201</sup> Schneider, ‘Puericulture, and the Style of French Eugenics,’ 269; Pinard, ‘De la conservation et de l’amélioration de l’espèce,’ 174. ‘C’est en faisant ainsi de la puériculture avant la procréation, c’est-à-dire en faisant de la prophylaxie, qu’on arrivera à diminuer le nombre de déchets sociaux, des informes, des idiots, des dégénérés. C’est de cette façon que l’on arrivera, j’en ai la conviction profonde, à diminuer le nombre des inégalités naturelles, dites fatales. C’est en entrant et en préservant dans cette voie que l’on réagira contre la dégénérescence de la race et que, plus tard, l’atavisme ne transmettra aux générations futures que des de sélection et non des éléments de décadence.’

<sup>202</sup> Turda and Gillette, 33.

with the widespread belief in neo-Lamarckian heredity, the premise of which allowed the *health* of the individual to become a genetically pliable springboard for future generations, meant that French eugenicists tended to emphasise *positive* measures, encouraging the production of a stronger populace through public health reforms, social hygiene, and preventative medicine, whilst deemphasising *negative* programmes such as enforced sterilisation.<sup>203</sup> This, in turn, meant that French eugenics – whilst, just like Francis Galton and his followers, aiming for nothing less than the hereditary improvement of the species – could affiliate not only with pronatalists but also with the broader hygienist cause, relentlessly battling the various pathologies weakening the Third Republican organism, such as tuberculosis, alcoholism, and syphilis.<sup>204</sup> As a result, eugenics emerged as a *medical* matter in France, subject of interest to doctors over anthropologists and biologists.<sup>205</sup> This also endowed the French brand of eugenics with a broader base for support since, William Schneider writes, ‘it was more acceptable to call for having healthier babies than eliminating the unfit.’<sup>206</sup>

When London hosted the first International Congress of Eugenics in July of 1912, the French delegation therefore stood out. Amongst a few demographers, biologists, academicians, as well as high-ranking politicians such as Paul Strauss, the largest group were doctors – most of whom were paediatricians, obstetricians, or *puériculteurs*.<sup>207</sup> Pinard, too ill to attend the event, had his prepared paper presented by a colleague. The script confidently declared that what ‘Sir Francis Galton had entitled Eugenics’ is, in fact, ‘nothing but *puériculture*’ – a science, ‘studied for years in France’, having as its goal to research the ‘conditions relative to the reproduction, preservation, and improvement of the human species.’<sup>208</sup> The 1912 congress was widely reported on in French newspapers, some of which had correspondents sent over to London. In *Le Journal*, headlines asked: ‘What is Eugenics?’ and ‘How to assure the health of our children?’<sup>209</sup> At the same time, *Larousse mensuel* included an entry on ‘eugénique’, alarmingly announcing that ‘France, more encumbered than other nations by the unfit, the underdeveloped, and the harmful, lags behind’. ‘That is why,’ the dictionary-definition declared, ‘here more than elsewhere, it is necessary to

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<sup>203</sup> Lefaucheur, 428.

<sup>204</sup> Schneider, *Quantity and Quality*, 82-83.

<sup>205</sup> Carol contrasts ‘eugénisme galtonien’ against ‘eugénisme médical français’ (77).

<sup>206</sup> Schneider, *Quantity and Quality*, 82.

<sup>207</sup> Carol, 77-78. Also attending the event was the Paul Doumer, a pronatalist senator and soon-to-be president of the Republic, who in his address to the congress announced his hopes that the next international event would be held in Paris.

<sup>208</sup> The Eugenics Education Society, *Problems in Eugenics: Papers Communicated to the First International Congress held at the University of London, July 24<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup>, 1912* (London: Chas. Knight & Co., 1912), 457-459. Wellcome Collection.

<sup>209</sup> ‘Qu’est-ce que l’eugénie ?’, *Le Journal* (27 July 1912); ‘Au congrès eugénique : Comment assurer la santé de nos enfants,’ *Le Journal* (28 July 1912).

understand the logic of eugenics and the practical goal it proposes.<sup>210</sup> Before the end of the year, the French Eugenics Society had been launched in Paris.<sup>211</sup> Whilst Pinard, in the role of vice-president, initially called for the word ‘puériculture’ to feature in its title, after settling on the international legibility of ‘eugenics’, the *Société française d’eugénique* hosted its inaugural meeting at the Paris Medical School in January of 1913. Over sixty percent of the attendees were doctors.<sup>212</sup> The society was soon in full swing, marked by over one-hundred members, monthly meetings, and regular publications of their journal, *Eugénique*.

With all activities put on hold during the hostilities, the society’s first major interwar event was a 1920 public conference examining ‘The Eugenic Effects of the War’. Edmond Perrier, president of the society, opened the event by reiterating the modus operandi of French eugenics: ‘to research, define and spread the means of perfecting the human races by indicating the conditions which each individual, each couple must strive to fulfil in order to have healthy and beautiful babies.’<sup>213</sup> Revealing the continued influence of Lamarckism, Perrier emphasised that, while ‘bearing fruit’, it is crucial ‘that the *milieu* itself is not a cause of degradation’ and, therefore, that the ‘individual ignorance that propagate contagion’ and ‘debaucheries of all kinds’ are ‘mercilessly pursued’.<sup>214</sup> In turn, another speaker emphasised the hereditary effects of malnutrition, identifying an imbalanced diet as ‘a determinant of defects and degeneration’.<sup>215</sup> Eugène Apert, *puériculteur* and founding member of the *Société française d’eugénique*, subsequently compared the eugenic effect of war to that of an ‘acute, infectious disease’ or a ‘microbial invasion’. Even after ‘the enemy has been beaten’ and ‘the fever ceases,’ he elaborated, the ‘organism remains changed: anaemic, emaciated’. However, Apert reassured the nation that there was no risk of ‘wounds’, ‘amputations’, ‘vicious scars’, or ‘fractures’ acquired during the war being genetically transmitted onto future Frenchmen.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Dr J. Laumonier, ‘eugénique’, *Larousse mensuel illustré* (July 1912): 454. ‘Quant à France, la plus encombrée pourtant de toutes les nations par les inaptes, les arriérés et les nocifs, elle reste fort en arrière des autres pays (...). C’est pourquoi, chez nous plus qu’ailleurs, il est nécessaire de faire comprendre la raison de l’eugénique et le but pratique qu’elle propose.’

<sup>211</sup> See e.g.: Jacques Léonard, ‘Le premier Congrès international d’eugénique (Londres, 1912) et ses conséquences françaises,’ *Histoire des sciences médicales*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1983): 141-146; Jacques Léonard, ‘Les origines et les conséquences de l’eugénique en France,’ *Annales de démographie historique* (1985): 203-214.

<sup>212</sup> Carol, 80-81. The French Eugenics Society comprised of 64.5 % doctors, compared to 22,5% in Britain, 19,6% in America, and 33,4% in Germany.

<sup>213</sup> Perrier, 1-2. ‘la *Société française d’eugénique* dont le but de rechercher, de préciser, de répandre les moyens de perfectionner les races humaines, en indiquant les conditions que chaque individu, chaque couple doit s’efforcer de remplir pour avoir de robustes et beaux enfants.’

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. ‘Pour qu’ils portent tous leurs fruits, il faut que le milieu lui-même ne soit pas une cause de dégradation; que les vices nationaux comme l’alcoolisme, les négligences personnelles qui propagent les contagions, les débauches de toute nature soient impitoyablement poursuivies.’

<sup>215</sup> Frédéric Houssay, ‘Eugénique et Régimes Alimentaires,’ *Eugénique et sélection*, 26. ‘Qu’un régime alimentaire mal équilibré, mal réglé sur la dépense organique, puisse être un déterminisme de tares et de dégénérescences’.

<sup>216</sup> Dr. Apert, ‘Eugénique et Santé Nationale,’ in *ibid.*, 59-69. ‘On peut comparer une grande guerre dans la vie d’un peuple à une maladie infectieuse aiguë dans la vie d’un individu. La nation mobilise ses défenseurs attirés, ses soldats actifs, puis ses réserves et sa territoriale, de même que l’organisme oppose à l’invasion microbienne (...) l’ennemi a été vaincu ; la fièvre cesse ; c’est

Widely reported on in the press, the 1920 conference marked a change of direction that would come to characterise the society's operations throughout the interwar period.<sup>217</sup> Having acted as an inwards-looking, learned society during the prewar period, the *Société française d'eugénique* now turned its efforts outwards, educating the public through lectures and university courses, as well as seeking to impact the body of intellectual, scientific, and political decision makers in France.<sup>218</sup> The most pronounced example the latter was the society's campaign for a premarital examination law, proposed by Pinard himself in 1926, the discussion around which, as we will see, was still ongoing in 1930, when *Documents* intervened in France's longstanding concern with infant health to put forth a pointed critique of the eugenic rationale. Indeed, whilst France debated Pinard's eugenic medical certificate, set to 'guarantee and safeguard future generations'<sup>219</sup>, Bataille explained, alongside the teratological illustrations of 'monstruous' infants, that, despite seeking to produce a 'perfect *type*', the only achievement a eugenic programme can accomplish is, in the end, to expose all human beings as heterogenous deviations from such ultra-utopian ideal and, thus, to frame 'each individual' as 'a monster'.<sup>220</sup>

### *Pinard's Politics: The French Campaign for a Eugenic 'certificat prénuptial'*

Pinard had been elected *député de la Seine* in 1919, a role that he would maintain until retiring from politics in 1928, at the age of eighty-four.<sup>221</sup> Throughout this period, Pinard relentlessly pursued his political platform to promote the programme of *puériculture*. Already in December of 1920, Pinard presented 'a proposition for a law having as its goal the improvement of French births from the point of view of quality.'<sup>222</sup> Although nothing came of it, Pinard did not cease his efforts. Once re-elected in 1924, Pinard, being the eldest deputy, was officially dubbed *doyen d'âge*, a role allowing him not only to chair debates, but also to open sessions with a lengthy speech. His inaugural address, held

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l'armistice ; c'est la paix. Mais l'organisme reste modifié ; il est anémié, amaigri, atteint dans certaines fonctions (...). D'une façon générale, quand il s'agit de blessures des membres, amputations, ankyloses, cicatrices vicieuses, fractures, on peut dire que la valeur reproductrice n'est pas diminuée et qu'il n'y a aucun danger de transmission de la mutilation aux enfants à venir.'

<sup>217</sup> The *Société française d'eugénique* merged with the *Institut international d'anthropologie* in 1926.

<sup>218</sup> William Schneider, 'The Eugenics Movement in France, 1890-1940,' in Mark B. Adams (ed.) *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 77-79.

<sup>219</sup> 'Annexe n°3585, Séance du 24 novembre 1926,' *Journal officiel de la République française. Documents parlementaires. Chambre des députés : annexes aux procès-verbaux des séances* (1926): 131. 'Messieurs, garantir, sauvegarder, même avant leur naissance, les générations futures, est le fait essentiel, et le seul, qui puisse assurer la pleine évolution de l'espèce humaine.'

<sup>220</sup> Bataille, 'The Deviations of Nature'.

<sup>221</sup> Already during the war, Pinard had been positioned as vice president of a Committee for the Protection of Mothers and Children. Additionally, in 1920, Pinard and Richet were made Vice Presidents of the council of birthrate as part of the new Ministry of Social Hygiene and Welfare (Klaus, 267).

<sup>222</sup> 'Annexe n°1730, Séance du 2 décembre 1920,' *Journal officiel de la République française. Documents parlementaires. Chambre des députés : annexes aux procès-verbaux des séances* (1920): 347. 'une proposition de loi ayant pour objet le relèvement de la natalité française au point de vue de nombre et de la qualité.'

on 1 June 1924, announces his political ambitions.<sup>223</sup> After deploring the financial deficit terrorising interwar France, Pinard swiftly turned his attention to another problem, ‘infinitely graver for our country: the deficit of French lives!’<sup>224</sup> Following the war, where ‘human capital of an inestimable price, made of beauty, youth, and strength, disappeared forever’, Pinard elaborated, in full convergence with the amplified interwar pronatalist rhetoric: ‘France is thus fatally marching towards death!’<sup>225</sup> ‘But is it enough to elevate birth rates?’, Pinard went on to ask: ‘No. That is only half the task. Quantity will not suffice. We also need, we primarily need, quality.’<sup>226</sup> He continued:

We know where monsters come from, and we also know how they can be avoided. Still, this does not hinder the majority from procreating in exactly the same way as our Stone Age ancestors, to procreate without thinking. Now, we have to think. And puériculture teaches us to think, before procreating.<sup>227</sup>

‘All procreation in a state of sickness, even of convalescence, all procreation in a state of drunkenness,’ Pinard continued, repeating his 1898 thesis, steeped in neo-Lamarckism, ‘only generates puny, malformed products, imbeciles or idiots, products most often inept to live, and, in any case, even if they go on to live, social wastes.’<sup>228</sup> ‘*Vive la République!* who will let France live in all its force and splendour!’, rallied Pinard, met with applause from all ends of the Chamber.<sup>229</sup>

Two years later, in November of 1926, Pinard presented France’s first concrete proposal for eugenic legislation. Aiming to ‘guarantee and safeguard future generations, even before their birth’, the motion announced: ‘Every French citizen wishing to marry can be entered in the civil registry only if he has a medical certificate dated from the day before, establishing that he has

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<sup>223</sup> ‘Ouverture de la session ordinaire de 1924, Séance du 1<sup>er</sup> Juin 1924,’ *Journal officiel de la République française. Débats parlementaires. Chambre des députés : compte rendu in-extenso* (2 June 1924): 2221-2226.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 2222. ‘Mais si le déficit financier est grave, il en existe un autre, infiniment plus grave, hélas ! pour notre pays : le déficit des vies humaines françaises !’

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 2223. ‘Avec la guerre le déficit s’est terriblement accru. Plus de trois millions de vies humaines – dont quinze cent mille combattants, formant le capital humain, d’un prix inestimable, fait de beauté, de jeunesse et force – disparus à jamais ! (...) La France marche ainsi vers la mort, fatalement !’

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 2224. ‘Mais, est-ce tout que d’accroître la natalité ? Non. Ce n’est là que la moitié de la tâche. La quantité ne suffit pas. Il faut aussi, il faut surtout, la qualité.’

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 2224. ‘Nous savons d’où viennent les monstres et nous savons aussi comment on peut éviter leur apparition. Cela n’empêche pas l’immense majorité de nos semblables de procréer exactement de la même façon que nos ancêtres de l’âge des cavernes, de procréer sans réfléchir. Or, il faut réfléchir. Et la puériculture apprend à réfléchir, avant de procréer.’

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 2224. ‘Toute procréation en état de maladie, et même de convalescence, toute procréation en état d’ébriété ne donne, le plus souvent, que des produits malingres, malformés, imbéciles ou idiots, produits souvent inaptes à vivre, et, en tout cas, même s’ils parviennent à vivre, ne constituant, pour la plupart, que des déchets sociaux.’

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 2226. ‘*Vive la République!* qui fera vivre la France dans toute sa force et sa splendeur !’

contracted no contagious disease.<sup>230</sup> The proposal thus perfectly encapsulates, Carol writes, the history of ‘*l’eugénisme médical française*’.<sup>231</sup>

Whilst the idea of a premarital certificate had circulated since the *fin-de-siècle*, it was only after the demographic loss of the war that it gained serious support in France.<sup>232</sup> Georges Schreiber, another fervently eugenic paediatrician, had initially promoted its necessity at the 1920 *Société française d’eugénique* conference and continued to campaign for the cause through lectures and radio programmes, before eventually calling on the *Société* to hold a special conference on the topic in 1925.<sup>233</sup> The resulting event, hosted in the late spring of 1926 at the *Musée social*, was attended by politicians, hygienists, as well as journalists. The *Société française d’eugénique* announced its official support: ‘we are certain that the *premarital medical exam* can diminish the number of innocent victims, and improve future generations’.<sup>234</sup> A few months later, when Paris hosted the 1926 International Federation of Eugenic Organisations, the question of obligatory premarital medical exams was, as Dr Henri Bouquet wrote in *Le Temps*, ‘discussed everywhere’.<sup>235</sup>

When Pinard proposed his obligatory *certificat médical* on 24 November 1926, a lively debate ensued across all major newspapers. ‘We are going to impose the prenuptial certificate,’ announced *Le Matin*: ‘Bravo! This law is necessary because the physical dupery is deplorable.’<sup>236</sup> Writing in *Le Petit Journal*, on the other hand, the former minister, Laurent Bonnevey, expressed concerns over its efficiency: ‘the prenuptial certificate will be without effect; it will neither preserve the spouse from contagion, nor protect society from malformed children.’<sup>237</sup> Meanwhile *Le Quotidien*, after deploring the fact that *eugenics* – defined as the ‘science and art of having beautiful children’ – was ‘still not widespread enough in France, despite the efforts of it most

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<sup>230</sup> ‘Annexe n°3585, Séance du 24 novembre 1926,’ 131. ‘Messieurs, garantir, sauvegarder, même avant leur naissance, les générations futurs, est le fait essentiel, et le seul, qui puisse assurer la pleine évolution de l’espèce humaine. (...) Tout citoyen français voulant contracter mariage ne pourra être inscrit sur les registres de l’état civil que s’il est muni d’un certificat médical, daté de la veille, attestant qu’il ne présente aucun symptôme appréciable d’une maladie contagieuse.’

<sup>231</sup> Carol, 312.

<sup>232</sup> For an extensive history of the premarital medical exam, see Carol, in particular chapters 9 and 13.

<sup>233</sup> Léonard, ‘Les origines,’ 212. For Schreiber’s 1920 speech, see Georges Schreiber, ‘Eugénique et Mariage,’ *Eugénique et sélection*, 159-188.

<sup>234</sup> Georges Schreiber, ‘L’Examen médical pré-nuptial dans les différents pays,’ in Dr René Sand et al. *L’Examen médical en vue du mariage* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1927), 29. ‘nous sommes convaincus que dès à présent *l’examen médical avant le mariage* peut diminuer le nombre des victimes innocents, et améliorer les générations à venir : C’est pourquoi nous vous convions à aider notre *Société française d’Eugénique* dans cette propagande qu’elle estime utile à la fois pour le pays et pour l’humanité.’

<sup>235</sup> Henri Bouquet, ‘Le certificat pré-nuptial,’ *Le Temps* (8 Sept 1926). ‘Il en est un, notamment, que l’on discute un peu partout (...), c’est le certificat pré-nuptial ou certificat d’aptitude au mariage.’ Dr. Bouquet had also written the entry on *puériculture* in *Larousse mensuel* (1907).

<sup>236</sup> Guy Launay, ‘Certificat,’ *Le Matin* (10 December 1926). ‘On va instaurer le certificat pré-nuptial. Bravo ! Les candidats au mariage devront présenter au maire une note médicale prouvant qu’ils sont en bonne santé ! Ce conseil de réforme nous évitera sans doute de lamentables hérédos. Cette loi est nécessaire, car la duperie physique est une chose lamentable.’

<sup>237</sup> Laurent Bonnevey, ‘Le futur mari : doit-il apporter une fiche sanitaire ?,’ *Le Petit Journal* (16 June 1927). ‘le certificat pré-nuptial sera sans effet : il ne préservera pas l’épouse contre la contagion, ni ne gardera la société contre la mise au monde d’enfants tarés.’

famous propagandist, *professeur* Pinard', went on to express their allegiance to the certificate.<sup>238</sup> The article, entitled 'How to diminish the number of abnormal children?', concluded that the birth of 'crippled children, idiots, born criminals, wretched biological waste' who, in turn, 'will themselves produce new unfortunates', is not only 'inhumane' but also 'dangerous for the future of the race'.<sup>239</sup>

In *Le Journal*, Clément Vautel, well-known for his natalist and antifeminist views, even devoted his cinema column to 'this curious law proposed by Professor Pinard'.<sup>240</sup> After summarising the opinions of an array of medical professionals, Vautel recounted reactions received from *Le Journal*-readers. One claimed that his marriage had cured him from tuberculosis, arguing thus that, with 'the Pinard certificate', he 'wouldn't be married' and therefore 'would perhaps be dead today'.<sup>241</sup> Another reader rebelliously exhumed: 'what if I want to marry a *tuberculeux*? The heart has reasons that social hygiene cannot know'.<sup>242</sup> Vautel concluded:

science should, it is certain, intervene in this essential elaboration where chance play a dangerous role. We occupy ourselves, very seriously, with the improvement of horses, dogs, pigs, etc. The human species is haphazardly improvised... But how can this be done? It is not a book by Professor Pinard that lovers hold in their hands when, married or not, they decide not to read anymore...<sup>243</sup>

Indeed, as *L'Intransigeant* had announced: 'The newspapers talk a lot about Doctor Pinard's proposed law' – 'either in support or in scorn'.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Albert Chenevier, 'Comment diminuer le nombre des enfants anormaux?', *Le Quotidien* (14 Sept 1927). 'l'eugénisme (...) science et art d'avoir de beaux enfants (...) encore trop peu répandue chez nous, malgré les efforts de propagandistes dont le plus célèbre est le professeur Pinard, président de la Société française d'eugénique.'

<sup>239</sup> Ibid. 'il est, tout à la fois, inhumain et dangereux pour l'avenir de la race, de laisser toute liberté de procréer à des hommes, à des femmes qui engendreront des enfants infirmes, idiots, criminels-nés, malheureux déchets biologiques appelés à devenir de lamentables déchets sociaux, et qui feront souche eux-mêmes de nouveaux infortunés.'

<sup>240</sup> Clément Vautel, 'Mon Film,' *L'Intransigeant* (16 December 1926). 'cette curieuse proposition de loi suggérée par le professeur Pinard'. In 1924, Vautel wrote *Madame ne veut pas d'enfant*, a story about a *femme moderne* who declines on motherhood in favour of a pleasure-filled life. (Roberts, 131.)

<sup>241</sup> Ibid. 'Un lecteur m'écrit (...) Faute du certificat Pinard, je n'aurais pu me marier et je serais peut-être mort aujourd'hui!'

<sup>242</sup> Ibid. 'Une lectrice ajoute : 'Et s'il me plaît, à moi, d'épouser un tuberculeux ? Le cœur a des raisons que l'hygiène sociale ne connaît pas...'

<sup>243</sup> Ibid. 'la science doit aussi, c'est bien certain, intervenir dans cette élaboration essentielle où le hasard joue un rôle dangereux. On s'occupe très sérieusement de l'amélioration des races chevaline, canine, porcine, etc... L'espèce humaine s'improvise au petit bonheur... Mais comment faire ? Ce n'est pas un livre du professeur Pinard qu'ils tiennent à la main, lorsque les amoureux, mariés ou non, décident de ne pas lire plus avant...'

<sup>244</sup> 'Nos échos,' *L'Intransigeant* (16 December 1926). 'Les journaux parlent beaucoup, nous écrit notre confrère Urbain Gohier, soit pour approuver, soit pour la blaguer, de la proposition de loi du docteur Pinard, sur le 'certificat pré-nuptial'.'

Tasked with examining Pinard's proposal on behalf of the *Commission de l'hygiène*, Dr Paul Nicollet was called to present his findings to the Chamber in December of 1927.<sup>245</sup> The war, Nicollet announced, provoking not only human loss and thus a diminished reproductive population, but also the spread of illness of contagious illness, has meant that even those who survived it are today of 'an incontestably inferior quality'.<sup>246</sup> As a result, he deplored: 'The future generation seem therefore to be, eugenically speaking, worse than that which preceded it.'<sup>247</sup> The idea behind the *certificat médical pré-nuptial* was, thus, Nicollet explained, 'very simple':

Professor Pinard's proposal demands that the law would allow a doctor to, if not prevent, at least divert a '*contagieux*' from marriage, an unfortunate who, often without knowing, can bring into existence a poor, defective being, sick, perhaps a monster, and in any case a human misfit...<sup>248</sup>

With full support from Nicollet, the *Commission de l'hygiène*, as well as long list of high-ranking *ligues*, organisations, and politicians, Pinard's proposal was set to be voted on. The debate in French newspapers was amplified. *Le Petit Journal* spoke of a 'dictatorship of Hygiea'.<sup>249</sup> *L'Homme libre*, in turn, asked if 'M. Pinard and M. Nicollet' found themselves superior to 'absolute freedom', explaining that 'love is a child who knows neither the law nor certificates'.<sup>250</sup> *Le Rappel*, on the other hand, elaborated that while 'infatuated fiancés' is 'all good and well', the 'children that will be born mad, with tuberculosis or rickets, are innocent victims of this love, and that is monstrous...'. 'The important and essential thing', the newspaper continued: 'is not to have many children, but to have beautiful children, that is to say, healthy and normal children, without hereditary malformation.'<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> 'Annexe n°5172, Séance du 6 décembre 1927,' *Journal officiel de la République française. Documents parlementaires. Chambre des députés : annexes aux procès-verbaux des séances* (1927): 372-378.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 373. 'la guerre a laissé survivants des reproducteurs males de qualité incontestablement inférieure à ceux du temps de paix.'

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 373. 'La génération à venir semble donc devoir, au point de vue eugénique, être moins bonne que celle qui l'a précédée.'

<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 376. 'Le point de départ de sa proposition de loi est très simple (...). La proposition de loi du professeur Pinard demande au législateur de permettre au médecin, sinon d'empêcher, tout au moins de détourner du mariage un 'contagieux', un malheureux qui, souvent sans le savoir, peut porter à sa future conjointe une maladie d'autant plus dangereuse qu'elle n'est pas dépistée dans son origine, sa cause réelle, et en cas de procréation, de lancer dans l'existence in pauvre être débile, malade, parfois un monstre, et dans tous cas, une 'épave humaine'.'

<sup>249</sup> de La Palisse, 'Aux vérités de La Palisse,' *Le Petit Journal* (26 February 1928). 'la dictature d'Hygée'.

<sup>250</sup> A. Ch.-M, 'Amour et certificat,' *L'Homme libre* (28 February 1928). 'L'amour est un enfant qui n'a jamais connu de loi, - ni de certificat, et, à vouloir l'enserrer dans des diplômes parcheminés, on fera si bien qu'il se réfugiera dans la liberté absolue ; et alors, en serez-vous plus avancés, M. Pinard et M. Nicollet ?'

<sup>251</sup> Line Deberre, 'La question des enfants,' *Le Rappel* (29 December 1927). 'L'important, l'essentiel n'est pas d'avoir beaucoup d'enfants, mais d'avoir de beaux enfants, c'est-à-dire des enfants sains, normaux, sans tare héréditaire. (...) Deux fiancés s'adorent (...) Fort bien... mais les petits qui naîtront fous, tuberculeux, rachitiques seront les innocentes victimes de cet amour, et cela est monstrueux...'

In February of 1928, before any vote had taken place, however, the proposal was postponed following demands of a complementary rapport to be produced by the *Commission de l'hygiène*. When the newly elected Chamber was installed in April of 1928, Pinard had retired from his political career and the proposal was temporarily shelved.<sup>252</sup> Taking stock of the discursive impact of Pinard's campaigning for a *certificat*, Schreiber recounted: 'It has been spoken about in journals, in parliament, in the salons; we would like to have had talked about it even in the bedrooms. It is progress, since above all we wanted to modify the public opinion.'<sup>253</sup>

Despite this legislative setback, however, the debate continued across the political agenda and the press. It seeped further into popular culture too. In December of 1928, *Désabillez-vous* – an *opérette* in three acts – premiered in Paris. The plot circled around the young *garçon* Paul visiting Dr Malanson – characterised by *Le Matin's* reviewer as a 'fervent pronatalist propagandist' – to obtain a premarital medical certificate.<sup>254</sup> A chaotic flurry of interlinked sexual encounters, involving even Dr Malanson himself, is uncovered, provoking, once more in the words of *Le Matin's* reviewer, 'piquant situations' and 'incessant bursts of laughter'.<sup>255</sup> Newspapers soon described it as a 'triumphal success'.<sup>256</sup> In 1929, another Pinard-inspired drama premiered in Paris. The film, entitled *Le permis d'aimer*, was significantly more serious in tone. The script had been written by Dr Malachowski, whose back catalogue includes titles such as *Le baiser qui tue* (1928) – a melodrama about a young *marin* contracting syphilis from a prostitute, produced with the support of the *Ministère du travail et de l'hygiène* and the *Musée social*.<sup>257</sup> After describing Dr Malachowski as a Eugène Brieux of cinema, *Excelsior's* reviewer dubbed the film a 'plea in favour of the prenuptial certificate'.<sup>258</sup>

As a new campaign for legislation was launched in 1929, the political discussion around the certificate surfaced once more. Arguing for its immediate implementation, *député* Marius Moutet declared in December: 'to have children is good, but to prevent them from dying is better.'<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Carol, 226-227.

<sup>253</sup> Georges Schreiber, 'Les examens sanitaires périodiques,' *La Puériculture* (March, 1928): 130. 'On en parlera dans les journaux, on en parlera au Parlement, dans les salons ; nous voudrions qu'on en parlât même dans les chambres à coucher. C'est un progrès, car nous voulons d'abord modifier l'opinion publique.'

<sup>254</sup> 'Les premières,' *Le Matin* (27 December 1928). 'Mais Malanson n'examine pas que des maladies ; fervent propagandiste de la natalité, il est à la disposition des pères de famille qui entendent soumettre leur futur genre à une investigation qui rassura sa constitution.'

<sup>255</sup> Ibid. 'quelles situations piquantes surgiront, quelles folies concevront les personnages et quelles incessantes rafales de rires secoueront la salle.'

<sup>256</sup> 'Courrier des théâtres,' *Le Matin* (12 February 1929). 'Opérette ultra-gaie *Désabillez-vous* (succès triomphal).'

<sup>257</sup> Thierry Lefebvre, 'Le cinéma contre la syphilis – des débuts prometteurs,' *La revue du praticien*, 54 (2004): 2–5.

<sup>258</sup> 'Les films de la semaine,' *Excelsior* (5 July 1929). 'C'est un plaidoyer muet en faveur du certificat prenuptial.'

<sup>259</sup> Montet (1929), quoted in Ida-R. Sée, 'L'Hygiène et l'Enfance : L'enfance en péril,' *L'Hygiène Sociale* (25 January 1930): 457. 'Essayer de faire naître des enfants, c'est bien, mais les empêcher de mourir, c'est mieux, il y a chaque année, cinquante mille petites vies humaines à sauver !'

Mediating the debates, French newspaper-headlines asked: ‘To Have Beautiful Children: Would the premarital certificate give serious warranty to married couples?’; ‘For Parents with Children to Marry: Will the Prenuptial Certificate Guarantee Beautiful Infants?’<sup>260</sup> A manifesto in favour of the premarital examination was presented on national radio by Adolphe’s nephew, Dr Marcel Pinard, under the auspice of the National Office of Social Hygiene.<sup>261</sup> In the end, however, although the *directeur général de l’Assistance publique*, Dr Louis Mourier, enabled the provision of voluntary premarital medical consultations in 1930, triggering the press to exclaim ‘The Premarital Examination is Created’ and ‘Towards a Prenuptial Certificate’, French eugenicists would have to wait until 1942 and the instalment of the authoritarian Vichy regime for the *certificat pré-nuptial* to be passed into legislation.<sup>262</sup>

### *Les écarts de la nature*

When *Documents*, amid this debate, turned to negotiate the longstanding Third Republican obsession with the child, the charged currency this sign carried in interwar France, accumulated through relentless profusion in political as well as popular discourse, was radically exploited to avant-garde ends. In the second issue of the journal’s second year (1930), six illustrations of infants appeared across three full pages, (Fig. 9-11). The images, Bataille’s accompanying essay announced, had been reproduced from a late eighteenth-century album on teratology – an area of natural history concerned, as defined by the 1922 edition of *Larousse*, ‘with monsters’.<sup>263</sup> The original album, published by Nicolas-François and Geneviève Regnault under the title *Les Écarts de la nature, ou Recueil des principales monstruosités que la nature produit dans le genre animal* (1775) was held in the collections of Bataille’s place of work, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and featured forty-two full-page engravings depicting creatures suffering from bodily anomalies: a guineapig with two bodies, a horse with one eye, cats with two heads, a dog with six legs, a pair of conjoined deer, a pigeon with two beaks. Superimposed at the bottom of each illustration was

<sup>260</sup> ‘Pour avoir de beaux enfants : Le certificat pré-nuptial donnerait-il des garanties sérieuses aux époux ?’, *Paris-Soir* (4 December 1929); ‘Pour les parents qui ont des enfants à marier : Le Certificat Pré-nuptial assurera-t-il de beaux gosses ?’, *Le Midi* (5 December 1929).

<sup>261</sup> ‘Pour l’avenir : Il faut exiger le certificat pré-nuptial. Le Dr Pinard nous dit...’, *L’Intransigeant* (22 February 1930). ‘Le docteur Marcel Pinard, médecin de l’hôpital Cochin, vient de lancer par T.S.F., à tous les jeunes gens de France, un manifeste en faveur de la consultation pré-nuptiale.’; ‘Un appel aux jeunes gens en faveur de la consultation pré-nuptiale’, *Le Petit Parisien* (13 February 1930). ‘Le docteur Marcel Pinard, médecin de l’hôpital Cochin, adresse, sous le patronage de l’Office national d’hygiène sociale, un appel aux jeunes gens en faveur de la consultation médicale avant le mariage. ‘Jeunes gens qui veulent assurer l’avenir de votre foyer, conclut-il, avant de faire établir le contrat de mariage, faites établir le contrat de bonne santé.’ The same year, an entry for ‘Certificat Pré-nuptial’ appeared in *Larousse mensuel* (April 1930), quoting Pinard’s 1926 proposal.

<sup>262</sup> ‘L’examen pré-nuptial est créé’, *L’Œuvre* (3 June 1930); ‘Vers le certificat pré-nuptial’, *Le Journal* (23 May 1930); Carol, 326-329.

<sup>263</sup> ‘TÉRATOLOGIE’, *Petit Larousse illustré*, edited by Claude Augé (Paris: Larousse, 1922), 979. ‘Partie de l’histoire naturelle qui traite des monstres’.

a short description of the case at hand, detailing different defuncts and deformations. Although the Regnaults' teratological album featured various species – humans, both young and old, as well as animals – the images selected for print in *Documents* were only of children. More specifically, as announced by their captions, they displayed 'monstruous' children, victims of infant mortality or stillborn. Their symptoms varied: missing body parts, conjoined twins, and even a *semi-acephalic* child, born – as the description tells – 'sans cerveau'.

The crux of Bataille's essay was, he explained, 'the fact that, in one way or another, in one period or another, mankind cannot remain indifferent to its monsters.'<sup>264</sup> Composing a genealogy of sorts, Bataille subsequently delineates various historical articulations of this impossibility to remain neutral to 'monsters' and its function within that paradigm's structuring of the social. 'In the sixteenth century', he wrote, 'a kind of religious curiosity, due in part to the habit of living at the mercy of the most terrible scourges, was still mixed with a curious silliness. Books devoted to Siamese twins and to two-headed calves were very common'. 'In the eighteenth century', Bataille continued, 'the interest in monsters could be attributed to an alleged scientific curiosity.' As an example of the latter, Bataille states that the 'luxurious album of engraved and coloured illustrations by Regnault,' however, 'bears witness to a fairly superficial concern for information.'<sup>265</sup>

After establishing the consistency of the human interest in 'deviations', Bataille went on to tackle the relation between what is viewed as *natural* and what is viewed as *deviating* or *monstrous*. Rather than conceptualising these as opposing entities, defined by each other's negative image, Bataille suggests that they are interweaved, the latter lurking within the former. In fact, he proclaims, the supposedly natural is 'incontestably responsible' for the monstrous:

And, if one can speak of a *dialectic of forms*, it is evident that it is essential to take into account deviations for which nature – even if they are most often determined to be against nature – is incontestably responsible. On a practical level this impression of incongruity is elementary and constant: it is possible to state that it manifests itself to a certain degree in the presence of any given human individual. But it is barely perceptible. That is why it is preferable to refer to monsters in order to determine it.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Georges Bataille, 'The Deviations of Nature,' 53-55.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

No longer safely contained by a clear-cut, antithetical relation to the natural, monstrous deviation is, Bataille concludes, ‘literally overwhelming’: ‘Nothing is seen that arouses the human spirit more, that ravishes the senses more, that horrifies more, that provokes terror to a greater extent among creatures...’<sup>267</sup>

Within the deconstructive interpretation of *Documents*’ work, as we will see, the journal’s treatment of the monstrous tends to be abstracted to a linguistic terrain, where it is read as an effort to enact a semantic destabilisation by exceeding the limits of the term. Once returned to the visual culture of interwar France, however, once re-historicised and re-contextualised, the critical strategy emerging is one that hinges not on an ability to sabotage signification or communication but, on by contrary, on the *legibility* of the anxiety-laced currency the motif of the child carried in interwar culture, radically repurposed by *Documents* to disruptive ends.

### *Interpreting the Monstruous*

Taken as an important, early articulation of Bataille’s critique of Hegelian dialectics, ‘Les écarts de la nature’ is probably the text, after the short dictionary-entry on ‘Formless’, that has enjoyed the most prominent after-life amongst his *Documents*-contributions. Already in 1963, as part of *Critique*’s ‘Hommage à Georges Bataille’-issue, published the year after his death, Raymond Queneau identified the essay as an example of Bataille positioning himself as an ‘anti-Hegelian’.<sup>268</sup> ‘Les écarts de la nature’ has therefore been broadly studied, in particular by thinkers interested in inserting Bataille’s œuvre in a deconstructionist lineage. Indeed, Derrida too rejected Hegel. Writing in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida explains that Hegel ‘undoubtedly summed up the entire philosophy of the *logos*.’<sup>269</sup> Later, Derrida added: ‘If there were a definition of *différance*, it would be precisely the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the Hegelian dialectical synthesis *wherever* it operates.’<sup>270</sup>

In 1971, when Rodolphe Gasché turned to the monsters of ‘Les écarts de la nature’ as part of another, posthumous special issue on Bataille, this time published by the deconstructionist-

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>268</sup> Raymond Queneau, ‘Premières confrontations avec Hegel,’ *Critique*, No. 195-196, (Autumn, 1963): 694. ‘Georges Bataille, qui fit des études d’archiviste et non de philosophe, se confronte avec Hegel, dès ses premiers articles de *Documents*, en 1929. Il s’y affirme aussitôt anti-hégélien’.

<sup>269</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 24.

<sup>270</sup> Derrida, *Positions*, 40.

adjacent, *L'Arc*, he explained that they – ‘having violently projected their meaning outside of themselves’ – reveal a ‘*dialectic of forms*’ that ‘contrary to that of Hegel, is not a movement of synthesis’.<sup>271</sup> In the hands of Bataille, Gasché explains, ‘the dialectic, if we may call it such, describes an opposed movement.’ ‘It marches backwards,’ he continues, in ‘the direction of monsters, revealing nature as an exercise of deviations and itself essentially discarded.’<sup>272</sup> ‘This is why these monstrosities are ‘literally overwhelming’, Gasché concludes: ‘They make words wobble.’<sup>273</sup> In 1978, Gasché reiterated his deconstructionist identification of the monstrous. Disrupting all taxonomical efforts, set ‘to organize the diverse splinters of totality in such a way that the whole (...) becomes (once again) transparent,’ these teratological monsters unveil nature as ‘broken up into a seething mass of differences that all differentiate themselves from and among one another and remain irreducible to each other.’<sup>274</sup>

Similarly endowing ‘monstrosity’ a capacity to interrupt and destabilise processes of classification, Denis Hollier, writing in *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (1984), explains that whilst ‘genus’ is defined ‘by reproduction’, monsters – ‘unexplainable discrepancies’ – deviate ‘from a genus and from that law of the genus – reproduction’. ‘The very definition of monster is that it eludes reproduction,’ he continues: ‘like Plato’s simulacrum it is neither copy nor model.’<sup>275</sup> Expanding on this idea in 1991, Hollier writes that ‘teratology (the deviation of nature)’ is not only ‘at the core’ of Bataille’s ‘aesthetic’, but more, amounts to ‘one of the decisive components of the aesthetic ideology of *Documents*.’ Thwarting ‘the reproduction of similarity, the engendering of the same by the same,’ this monstrous deviation produces, across the pages of *Documents*, ‘above all an anti-aesthetic of the untransposable (a resistance to aesthetic translation)’: ‘A failure of a failure’.<sup>276</sup>

The incommunicable status of the monstrous, possessing a criticality fuelled only by the ability to semantically unsettle, was subsequently picked up by Didi-Huberman in *La Ressemblance*

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<sup>271</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, ‘L’Avorton de la pensée,’ *L’Arc*, no. 44 (1971): 21-22. ‘Décisions capitales, figures sans têtes, ayant violemment projeté hors de soi leur sens, elles relèveraient de cette *dialectique des formes*, dont parle Bataille dans *Les écarts de la nature*. Cette dialectique, contrairement à celle de Hegel, n’est pas un mouvement de synthèse de contraires dans une identité relevée.’

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 22. ‘Chez Bataille la dialectique, si l’on peut dire, décrit un mouvement opposé. Elle marche à reculons. En direction des monstres, qui désignent la nature comme une pratique d’écarts et comme essentiellement écartée elle-même.’

<sup>273</sup> Ibid. ‘Voilà pourquoi aussi ces monstruosités sont ‘littéralement bouleversantes’. Elles font chanceler les mots.’ Gasché also adds: ‘En partie aussi ce travail faisant l’objet d’une communication au séminaire de M. Jacques Derrida sur la théorie du discours philosophique à ENS (1969-70)’ (11n1).

<sup>274</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, *Georges Bataille: Phenomenology and Phantasmatology*, trans. Roland Végsö (California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 108-109. In this book, Gasché characterises Bataille’s thought as ‘a phantasmology that is the product of the deconstruction of phenomenology.’ (285).

<sup>275</sup> Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 139-140.

<sup>276</sup> Hollier, ‘The Use-Value of the Impossible,’ 20.

*informe*. The teratological illustrations reproduced in *Documents*, displaying an ‘anthropomorphism affected – at once opened and crushed – by the powers of the formless’, Didi-Huberman elaborated, unveils a disruptive ‘*paradox of resemblance*’.<sup>277</sup> Positing the two illustrations featuring conjoined twins as particularly pronounced examples, Didi-Huberman goes on to announce that, whilst the resemblance of twins is *perfect*, ‘in these cases, the resemblance has not been satisfied by such perfection, by such *conformitas*’.<sup>278</sup> Instead, ‘a sort of ‘epidemic’ of flesh becoming agglutination’ has been ‘brought into play, in its own development, in its own morphogenesis,’ by which ‘the admirable, double identity of twins’ becomes ‘a single monstrous body’.<sup>279</sup> The ‘*grand paradoxe à méditer*’, thus, is a ‘resemblance’, Didi-Huberman argues, ‘so strong that it has crushed the two bodies, one on top of the other, into a single material, from then on monstrous’; a ‘resemblance’ that is ‘so strong’ it ‘has become dissemblance’; a ‘resemblance so strong that the ‘human form’ is discarded from itself’.<sup>280</sup> The ‘theoretical richness’ of ‘these images’ thus resides in their ability to ‘introduce us to the ‘dialectic’ nature,’ Didi-Huberman writes, ‘of the *operation of the formless* envisioned precisely as excess of forms, excess in form’.<sup>281</sup> Bringing ‘encroachment’ to ‘the foreground of the *representation* itself,’ ‘images lose their dignity as communicable signs’, posing, in the end, only as ‘symptom’.<sup>282</sup> *Documents*, across which ‘a veritable *symptomology of forms*’ can be found, Didi-Huberman announces, thus worked to ‘*exceed iconographical thought*’.<sup>283</sup>

In the 1997, Krauss too turned to the teratological monsters reproduced in *Documents*.<sup>284</sup> ‘Bataille is interested in this splitting apart of meaning from within’, she writes: ‘How this might occur (...) is sketched in Bataille’s short essay “The Deviations of Nature”. “The inevitable production of the monstrous, or the heterogenous,” Krauss continues, ‘is the force that creates nonlogical

<sup>277</sup> Didi-Huberman, 147, 151. ‘anthropomorphisme atteint – tout à la fois ouvert et écrasé – par les pouvoirs de l’informe (...) *paradoxes de la ressemblance*’.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 152. ‘Mais, en ce cas précis, la ressemblance ne s’est pas contentée d’une telle perfection, d’une telle *conformitas*’.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 152. ‘elle a fait intervenir, dans son propre développement, dans sa propre morphogénèse, un contact matériel, une sorte ‘d’épidémie’ de chair devenue agglutination (...) l’identité double et admirable des jumeaux devient la conglomération d’un unique corps monstrueux, un corps de *siamois*.’

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 152. ‘La ressemblance a été si forte que l’organisme est devenue dissemblable : tel est le grand paradoxe à méditer. La ressemblance a été si forte que la ‘Figure humaine’ s’est écartée d’elle-même.’

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 153. ‘Insistons de nouveau sur la richesse théorique de ces exemples, de ces images : ils nous introduisent à la nature ‘dialectique’ – mot employé par Bataille lui-même dans son article, mot sur lequel il nous faudra évidemment revenir – du *processus de l’informe* envisagé précisément comme excès des formes, excès dans les formes’.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 310. ‘exhibant l’*empiètement* des figures en avant-plan de la *représentation* même, elle semble faire perdre aux images leur dignité de signes communicables, et ne se donne pour finie que comme le symptôme’.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 371, 417. ‘Les formes du symptomal se repèrent, en deuxième lieu, dans tous ces textes de Bataille écrits pour *Documents*, à travers ce qu’on pourrait nommer une véritable *symptomologie des formes* elles-mêmes. (...) *Documents* (...) menait en France un travail de *dépassement de la pensée iconographique*’.

<sup>284</sup> The role of Hegel, and Bataille’s relationship to his thought, is central to the conflict between Krauss and Didi-Huberman. In *Formless: A User’s Guide*, Bois and Krauss lament Didi-Huberman’s equation of Bataille’s critical thought with that of dialectics: ‘Bataille is not Hegelian: but is he dialectical? (...) We think not, and therein lies one of our two fundamental disagreements with Georges Didi-Huberman’s *La Ressemblance informe*’ (69).

difference out of the categories that are constructed to manage difference logically.’ ‘The other word,’ she announces:

to which Bataille turned to evoke this process of ‘deviance’ was *informe*, a declassing in every sense of the term: in the separation between space and time (pulse); in the systems of spatial mapping (horizontalization, the production of the lower-than-low); in the qualifications of matter (base materialism); in the structural order of systems (entropy).<sup>285</sup>

As such, the ‘legacy’ and ‘destiny’ of ‘the *formless*’, projected beyond *Documents* and onto the avant-garde at large, Krauss concludes, is ‘partly that of liberating our thinking from the semantic’.<sup>286</sup>

Evidenced by this brief survey, the monstrous children of ‘Les écarts de la nature’ tend to be transposed, especially by those keen to portray Bataille as a (proto-)deconstructionist, to a textual sphere, where they – similarly to Derrida’s *différance* – unsettle any attempt at closure or semiosis. ‘This is why these monstrosities are ‘literally overwhelming’, Gasché wrote: ‘They make words wobble.’<sup>287</sup> They are, to paraphrase Didi-Huberman, not communicable or legible signs but, on the contrary, *symptoms* enacting an operation ‘entirely heterogenous to signification.’<sup>288</sup> They work, in Krauss’ words, to ‘liberate our thinking from the semantic’.<sup>289</sup> Once more, thus, as Bataillean *excess* morphs into Derridean *écriture*, its critical force is limited to a linguistic level, far removed from the materiality of lived experience. If returned to the visual culture of interwar France and reinterpreted through Peircean semiotics, however, if recontextualised and rehistoricised, an alternative avant-garde strategy soon emerges across the pages of *Documents*.

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<sup>285</sup> Bois and Krauss, 245, 251, 252.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 252. This is also an attempt to separate ‘formless’ from another influential concept – *abject* – by emphasising ‘formless’ as ejected from the material reality: ‘abjection’, in producing a thematics of essences and substances, stands in absolute contradiction to the idea of the *formless*. (...) Bataille is interested in (...) the inevitable waste of the meaning system, the stuff that is no longer recyclable by the great processes of assimilation’ - whether ‘intellectual’ or ‘social’. (245). For a further account of Bois and Krauss’ rejection of the abject on the basis of its reliance on ‘reality’, see also: Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, and Helen Molesworth, ‘The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the ‘Informe’ and the Abject,’ *October* 67 (1994): 3–21.

<sup>287</sup> Gasché, ‘L’Avorton de la pensée,’ 21–22.

<sup>288</sup> Didi-Huberman, 307.

<sup>289</sup> Bois and Krauss, 252.

## *Contextualising the Monstruous*

As we have seen, the motif of the child – fuelled by deep-set convictions that France, plagued by plummeting birth rates, was on the verge of becoming depopulated – was used extensively and repetitively in the visual culture of interwar France, posing as a charged sign in political as well as popular discourse. Indeed, conditioned by such unshakable conviction, French eugenicist discourse too anchored its rhetoric in this anguished terrain, promoting – unlike their European counterparts – not the restriction of ‘unwanted’ births but instead the cultivation of ‘healthy and beautiful babies’.<sup>290</sup> In *Documents*, these Third Republican anxieties were foregrounded and agitated. In the hands of the dissident journal, subversively prodding and pressurising national fears, the *future of France* – taken to be allegorically anticipated in the image of the infant – was not only predicted to be weak and fragile, plagued by physical pathologies, but worse, *monstruous*.

Further attesting the communicability of the motif, and thus sharpening the critical focus of *Documents*’ avant-garde gesture, Bataille’s accompanying essay mounted a pointed critique against the eugenic logic. Identifying eugenics as a contemporary manifestation of humanity’s interest in monstrosity, Bataille turned to expose a methodological error looming within its rationale, with specific reference to its founder, Francis Galton, and his method of composite photography. ‘The composite images that Galton achieved through successive exposures of analogous but different faces, on the same piece of photographic film, are well known,’ Bataille writes: ‘From the faces of four hundred male American students, one obtains the typical face of the American student.’<sup>291</sup> On ‘the relation between the composite image and its components’, however, Bataille notes:

the first was necessarily more beautiful than the average example of the others; thus twenty mediocre faces constitute a beautiful face, and one obtains without difficulty faces whose proportions are very nearly those of Hermes of Praxiteles. The composite image would thus give a kind of reality to the necessarily beautiful Platonic idea. At the same time, beauty would be at the mercy of a definition as classical as that of the common measure. But each

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<sup>290</sup> Perrier, 1-2.

<sup>291</sup> Bataille, ‘The Deviations of Nature’.

individual form escapes this common measure and is, to a certain degree, a monster.<sup>292</sup>

‘It is useful to observe here,’ Bataille writes:

that the constitution of the perfect *type* with the aid of composite photography is not very mysterious. In fact, if one photographs a large number of similarly sized but differently shaped pebbles, it is impossible to obtain anything other than a sphere: in other words, a geometric figure. It is enough to note that a common measure necessarily approaches the regularity of geometric forms. Monsters thus would be the dialectical opposites of geometric regularity, in the same manner as individual forms, but in an irreducible way.<sup>293</sup>

Seeking to ‘give a kind of reality to the necessarily beautiful Platonic idea’, to achieve a ‘perfect *type*’, eugenics – blinded by impossible idealism – ends up, unwittingly, achieving the opposite effect: to call attention to and accentuate the monstrous lurking within ‘any given human individual’, to posit, therefore, all of humanity as a deviation. As Bataille explains: ‘each individual escapes this common measure and is, to a certain degree, a monster.’<sup>294</sup> Defined against the grain of its contemporary promoters, eugenics is unveiled as an operation through which only ‘the common character of personal incongruity and the monster can be expressed with precision.’<sup>295</sup> In the hands of *Documents*, thus, the ultra-utopian rationale of eugenics, setting out – in Pinard’s own words – to ‘improve the species’, is subversively inverted, unveiled as a programme that, in the end, affirms precisely that which Pinard’s *certificat prenuptial* sought to eugenically eradicate, that is, the heterogenous, excessive, and irrecoverable monstrousness at the heart of human existence.

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With its *positive* emphasis on care and health, the neo-Lamarckian theory of heredity helped bridge the Pinardian cluster of pronatalist eugenics with the longstanding and powerful hygienist discourse. In the Third Republic, Schneider writes, ‘virtually all those interested in improving the

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

human condition could be considered eugenicists if they thought that improvements were passed hereditarily to subsequent generations.<sup>296</sup> It is no surprise, then, that Léon Bourgeois – instigator of the first anti-tuberculosis legislation in 1916 and founding member of the *Comité national de défense contre la tuberculose* – was endowed with the first honorary presidency of the French Eugenics Society.<sup>297</sup>

The discursive merge between eugenics, pronatalism, and Third Republican hygienicism is materialised in Pinard's 1925 publication, *À la Jeunesse: Pour l'avenir de la race française*. Indeed, whilst addressing the French youth as the genetically pliable gatekeepers to the 'future of the French race', Pinard also returned to those well-rehearsed 'lessons' of the anti-tuberculosis campaigns, positing spittle, dust, and flies as a danger to the species. 'Jeunes filles et jeunes gens,' Pinard announced, there are 'two principal duties that we have to fulfil'.<sup>298</sup> The first task is that of staying healthy and working hard. '*Mens sana in corpore sano*', writes Pinard, thus mobilising the Latin proverb, sharply satirised by Leiris in *Documents*' dictionary-definition of 'Hygiene' (2:1930), as seen at the very start of this chapter. The second task, Pinard continued: 'all healthy adults must reproduce.'<sup>299</sup> Hailing eugenics as 'the new science that has as its goal to research and educate that which is necessary and indispensable to *breed well*,' Pinard turned to remind French youth of the fact that their 'biological capital' will be transmitted onto their offspring, and thus of the importance of choosing 'the most developed, healthy, vigorous, and beautiful' partner: 'what is essential is to avoid feeble offspring, malformed or flawed'.<sup>300</sup> When Pinard subsequently identified 'the agents of degradation', tuberculosis – alongside venereal disease and alcoholism – was framed as the primary threat to the feeble health and strength of France: 'numerous organic malformations stem from the toxic action of the tuberculosis bacillus.' Therefore, Pinard explained, 'we must follow the rules of hygiene': 'clean and aerated premises, prohibition against

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<sup>296</sup> Schneider, *Quantity and Quality*, 89-92.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>298</sup> Adolphe Pinard, *À la Jeunesse: Pour l'avenir de la race française*, (Ligue nationale française contre le péril vénérien, 1925), 3. Bibliothèque nationale de France, NUMM-5447874. 'Jeunes filles et jeunes gens, issus de parents sains et bien portants, vous voilà admirablement préparés pour accomplir le premier de deux principaux devoirs que nous avons à remplir'.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid. 'tout être humain adulte et sain doit *se reproduire*'.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid. '*L'Eugénétique*, c'est-à-dire la science nouvelle qui a pour but de rechercher et d'enseigner ce qui est nécessaire et indispensable pour *bien engendrer*' (17); 'vous transmettez à vos descendants le capital biologique (...). Lorsqu'ils veulent conserver et améliorer une race, ils choisissent les reproducteurs des deux sexes les mieux développés, les plus sains, les plus vigoureux, les plus beaux (...). Mais, ce qui est capital, c'est l'absence de rejetons faibles, mal développés ou tarés, c'est ensuite la naissance de produits pourvus de tous les caractères de leurs parents, c'est-à-dire sains et vigoureux' (3-4).

spitting, protection of food from dust and flies, etc...<sup>301</sup> ‘It is only through these conditions,’ Pinard concluded, ‘that the safeguarding of the French race will be constituted.’<sup>302</sup>

A prime example of how this discursive merge materialised in the visual culture of interwar France is the well-disseminated advertisements for Cadum soap featuring the healthiest of children in French visual culture: the *bébé Cadum*, (Fig. 42). Although this character first appeared in 1912, its real fame came in the interwar years, when a large publicity campaign made it a figure in everyday life, posing as a symbol of national defiance against national decline. In 1925, as Pinard’s *À la Jeunesse* appeared in print, a gigantic Cadum advertisement was mounted on the Hôtel Scribe in the ninth arrondissement. The poster, covering 1070 m<sup>2</sup> in total, was up for more than six months, gracing the Haussmannian façade with a seventeen-meter-long smiling face of the *bébé Cadum*.<sup>303</sup> As a result of its prominent place in French visual culture, it became a frequent reference within avant-garde circles too. In *La Liberté ou l’amour!* (1927), Robert Desnos tested the strength of the *bébé Cadum* in an envisioned battle played out in the streets of Paris between the soap-ad character and *Bibendum*.<sup>304</sup> Even Walter Benjamin wrote of the rosy-cheeked infant in his monumental *The Arcades Project*.<sup>305</sup> As seen at the start of this chapter, when Leiris defined ‘Hygiene’ in the *Documents*-dictionary, he satirically declared: ‘everyone will soon be moral, thanks to Cadum soap’.<sup>306</sup>

In the visual culture of interwar France, the motifs examined in this chapter – *spittle, dust, flies*, and, lastly, the *child* – were part of an interconnected web of signs, mobilised as part of an overarching Third Republican project to regenerate a fragile France. When these signs were re-disseminated in *Documents*, as this chapter has demonstrated, it was as part of a critique of such project – be that the Pasteurian urge to eliminate debilitating microbes or a eugenic strive to ‘preserve and improve the species’.<sup>307</sup> Once re-inserted into the visual culture of interwar France and reinterpreted through Peircean semiotics, then, a critical strategy, very different from that

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 9, 15. ‘Je vais, maintenant, m’efforcer de mettre en relief les agents de cette dégradation. (...) nombre de malformations organiques ont pour origine l’action toxique du bacille tuberculeux. (...) La tuberculose est **évitabile** ; il faut pour cela observer les règles de l’hygiène (...) propreté et aération des locaux, défense de cracher, préservation des aliments contre les poussières et contre les mouches, etc.’

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 20. ‘Oui, nous voulons, nous, puériculteurs, que la *procréation soit éclairée*. Nous voulons que les *procréateurs soient conscients de leur responsabilité*. C’est dans ces conditions seulement que sera constituée la sauvegarde de la Race française.’

<sup>303</sup> Eric Vergnaud, *Un siècle de personnages publicitaires* (Paris: Paris Bibliothèques, 1999), 140-146.

<sup>304</sup> Robert Desnos, *La Liberté ou l’amour!* (Paris: Aux Éditions du Sagittaire, 1927).

<sup>305</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 82. The *bébé Cadum* also featured in e.g.: Blaise Cendrars, ‘Hôtel Notre-Dame’ (1919); Fernand Léger, ‘La rue: objets, spectacles’ (1928); André Sauvage, *Études de Paris* (1928); as well as in the film *Entr’acte* (1924). For a discussion of the latter, see Patrick de Haas, *Cinéma absolu: avant-garde, 1920-1930* (Paris: Métay Éditions, 2018), 586-588.

<sup>306</sup> Leiris, ‘Hygiene’.

<sup>307</sup> Pinard, ‘De la conservation et de l’amélioration de l’espèce’.

identified in the deconstructionist reading of *Documents*, emerges: a strategy that did not seek to sabotage meaning-production but to critically participate in such cultural processes; a strategy whose criticality stemmed not from an unveiling of the ‘undecidability’ of signs but, on the contrary, from subversive re-dissemination of the charged currencies those signs carried in culture. Highlighting and re-circulating signs that agitated deep-seated Third Republican anxieties concerning the seemingly feeble health and strength of France, the journal not only sabotaged and undermined its idealist identity of order, stability, and progress, carefully crafted through official discourse, but critically re-defined it, added to and altered it, forcing a different self-image altogether: a base-France, depasteurised and monstrous.

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In the interwar period, another marker of French decline emerged: *America*. Indeed, whilst leaving much of Europe decimated, the United States emerged from the war, Frank Costigliola writes, ‘as the world’s leading nation.’<sup>308</sup> Perceived as a particularly prominent articulation of U.S. dominance on the world stage was the rapid spread of Hollywood films. In 1929, when the first American *talking films* screened in Parisian cinemas, therefore, a loud debate ensued, dystopically envisioning its anticipated impact on French culture and identity across both political and popular discourse. The next chapter will examine ways in which *Documents* critically intervened in such infected debates to subversive, avant-garde ends.

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<sup>308</sup> Costigliola, 15.

## Chapter Two: *Documents* and the Hollywood Talkie

In the fifth issue of *Documents*' first year (1929), a definition of 'Talkie' was published in the journal's 'Critical Dictionary'. Alongside the American poster for *Our Dancing Daughters*, a talking film featuring Joan Crawford and Anita Page, as well as a still from *Weary River*, another early talkie starring Betty Compson, (Fig. 43), the entry, written by Michel Leiris, embraced the new sound technology which had begun to arrive from Hollywood earlier the same year, to the anguish of the French establishment as well as Paris' cinematic avant-garde:

After a certain number of sound movies – at least one of which, *Our Dancing Daughters*, will certainly mark an important date in the history of cinema, not so much for technical reasons as because it signals the appearance of a totally new form of sentimentality in films, with the charm of an easy life, unspoiled by any concern other than to show protagonists of a sparkling youth and grace – here at last we have a real talkie, with retorts rebounding back and forth that sometimes add a sort of vocal close-up to the visual close-up. The English language is the language of *love*, such is the great lesson of *Weary River* (...). The narrow-minded have not failed in their grubby task with respect to talkies, warning of disaster, like they always do, in this case the end of cinema. Such a film gives the lie to them peremptorily despite its weaknesses, since what saves it is not so much a visual image here or there as the role played by the voices in it. Which shows why talkies are interesting. Thanks, then, to these talking films, from which we should expect everything (as *Weary River* has demonstrated), we can at last allow ourselves to be possessed body and soul by scenes of ardent sensuality, cast adrift on the raft of voices while everything collapses around us (...).<sup>1</sup>

When the first talking films arrived in Parisian cinemas in the late twenties, the French reaction was far from faint. To the prevailing cinematic avant-garde, the modern sound technology

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<sup>1</sup> Leiris, 'Talkie,' 82-83.

impaired the artistic purpose of film, poisoning its visual language and forcing the medium to regress to its earlier state of filmed theatre. In the 1929 words of the experimental filmmaker, René Clair: 'It is too late for those who love the art of moving pictures to deplore the effects of this barbaric invasion.'<sup>2</sup> The Third Republican establishment too was provoked. The novel noise echoing across French theatres was not only talking voices but talking *American* voices and, as such, talkies were perceived as painful signifiers of American domination. In 1930, the Republican politician, Édouard Herriot, warned of a future where 'Jeanne d'Arc is in danger of being represented by a young Californian'.<sup>3</sup> The same year, the writer, René Jeanne, anxiously announced: 'in six months, all those people who are interested in film will speak American.'<sup>4</sup>

Fleshing out the critical currencies that this sign – the talkie – carried in interwar France, this chapter explores ways in which the dissident journal *Documents* strategically re-disseminated such anguished significance to subversive ends. Part One, 'Hollywood, Americanisation, and the Arrival of Talking Films in Interwar France', situates the arrival of talkies, and the French reaction it engendered, within a longer discourse of French anti-Americanism that, as we will see, reached an embittered peak in the interwar period. The 'invasion of American films', Yvon Delbos announced to the Chamber of Deputies in 1929, 'is a moral invasion against which we must react'. 'The threat', he added, 'is further escalated with talking film. Because, this time, they do not only attack our ideas, but our language too.'<sup>5</sup> To the French establishment, thus, the motif of talking film loomed as concentrated signifier of a deplorable yet seemingly inevitable Americanisation of France, and therefore, as a painful manifestation of French loss after the First World War. When *Documents* entered the debate, publishing across the fifteen issues appearing between 1929 and 1931 numerous references to Hollywood talkies, the social and political tension surrounding the new sound technology was eagerly exploited, the charged terrain it inhabited in interwar France was mined for avant-garde purposes. In the hands of the dissident journal, talking film was framed not as a menacing vehicle of offensive but inescapable Americanisation, damaging and destabilising France and its national identity, but, on the contrary, as a liberating corrective to a 'narrow-minded' modernity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> René Clair, *Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Vera Trail (London: W. Kimber, 1953), 90.

<sup>3</sup> Édouard Herriot, *The United States of Europe*, trans. Reginald J. Dingle (London: G. G. Harrap, 1930), 219.

<sup>4</sup> René Jeanne, 'L'Invasion cinématographique américaine,' *Revue des deux mondes*, vol. 55, no. 4 (15 February 1930): 878. 'Le film parlant ne nous retirera en France aucun débouché, car dans six mois, tous ceux qui s'intéressent au cinéma parleront américain !'

<sup>5</sup> '2e séance du 9 Décembre 1929,' 4174-4175. 'Messieurs, je veux appeler votre attention sur la crise que traverse l'art cinématographique français. M. Gaston-Gérard y a fait allusion et il a manifesté de justes inquiétudes sur l'invasion des films américains (...) il y a là une invasion morale contre laquelle il faut réagir. (...) La menace s'accroît encore avec le film sonore et parlant. Car, cette fois, on ne s'attaque pas seulement à nos idées, mais aussi à notre langue.'

<sup>6</sup> Leiris, 'Talkie,' 83.

Part Two, 'A 'barbaric invasion': Talkies and the Cinematic Avant-Garde in Interwar Paris', continues to unpack the criticality of *Documents'* embrace of the Hollywood talkie by historicising it against another background, that of the cinematic avant-garde circles in interwar Paris. Indeed, albeit for a different set of reasons, the cinematic avant-garde too rejected the new filmic format as it arrived from America at the end of the 1920s. The extra-cinematic excess of speech, traditionally housed in the domain of theatre, would, they feared, transgress its medium-specific domain, and destabilise its long-fought-for identity as an autonomous artform, forcing what was felt as an atavistic regression to the medium's earlier pre-war state of filmed theatre. Inverting such lofty discourse, well-disseminated across both specialised and popular press in interwar France, *Documents* subversively eulogised precisely those elements that troubled the cinematic avant-garde: the excessive impurity, uncurbed theatricality, and radical lack of elevation, framing the new sound technology as a necessarily noisy antidote to a culture plagued by 'seriousness, nobility, morality'.<sup>7</sup> In interwar France, thus, *Documents'* embrace of the Hollywood talkie amounted to a double-edged sword, capable of challenging, at once, the official Third Republic and the prevailing avant-garde circles in Paris, subversively unifying them in their seemingly shared concerns with preserving a neatly glorified self-image.

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<sup>7</sup> Leiris, 'Fox Movietone Follies of 1929'.

## Hollywood, Americanisation, and the Arrival of Talking Films in Interwar France

### *Anti-Americanism in Interwar France*

Talking films arrived in Paris, from Hollywood, at a time of acute French mistrust of anything and everything American.<sup>8</sup> Although French anti-American sentiments had a longer history, with formative roots in the eighteenth century and an increasing sense of wariness towards the rapidly rising nation of the New World, it was the devastating experience of the First World War that pushed such apprehensive attitudes to the forefront of French consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, while Europe had been left shell-shocked and in ruins, the Americans, entering the war in 1917, seemed to have come away from the battlefield comparatively unscathed.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, when the U.S. authorities, immediately after the armistice, turned to remind France of their duty to repay, with interest, the hefty war loans liberally floated to them by the Americans during the hostilities, the French – who had not only suffered the most casualties, but also emptied their reserves – grew increasingly mistrustful of their ally.<sup>11</sup> Since France had already paid a much higher price for the victory, monetary as well as material, the Americans, they argued, should view the loans as war expenditure and cancel the accumulated debt. In any case, the French were not going to settle on a repayment plan without receiving a guarantee that reparations would be paid by the Germans, as agreed in the Versailles Treaty of 1919. Despite the 1922 formation of an American

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<sup>8</sup> Whilst films such as *Ombres Blanches* (MGM), shot silent and upgraded with a postsynchronised soundtrack, premiered in Paris in November 1928, the film discursively identified with the arrival of talkies was *The Jazz Singer*, first to include direct-recorded dialogue scenes. The latter premiered in Paris in January 1929.

<sup>9</sup> The literature on French anti-Americanism is vast, see e.g.: Strauss, *Menace in the West*; Roger, *The American Enemy*. According to Roger, the eighteenth-century scientist, Georges-Louis Buffon was the central in promoting the widespread idea that the New World was deficient. (1-29).

<sup>10</sup> See e.g.: Georges Clémenceau, *Grandeurs et misères d'une victoire* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1930). 'Votre intervention dans la guerre, qui vous fut clémente, puisqu'elle ne vous prit que 56 000 vies humaines au lieu de nos 1 364 000 tués (Il faut y ajouter 740 000 mutilés, 3 millions de blessés)' (133).

<sup>11</sup> See e.g.: Benjamin D. Rhodes, 'Reassessing 'Uncle Shylock': The United States and the French War Debt, 1917-1929,' *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (March 1969): 787-803; Denise Artaud, 'Reparations and war debts: the restoration of French financial power, 1919-1929,' in *French Foreign Defence Policy, 1918-1940: The Decline and Fall of a Great Power*, edited by Robert Boyce (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 88-105.

World War Foreign Debt Commission, instructed to collect the loans within twenty-five years at an interest rate of 4.25, France continued to refuse negotiations on repayment.<sup>12</sup>

Concerns around the American agenda only seeped further in when the U.S.-designed Dawes Plan, signed in 1924, set to ease the thorny conflicts and aid restitution of German war reparations, seemed to undercut the French position, while emphasising Germany's industrial superiority and maximising American influence on the European continent.<sup>13</sup> With the franc radically depreciating, however, after having been taken off the gold standard during the war, France's financial situation grew increasingly untenable.<sup>14</sup> When the newly elected President Coolidge, frustrated with France's stubborn refusal acknowledge their debt, responded by denying any further American loans, the French were eventually forced to cave. In 1926, as the franc reached an all-time low, the *accord Mellon-Bérenger* was signed, agreeing to the payment of just over four billion dollars across a period of sixty-two years.<sup>15</sup>

Vexations soon surfaced in French newspapers. 'We are not fools,' wrote *L'Intransigeant*: 'That which has been deemed inapplicable to the vanquished, one imposes on the vanquisher. Is this in punishment of their victory?'<sup>16</sup> Deploring the French 'volte-face', *L'Homme libre*, in turn, described the *accord* as a 'capitulation' and 'national disgrace' that would 'place the noose around the neck of numerous generations'.<sup>17</sup> On 11 July, twenty-five thousand war veterans took to the streets, marching in protest of the repayment plan. The manifestation, reported in all major newspapers, featured a placard asking the Americans to reconsider the agreement to avoid 'the ruin of France and the loss of her independence'.<sup>18</sup> The following month, the French war-time prime minister, Clémenceau, even penned an open letter to Coolidge: 'Today, it is towards America that the anxiety of France finds itself principally orientated.' 'France', he added, 'is not for sale, not even to its friends.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Rhodes, 791-792.

<sup>13</sup> For an account of French reactions to the Dawes Plan, see e.g.: Costigliola, 110-139.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g.: Bernard and Dubief, chapter 9; Weber, *The Hollow Years*, chapter 2; Maurice Agulhon, *The French Republic*, 147-178.

<sup>15</sup> The accord, however, was not ratified until 1929. As an effect of the financial crash, Hoover established a one-year moratorium in 1931 that would suspend both the payment of German reparations to France and the payment of French debts to the US. On 15 December 1932, France unilaterally declared its payments suspended. For the rest of the decade, American Congress would recall, in vain, that France had obligations of repayment (Roger, 313-4).

<sup>16</sup> Léon Bailby, 'Payer, oui... mais quoi?', *L'Intransigeant* (28 April 1926): 1. 'Ce qui était jugé inapplicable au vaincu, on l'impose au vainqueur. Est-ce en châtement de sa victoire?'

<sup>17</sup> Eugène Lautier, 'Les dettes interalliées: Volte-Face,' *L'Homme libre* (7 October 1926): 1. 'une capitulation, et la chaîne mise au cou de plusieurs générations, bref, une honte nationale.'

<sup>18</sup> The placard was quoted in multiple newspapers e.g., *Le Petit Journal* (12 July 1926): 'Au-dessus de diplomaties, loin des combinaisons politiques et financières, les combattants de France s'adressent directement au peuple américain. Après les déceptions de la paix, ils ne veulent pas que les accords consacrent la ruine de France et la perte de son indépendance.'

<sup>19</sup> Georges Clémenceau, 'Lettre ouverte de M. Clémenceau au Président Coolidge,' in *Grandeurs et misères d'une victoire*, 369-372. 'Aujourd'hui, c'est du côté de l'Amérique que l'inquiétude de la France se trouve principalement orientée. (...) La France n'est pas à vendre, même à ses amis.'

Collapsing the image and idea of the Old World, within which France had viewed itself as of supreme stature, the Great War was widely represented as having paved the way for America to opportunistically emerge as new world leaders.<sup>20</sup> ‘Everything that Europe has lost, America has gained,’ wrote the soon-to-be prime minister of France, André Tardieu, in 1927: ‘Thanks to the war, America more than doubled her power and laid the foundation of a new empire. Thanks to the war, American prosperity, which in pre-war days was a proud boast, has grown in painful contrast to European distress.’<sup>21</sup> Bitterly culminating in the interwar period, French anti-Americanism was thus interweaved with and fuelled by an agonising acknowledgement of national decline.<sup>22</sup> American ascendancy became synonymous with French fragility. Indeed, as Clémenceau wrote in *Grandeurs et misères d’une victoire*, his aggrieved account of the conflictual aftermath of the Great War, published posthumously in 1930: ‘After making themselves rich on the war, America proceeded to ruin us’.<sup>23</sup>

Interwar France was soon swamped with anti-American literature from all sides of the political spectrum. In 1927, the leftist parliamentarian Jean-Louis Chastanet published *L’Oncle Shylock ou l’impérialisme américain à la conquête du monde*, scathingly positing America as the Shakespearian loan-shark: ‘One can dominate the entire world without conquering it. For, lending money to others is a way of dominating them. And it has lent money to the entire world.’<sup>24</sup> The same year, the sociologist André Siegfried published *Les États-Unis d’aujourd’hui*, in which a chapter, entitled ‘America: Creditor of the World’, explained: ‘Of one fact we are certain, and that is that in 1914 the Americans were in debt to Europe and now Europe is in debt to them.’<sup>25</sup>

A longstanding, central topos in French anti-Americanism, energetically revitalised in the emerging body of literature rapidly accumulating in the interwar period, was the perceived contrast between antithetical cultures: the traditional and dignified versus the rootless and hollow; the Old World versus the New World. In *Qui sera le maître, Europe ou Amérique ?* (1927), Lucien Romier – editor of the conservative newspaper *Le Figaro* – portrayed America as a materialist and money-driven culture, lacking ‘profound roots’ and a ‘taste for the immutable’.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Costigliola writes: ‘The United States emerged from the Great War as the world’s leading nation.’ (15). ‘The Great War destroyed centuries-old empires, decimated a generation of Europe’s youth, and ended that continent’s easy domination of the world.’ (25).

<sup>21</sup> Tardieu (1927), quoted in Roger, 306.

<sup>22</sup> Roger writes: ‘The rise of French anti-Americanism is tied to the bitter perception of national decline. (...) Uneasiness over France’s decline was lurking behind the accumulating maledictions of America.’ (277-278).

<sup>23</sup> Clémenceau, *Grandeurs et misères d’une victoire*, 285. ‘Après s’être enrichie par la guerre, l’Amérique entreprend de nous ruiner’.

<sup>24</sup> Chastanet (1927), quoted in Roger, 317.

<sup>25</sup> Siegfried (1927), quoted in *ibid.*, 306.

<sup>26</sup> Lucien Romier, *Qui sera le maître, Europe ou Amérique ?* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1927), 166-7. ‘L’existence américaine, sans racines profondes (...) elle exclut le goût de l’immuable’.

The most famous anti-Americanist treatise, however, so popular that the publisher ran one-hundred-and-fifty prints only in the first six months, was Georges Duhamel's *Scènes de la vie future* (1930). In it, Duhamel paints a dystopian picture. Not only was it clear that America had ascended as world leaders in the aftermath of the war, but as they exported their culture across the Atlantic, a weakened France, forced to submit to the reconfigured pecking order, was now being inundated with the hollow and mechanistic 'American spirit': 'no one can any longer doubt that their civilisation is nevertheless able to conquer the Old World and has begun to do so. America, then, represents to us the Future.'<sup>27</sup> 'Before twenty years have passed,' Duhamel prophesised, 'we shall be able to find all the stigmata of this devouring civilization on all the members of Europe': 'Behold, people of Europe, behold the new empire!'<sup>28</sup>

At the heart of this gloomy forecast, framed as a primary vehicle of the Americanisation of France, was Hollywood.<sup>29</sup> Already in 1924, the left-wing journalist and *cinéaste*, Léon Moussinac dismissed Hollywood as a symbol of all things deplorably and dangerously American, 'organised according to the principles of Ford'.<sup>30</sup> Six years later, in Duhamel's popular publication of 1930, as American films flooded the French market at an unprecedented rate, thus controlling an industry that prior to the war had been proudly dominated by the French, Hollywood was portrayed not only as a marker of 'the worst decadence' but as an imminent threat, invading and debasing French culture and identity. After describing American cinema as 'an industrialised luxury, made by soulless machines for a crowd whose own soul seems to be disappearing,' Duhamel went on to reflect:

They – but who, good heavens, are *they*? perhaps all of us – have allowed cinema to become a most powerful instrument for enforcing a uniform standard, alike in ethics, politics, and aesthetics. They have allowed the tidal wave of Hollywood to smother our whole country with its froth, and to choke forever the springs of an old and noble spiritual life.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Georges Duhamel, *America the Menace: Scenes from the Life of the Future*, trans. Charles Miner Thompson (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1931), xiv. Woodrow Wilson and his America wanted to help rebuilt Europe, but not at the expense of American economic prosperity. In fact, the Americans posited *commerce* as an ally of peace, or in Costigliola's words, 'prosperity as a solvent.' (Costigliola, 110). Similarly, Will Hays, head of the MPPDA, framed the European import of Hollywood film as a broker of social and political stability, stating that 'the only way to assure peace is to Americanize the thoughts, the language, and the souls of the inhabitants of 'little, old Europe.'" (Strauss, *Menace in the West*, 150).

<sup>28</sup> Duhamel, xiv, 215.

<sup>29</sup> See e.g.: Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (eds.), *Hollywood Abroad: Audiences and Cultural Exchange* (London: British Film Institute, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Léon Moussinac, 'Cinématographie,' *Mercure de France*, no. 627, vol. 173 (1 August 1924): 793. 'tout y a été organisé selon les principes de Ford. Et on s'est mis à fabriquer des films comme on construit en série un type d'automobile populaire.'

<sup>31</sup> Duhamel, 25, 40.

In interwar France, therefore, Hollywood loomed as a heightened motif in discourse, painfully signifying at once American dominance and French decay. Yet, the despair triggered by Hollywood was, as we will see, to be substantially amplified by the arrival of talking films at the end of the 1920s. Indeed, it was the symbolic stakes loaded within this sign, the charged currency of which had been generated through repeated use and circulation in culture, that made the talkie an ideal tool for avant-garde subversion, soon to be staged in the dissident Parisian journal *Documents*.

### *Inventing Cinema: France's Film Industry and the Effects of the First World War*

Film, of course, had been a French invention. In 1895, the Lumière brothers successfully recorded moving images for the first time using their groundbreaking technology, the *Lumière Cinématographe*. A decade later, permanent cinemas were constructed all over Paris. By 1908, French films were exhibited around the world in numbers greater than those of any other country, (Fig. 44).<sup>32</sup> Having 'unleashed a 'Pathé-mania' across continents', Susan Hayward writes, Pathé Studios 'sold twice as many films to North America as the entire U.S. film industry.'<sup>33</sup> To the French, therefore, cinema was more than a proud innovation. Following the humiliating defeat against Prussia in 1871, rigorously upending France's perceived self-image, the creation of a world-wide market dominance played a crucial role, symbolic as well as financial, in the re-invigoration of a French national identity.<sup>34</sup>

The French hegemony, however, was brief. With the declaration of war, France's film industry was paralysed. The Pathé filmstock factory at Vincennes was turned into a war plant and staff were called in for war duty. Production branches closed. Cinemas locked their doors. As it became clear that the war was going to be long-lasting, however, film theatres began to re-open with the official purpose of maintaining morale. With the French industry at a halt, the films screened were mostly imported, primarily from Hollywood, where production had continued as usual.<sup>35</sup> It was here, Richard Abel writes, as the war was raging on the French front, that 'the way was prepared for American invasion.'<sup>36</sup> It all began, Abel explains, in the spring of 1915, when

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema, 1896-1914* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 20.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915-1929* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 9. For a general account of Hollywood's dominance in the aftermath of the war, see e.g.: Kirstin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907-1934* (London: BFI Press, 1985); Andrew Higson and Richard Maltby (eds.), *Film Europe' and Film America': Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange, 1920-1939* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> Abel, *French Cinema*, 10.

the first Mack Sennett Keystone comedies – featuring Mabel Normand, Fatty Arbuckle, and Charlie Chaplin – were released in France. By the summer, the latter, nicknamed *Charlot*, was a national favourite.<sup>37</sup> At the end of the year, Pathé themselves had even begun to distribute American productions. By 1917, over half of the films exhibited in Paris were imported from Hollywood.<sup>38</sup>

The first explicit attempt to curb the influx of Hollywood films was presented in 1921, when France increased the tariff on imported American films. Soon deemed ineffective, the newly established *Comité de défense du Film Français* called for the immediate imposition of a quota system in 1922, set to reserve thirty-three percent of programming to French films.<sup>39</sup> The bid, *Ciné-Journal* enthusiastically reported, would ‘give French film the legitimate place that it should occupy on the screens of our country’.<sup>40</sup> Despite lowering their demands to a ratio of twenty-five percent in January of 1923, and gaining support from prominent distributors and filmmakers, the proposal was in the end rejected. The French film industry, deputy Arthur Levasseur stated, is not yet sufficiently strong ‘to ensure 25% of programming.’<sup>41</sup>

Failing to impede the rapid inflow, the crisis soon worsened. In 1924, eighty-five percent of films shown in France were American.<sup>42</sup> Calls for the urgent need to radically restrict the importation of foreign films soon echoed across French newspapers. In February of 1925, as part of a multi-pronged campaign effort, which included an open letter to Hollywood film producer, Adolph Zukor, Michel Carré, president of the *Société des auteurs de films*, published an article in *Comoedia*.<sup>43</sup> ‘*Quota, please!*’ pleaded Carré: ‘We are no longer masters in our own house! Our unanimous protestation cannot be without effect, and we will speak up louder if necessary.’<sup>44</sup> Still, no tangible undertakings were proposed by the authorities. Provoked by the inaction, appeals for

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<sup>37</sup> See e.g.: Libby Murphy, ‘Charlot français: Charlie Chaplin, The First World War, and the Construction of a National Hero,’ *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 14:4 (2010): 421-429.

<sup>38</sup> Abel, *French Cinema*, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Georges Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma, vol. 5: l’art muet, 1919-1929* (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1975), 27-31; Jens Ulf-Møller, *Hollywood’s Film Wars with France: Film-Trade Diplomacy and the Emergence of the French Film Quota Policy* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2001), 61.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Comité de défense du Film français,’ *Ciné-Journal* (18 February 1922): 18. ‘de donner au Film Français, la place légitime qu’il doit occuper sur les écrans de notre pays’.

<sup>41</sup> The debate was reprinted in ‘Le débat de la chambre sur la détaxation de cinémas,’ *La Cinématographe Française*, no. 221 (27 January 1923): 9-24. ‘Je ne crois pas que notre industrie soit enfin suffisante pour assurer 25% des programmes.’ (22).

The same issue comprised an open letter to the Senate, signed by the *Comité de défense du Film Français*, requesting the issue to be reopened while stating that Levasseur’s claim was ‘*completely incorrect*.’ (‘Une requête au Sénat pour le Film Français,’ 31-32).

<sup>42</sup> David Strauss, ‘The Rise of Anti-Americanism in France: French Intellectuals and the American Film Industry, 1927-1932,’ *Journal of Popular Culture* 10 (1977): 754. Sadoul writes: ‘Le gouvernement Poincaré, formé au début de 1923, resta sourd à cette protestation et, faute d’une protection, la crise du cinéma français s’aggrava beaucoup en 1923-1925’ (31).

<sup>43</sup> Michel Carré, ‘L’Amérique et nous : Précisions,’ *Comoedia* (6 February 1925): 4.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. ‘Nous ne sommes même plus les maîtres chez nous!... Notre protestation unanime ne peut manquer d’avoir d’écho et nous la ferons entendre plus haut s’il est nécessaire. (...) *Contingemment, s.v.p. !*

action continued to reverberate across most major French newspapers. Publishing questionnaires, asking politicians as well as filmmakers and actors to respond to the current situation, became a frequent phenomenon. When Charles Pathé himself, in a September 1926 interview, expressed his support for an import quota, describing it as ‘the only remedy (...) to our ills’<sup>45</sup>, Émile Vuillermoz, writing in *Le Temps* in October of 1926, thanked the French film mogul for his ‘unreserved adherence’ to the cause, explaining that ‘the invasion of our screens by transatlantic film is for French cinema a question of life and death.’<sup>46</sup>

### *Édouard Herriot’s 1928 Film-Quota: ‘Cinema was born in France, and French cinema must conquer the world’*

When the newly installed minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, Édouard Herriot, launched a commission set to study the current state of French film in the early months of 1927, the reaction from the press was characterised by a mixture of anticipation and frustration.<sup>47</sup> ‘So, what are we waiting for’, asked *Le Petit Journal*: ‘Let’s defend ourselves!’<sup>48</sup> Responding to an opinion poll published in *Paris-Midi*, the film director, Henri Diamant-Berger, announced: ‘American culture is not worthy of dominating the world and suffocating French culture, which would be equivalent to a regression of human intellect’. If he had been in charge, Diamant-Berger added, a quota system ‘would be imposed within twenty-four hours.’<sup>49</sup>

Herriot announced his plan of action to the Senate in November: ‘We must respond without delay to the anguished appeal (...). France will soon be colonised by foreign film, unless we intervene’. ‘It demands that which in one word is called’, he concluded, ‘the ‘quota’ of

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<sup>45</sup> Max Frantel, ‘Le Cinéma aux Européens,’ *Les Annales politiques et littéraires*, no. 2254 (5 September 1926): 253-4. ‘ici, en France, chez nous, il est un remède à nos maux’. The interview was reported on in numerous newspapers.

<sup>46</sup> Émile Vuillermoz, ‘Courier Cinématographique,’ *Le Temps* (2 October 1926). ‘l’invasion de nos écrans par le film transatlantique est pour le cinéma français une question de vie ou de mort. (...) Félicitons-nous de voir un professionnel de la valeur de M. Charles Pathé adhérer sans réserve à ce programme.’ For an account of Vuillermoz’s œuvre, see Pascal Manuel Heu, *Le Temps du cinéma : Émile Vuillermoz père de la critique cinématographique, 1910-1930* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003).

<sup>47</sup> Ulf-Møller, 86-88. The cinema commission met in the beginning of May.

<sup>48</sup> R. J., ‘En marge de l’écran : Défendons-nous !,’ *Le Petit Journal* (18 mars 1927). ‘Alors, qu’attendons-nous pour nous défendre ?’

<sup>49</sup> ‘Si vous étiez dictateur du cinéma...,’ *Paris-Midi* (10 July 1927). ‘La culture américaine n’est pas digne de dominer le monde et l’étouffement de la culture française par elle équivaudrait à un recul de l’intelligence humaine (...). J’imposerais dans les vingt-quatre heures le contingentement’.

importation.<sup>50</sup> 'Finally, we decide to take cinema seriously!' exclaimed *Le Petit Parisien*.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, in the left-wing newspaper *L'Œuvre*, Lucien Wahl satirised:

All this under the pretext of protecting a 'national' industry that, incapable of fighting on its own against the competition, comically appeals to the State for help. It therefore publicly admits its mediocrity and its insufficiency. Will the customs-officers tomorrow be charged to stop Charlot at the border?<sup>52</sup>

After Herriot had clarified to the *Conseil d'État* that it was a matter of 'protecting our country (...) against a veritable moral and intellectual stranglehold', and that his proposed legislation thus acted in the interest of 'order' and 'national security', France passed its first major protectionist measure in the realm of film with an overwhelming majority of fifty-one to one.<sup>53</sup> The unprecedented decree, legislated on 18 February 1928, and subsequently expanded on 14 March, gave the *ministre de l'instruction publique et des beaux-arts* the power not only to control domestic cinema releases, but also to legally compel foreign producers to import French films, in order to, in return, export theirs to France.<sup>54</sup> As Herriot explained to the press: 'Cinema was born in France, and French cinema must conquer the world.'<sup>55</sup>

The Americans, to whom the decree instituted a transgression of the 1927 Geneva Convention on free trade, responded by calling a boycott, threatening to cease all business in France as of the end of April.<sup>56</sup> Since the French film industry, still unable to satisfy domestic programming, were

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<sup>50</sup> 'Séance du 8 Novembre 1927,' *Journal officiel de la République française. Débats parlementaires. Sénat : compte rendu in-extenso*, no. 86, (9 November 1927): 1078. 'Il faut répondre sans délai à l'appel angoissé (...). France ne tarderait pas à être colonisée à l'intérieur par le cinématographe étranger, si nous n'intervenons pas. Que demande l'industrie française du cinématographe ? Elle demande ce qu'elle appelle d'un mot (...) le 'contingentement' des importations.' In his speech, Herriot also emphasises the possibilities of utilising national cinema for the purposes of hygienic education, more specifically 'to combine the teachings of the microscope with those of cinema' to, for example, 'demonstrate the very dangerous role of the fly.' (1079).

<sup>51</sup> Maurice Huet, 'Mieux vaut tard...', *Le Petit Parisien* (11 November 1927). 'Enfin on se décide à prendre cinéma au sérieux témoin la significative séance d'avant-hier au Sénat !'

<sup>52</sup> Lucien Wahl, 'La Censure et les films qu'elle interdit,' *L'Œuvre* (4 February 1928). 'Cela sous le prétexte de protéger l'industrie 'nationale', qui, incapable de lutter toute seule contre la concurrence, appelle comiquement l'État au secours. Elle avoue ainsi publiquement sa médiocrité et son insuffisance. Les douaniers seront-ils demain chargés d'arrêter Charlot à la frontière ?' Like *L'Œuvre*, many left-wing newspapers critiqued the quota agreement as a form of protectionism. On 20 June 1929, for example, *Le Populaire* wrote: 'c'est une mesure de protectionnisme et elle est dangereuse par définition'.

<sup>53</sup> Herriot (1928), quoted in Christopher Gauthier, Tanguy Perron, and Dimitri Vezyroglou, 'Histoire et cinéma: 1928, année politique,' *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, no. 48, vol. 4 (2001): p194n10. 'Il convient aujourd'hui de prémunir notre pays (...) contre une véritable emprise intellectuelle et morale. [Le contingentement des films étrangers] n'est pas seulement l'intérêt du bon ordre et de la moralité publique, celui de la sécurité intérieure et extérieure de l'État, mais aussi l'intérêt de la Conservation des mœurs et des traditions nationales, qu'il s'agit de sauvegarder'.

<sup>54</sup> For an account of the 1928 decree, passed on 18 February, see: *Journal officiel de la République française. Lois et décrets*, no. 43 (19 February 1928): 2016-2017. For details on the extension, instituted in March, see: *Impressions : projets, propositions, rapports*, no. 372 (14 March 1928): 11-13. See also: Paul Lèglise, *Histoire de la politique du cinéma français: le cinéma et la IIIe République* (Paris: Librairie générale de droit et de jurisprudence, 1970), 67-70.

<sup>55</sup> Herriot quoted in 'Le Conseil des Ministres a approuvé le statut du cinéma,' *Le Petit Parisien* (19 February 1928): 1. 'Le cinéma est né en France, et le cinéma français se doit de conquérir le monde.'

<sup>56</sup> The boycott was reported on in all major news outlets, referred to as a 'lock-out'.

financially dependent on screening of American products, this caused deep concern. Newspaper headlines reported of up to eight thousand Frenchmen losing their jobs.<sup>57</sup> ‘We are really forgetting that American firms expend fifty million each year in France’, wrote *Le Figaro*.<sup>58</sup> ‘The ‘quota is already a fiasco,’ announced *Le Populaire*.<sup>59</sup> Within months, a pressured Herriot was forced to retaliate. A new agreement was signed on 4 May, after the President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Will Hays, had traveled to Paris to meet with the French minister. With the mandatory counter-purchase clause repealed, the modified decree, allowing for a ratio of seven Hollywood imports per film produced in France, was so generous that the American industry never reached its ceiling. Moreover, in addition to imports allowed by the quota agreement, the Americans were permitted to freely distribute up to sixty percent of the total number of U.S. films exhibited in France during the preceding year. In the end, Herriot’s film quota did little more than ratify the prevailing market ratio and reinforce American dominance.<sup>60</sup>

In the interwar period, thus, the French image and idea of Hollywood became increasingly burdensome, merging with longstanding Third Republican concerns of a fragile France. Spelling out the anguish embodied by the influx of American film, deputy Delbos announced, in December of 1928, to the *Chambre des députés*:

A country that imposes its cinema abroad also imposes its culture, its production and assures its economic expansion, while a country that lets itself be invaded by foreign films risk losing its own genius, its intellectual originality and moral, and at the same time, its material prosperity.<sup>61</sup>

Delbos’ patriotic protestation was met with applause from all sides of the chamber. As we will see, the fraught socio-political weight that Hollywood cinema carried in culture, successively accumulating through repeated use and circulation in popular as well as political discourse,

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<sup>57</sup> See e.g.: ‘Huit mille employés français sur le pavé ?’, *L’Œuvre* (28 April 1928); ‘Le contingentement des films : 8000 employés français sont menacés’, *L’Intransigeant* (30 April 1928).

<sup>58</sup> Jules Laurent, ‘Le contingentement des films’, *Le Figaro* (29 April 1928). ‘On oublie vraiment trop que les firmes américaines dépensent chaque année en France une cinquantaine de millions.’

<sup>59</sup> ‘Sous le patronage de M. Herriot : Le décret sur le cinéma subit de graves déboires’, *Le Populaire* (16 April 1928) : 1. ‘le contingentement a déjà fait fiasco, et la commission du cinéma a été obligée d’accorder de nombreuses concessions.’

<sup>60</sup> Ulf-Møller, 100-115. See also: Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press, 2005): 303-313.

<sup>61</sup> ‘1ère séance du 7 Décembre 1928’, *Journal officiel de la République française. Débats parlementaires. Chambre des députés : compte rendu in-extenso*, no. 88 (8 December 1929): 3369. ‘Un pays qui impose son cinéma à l’étranger y impose par cela même sa culture, sa production et y assure son expansion économique (*Très bien ! très bien*), tandis qu’un pays qui se laisse envahir par des film étrangers risque de perdre son génie propre, son originalité intellectuelle et morale, et, en même temps, sa prospérité matérielle. (*Applaudissements*).’

therefore, turned it into an ideal site for *Documents*' subversive gesture, set to attack aggrandising self-images and expose a counter-portrayal of a France dethroned.

With the Hays-Herriot agreement set to expire in the autumn of 1929, hopes of a possible renegotiation arose.<sup>62</sup> In March, the governing body of the French film distribution and production, *Chambre syndicale de la cinématographie*, announced their proposal for a revised protocol. The bid, reported on in all major newspapers, suggested a radically restricted ratio, allowing only *three* American imports per domestic production.<sup>63</sup> As the news reached the other side of the Atlantic, however, the Americans, once more, responded with a boycott threat, declaring in return that they wanted the quota agreement to be scrapped entirely. Furious reactions echoed across the French press. 'The war is declared', wrote Vuillermoz in an April-issue of *Le Temps*.<sup>64</sup> A week later, *Le Figaro* published a survey, asking notable filmmakers how France should respond. 'American cinema,' the avant-garde filmmaker Marcel L'Herbier deplored, 'has got it into its head to devour French film'. Germaine Dulac, in turn, responded: 'My opinion? To not budge an inch'.<sup>65</sup>

Steeped in antagonism, the Franco-American negotiations proceeded slowly.<sup>66</sup> With no agreement reached in July of 1929, deputy Jean-Michel Rénaitour urged the Senate to 'enact measures so that the French film industry can resist this attack': 'it was a Frenchman, Lumière, who invented cinema. And that would be perhaps already a sufficient reason to not let French cinema die in a great financial battle, under the blows of a foreign invasion.'<sup>67</sup> In September, a new Franco-American accord was announced. Despite longstanding pressure from both press and politicians, lobbying for stricter efforts to curb the influx of Hollywood films, the existing Hays-Herriot agreement, it was revealed, would be prolonged for another year, without

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<sup>62</sup> The position as *Ministre de l'Instruction publique et des beaux-arts* was taken over by Pierre Marraud on 1 November 1928.

<sup>63</sup> See e.g.: 'Vers un nouveau règlement du contingentement,' *Ciné-Comoedia* (1 March 1929); 'Les films étrangers : Un nouveau règlement du contingentement,' *L'Intransigeant* (2 March 1929).

<sup>64</sup> Émile Vuillermoz, 'Chronique Cinématographique : La grève de la faim,' *Le Temps*, (13 April 1929). 'La guerre est déclarée'.

<sup>65</sup> 'Notre enquête,' *Le Figaro* (21 April 1929). L'Herbier: 'Le cinématographe américain, tel Ugolin, mange ses enfants pour leur conserver un père. Il s'est mis en tête de dévorer le film français.' Dulac: 'Pourquoi l'Amérique réagit-elle avec tant de violence contre notre loi de contingentement ? Pourquoi multiplie-t-elle ses manœuvres et ses intrigues ? Sans doute, parce que le décret de Herriot porte en lui notre défense et notre espoir de vivre. Mon avis ? Ne pas céder un pouce du terrain acquis. Vouloir de toutes nos forces organiser une production française. La France a le droit de s'exprimer cinématographiquement en toute liberté, sans craindre la colonisation, de quelque pays qu'elle vienne.'

<sup>66</sup> The negotiations were meticulously reported on in the press. In June of 1929, *Paris-Midi* dubbed it a 'burning question'.

<sup>67</sup> '2e séance du 12 Juillet 1929,' *Journal officiel de la République française. Débats parlementaires. Chambre des députés: compte rendu in-extenso*, no. 68 (13 July 1929): 2518-2520. The appeal was reported on in all major newspapers. 'monsieur le ministre, nous vous demandons de prendre des mesures pour que l'industrie française du cinéma puisse résister à cette rafale. (...) Il y a une autre chose, en tout cas, que les Américains, même avec tous leurs dollars, ne pourront pas empêcher : c'est que c'est un Français, Lumière, qui a inventé le cinéma. (*Nouveaux applaudissements.*) Et cela peut-être serait déjà une raison suffisante pour qu'on ne laisse pas en France mourir le cinéma dans une grande bataille économique et sous les coups d'une invasion étrangère.'

amendments. ‘The ‘quota’ war’, *L’Humanité* summarised, ‘has ended, exactly as expected, with a complete defeat’.<sup>68</sup>

In the face of repeated attempts to safeguard French film production and, thus, salvage a sense of national pride and superiority on the world stage, continuously debated in the press, American dominance was further reinforced as the twenties drew to a close. Indeed, parallel to the unfolding of France’s failure to impede Hollywood imports, the film industry was confronted with an entirely novel innovation, American in origin, which, as we will see, only would extend the power of Hollywood: the arrival of sound film. ‘An undeniable sickness currently weighs over our cinema’, wrote *Le Petit Parisien* in September of 1929. Its ‘two principle’ causes, the newspaper continued to diagnose, were ‘the so-called ‘quota’ decree and the arrival of ‘talkies’’.<sup>69</sup>

Although the central issue of spoken dialogue nurtured brief hopes that sound film would automatically renationalise the production and consumption of film, the troubled French industry struggled to transition to the new technology and, therefore, once more had to rely on Hollywood imports. Moreover, with the added dimension of language, as we will see, the stakes at play were felt to have been significantly raised. Writing in *L’Intransigeant* on 24 October 1929, Léon Bailby aired French frustrations. ‘Are we, in France, ruined or stupid?’ he deplored: ‘Even if our studios are not yet equipped to produce viable talking films, can we not demand upon the entry of foreign films that they speak in ‘French?’ ‘This is a different debate than that around the quota’, Bailby concluded: ‘the latter aimed only at protecting our producers. Here, on the contrary, it is about defending the French mentality and mind against a veritable invasion.’<sup>70</sup> Indeed, when arriving from Hollywood at the end of the 1920s, talkies were received as a dangerous menace, looming as charged sign at the heart of deep-seated fears of French fragility, soon to be subversively embraced by *Documents* as a necessarily noisy antidote to a ‘narrow-minded’ modernity.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Léon Moussinac, ‘Communiqué,’ *L’Humanité* (29 September 1929). ‘La guerre du ‘contingentement’, c’est-à-dire la guerre au film américain en France, s’est terminée, ainsi que nous l’avions exactement prévu, par la défaite complète’.

<sup>69</sup> Maurice Huet, ‘Un ange passe !,’ *Le Petit Parisien* (20 September 1929). ‘Un malaise indéniable pèse actuellement, chez nous, sur le cinéma. Les causes en sont diverses, encore que, de l’avis général, les deux principales soient surtout, le décret dit du ‘contingentement’ et l’avènement des ‘talkies’.’

<sup>70</sup> Léon Bailby, ‘Les films parlants,’ *L’Intransigeant* (24 October 1929). ‘nous ont devancés dans la fabrication des *talkies*, ce sont les films étrangers seuls qui ont cours en France. Les textes parlés sont en anglais. (...) Sommes-nous en France, ruinés ou stupides ? Même si nos studios ne sont pas encore équipés pour produire des films parlés viables, ne pouvons-nous imposer à l’entrée des pellicules étrangères l’obligation qu’elles soient parlées en ‘français’ ? C’est un autre débat que celui du contingentement. Mais ce dernier ne visait qu’à protéger nos producteurs. Ici, au contraire, il s’agit de défendre contre une véritable invasion, la mentalité, la pensée françaises.’

<sup>71</sup> Leiris, ‘Talkie’.

## *American Talkies in Interwar France*

If film had been a French invention, talking film was undoubtedly American. Already in June of 1925, Warner Brothers signed an agreement with Western Electric to investigate the technical and commercial viability of sound film.<sup>72</sup> In October of 1927, the very first talkie, *The Jazz Singer*, premiered in America. Featuring Broadway star Al Jolson, the film was a huge success. Within the next year and a half, all major American studios had signed contracts with Western Electric and were installing sound equipment in recording studios and theatre chains.<sup>73</sup>

The French industry, however, was ill-prepared for transition. On top of chronic difficulties revitalising domestic production after the war, its small scale, artisan infrastructure, lacking the vertical integration of Hollywood, meant that moving to sound production was to be a slow and expensive process. As a result, silent film remained the industry norm in France until the end of the decade.<sup>74</sup> To satisfy audiences increasingly intrigued by the novel talkie-phenomena, the French once more had to rely on American imports. This time, France's dependence comprised not only Hollywood films but also U.S.-patented sound technology. According to a French film magazine, Western Electrics charged six-hundred-thousand francs to install sound technology in a single film theatre.<sup>75</sup> With the arrival of sound film, Dudley Andrew thus writes, 'Hollywood had France in the palm of its hand': 'With neither an organized strategy nor significant resources, the French could only sit back to watch themselves be "taken" while the entire nature of the motion picture changed underneath them.'<sup>76</sup>

The anticipated Paris premiere of *The Jazz Singer* was held at the Aubert-Palace, one of the first French theatres installed with American-patented sound equipment, on 26 January 1929. 'Le premier grand film sonore et PARLANT', read one advertisement: 'AL JOLSON chante sous vos yeux'. 'UNIQUE À PARIS! LE VÉRITABLE FILM PARLANT', read another. 'VOIR et

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<sup>72</sup> Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1995), 19; Hannah Lewis, *French Musical Culture and the Coming of Sound Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3-4.

<sup>73</sup> Barrios, 42.

<sup>74</sup> An early attempt at producing a French speaking talkie was *Les Trois Masques* (1929). Telling of the problems plaguing the domestic industry, however, the film had been produced in England. Eventually, Hollywood developed two strategies to produce French or multi-language films. The first, primarily mobilised by MGM, included the import of French actors to Hollywood, the most famous example of which is Maurice Chevalier. The second, primarily mobilised by Paramount, included the purchase of Joinville, a production studio in Paris, from which they themselves could produce French-language versions of their films, see e.g.: Ginette Vincendeau, 'Hollywood Babel: The Coming of Sound and the Multiple-Language Version,' in *Film Europe and Film America*, 207-224. In the thirties, Hollywood began to shift away from the model of foreign-language versions to dubbing.

<sup>75</sup> Abel, *French Cinema*, 60.

<sup>76</sup> Dudley Andrew, 'Sound in France: The Origins of a Native School,' *Yale French Studies*, No. 60 (1980): 94.

ENTENDRE le merveilleux film VITAPHONE PARLANT et SONORE’, read a third.<sup>77</sup> Still, some remained skeptical of its potency. In a May-issue of *L’Homme libre*, Félicien Faillet announced: ‘*talking film is a stupidity*; it will, in France and in Europe, only be an extremely fleeting trend.’ ‘The curiosity aroused,’ he added, ‘will very soon decline’.<sup>78</sup> Within months, however, the contrary was confirmed. *The Jazz Singer* proved a huge hit, running for almost a full year and attracting over half-a-million spectators.<sup>79</sup> In September of 1929, one-hundred-and-ten *films parlants* were screening in France, only four of which had been produced in France.<sup>80</sup> In November, Faillet bitterly admitted his miscalculation: ‘The great offensive of talking film is launched. Liberated by the clumsy and cowardly abandonment of the quota, the American production is unchained’.<sup>81</sup>

With no working translation method in sight, however, the issue of language soon became an awkward obstacle. As sufficient dubbing techniques were not standardised until 1931, this early transition period was characterised by mostly unsuccessful experimentations with rudimentary dubbing, subtitles, and intertitles. When *The Jazz Singer* screened in Paris, French titles were projected on a secondary screen for dialogue scenes. Whilst a box-office triumph, it was evident that this would not be a lasting solution.<sup>82</sup> French frustrations festered. In April of 1929, *Pour Vous* satirised the liberal screening of American talkies without providing proficient translation. The tongue-in-cheek critique was published in the shape of two short texts. Under the title ‘Do you speak American’, the first, written in English, or, more specifically, in what resembles an exaggerated stereotype of American slang, read:

Listen, big boy, I had enough o’ this foreign language stuff! The whole world oughta talk American. Doncha tink it’s about time dese foreign hayseeds snapped out of it and loined a real lingo? Believe me, babe, these new talkies will wake ‘em up! Anyone that sees a talkie from now on and can’t understand

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<sup>77</sup> See ads in *Paris-Midi* (5 April 1929), *Paris-Midi* (19 April 1929), and *Le Temps* (16 mars 1929).

<sup>78</sup> Félicien Faillet, ‘L’absurdité du film parlant,’ *L’Homme libre* (24 May 1929). ‘*le film parlant est une stupidité*; il n’aura, en France et en Europe, qu’une vogue extrêmement passagère. (...) La curiosité éveillée (...) tombera bien vite et il ne restera plus rien de ce feu de paille...’

<sup>79</sup> Abel, *French Cinema*, 61.

<sup>80</sup> O’Brien, 64-65.

<sup>81</sup> Félicien Faillet, ‘Films soporifiques,’ *L’Homme libre* (22 November 1929). ‘La grande offensive du film parlant est déclenchée. Libérés par l’abandon veule et maladroit du contingentement, la production américaine est déchaînée’.

<sup>82</sup> Martine Danan, ‘Hollywood’s Hegemonic Strategies: Overcoming French Nationalism and the Advent of Sound,’ in *Film Europe’ and ‘Film America’*, 225-248.

American is just outa luck, see! Get me, kid – in five years the whole world'll be talkin' like us thoird Avenue guys!<sup>83</sup>

The second text, labelled '*French sub-title*', read, this time in French: 'Did you understand all of what I just wrote? No? Well, for you the question of talking films, in American, is resolved.'<sup>84</sup>

Two months later, when a series of short talkies, featuring a performance by the American singer and vaudeville performer, Yvette Rugel, was screened at the Cinéma Madeleine, the provoked Parisian crowds reportedly booed and whistled until the film was withdrawn. Commenting on the events, the U.S. magazine *Variety* recommended American companies to delete all English dialogue before their films screened in France: 'Without exception, every time an American talker has been flashed on the screen in Paris it has got the razz – and what a razz!<sup>85</sup> It was after deploring various translation strategies deployed to 'overcome this inconvenience' – be it by 'providing, on a small screen placed alongside the main one, a French translation' or subtitles written by 'a clumsy hand' in 'an attempt to skimpily summarise the English mumbling' – that Bailby, in an October-issue of *L'Intransigeant*, alarmingly announced the stakes at play. Whilst 'the quota' had 'aimed only at protecting our producers', he wrote, tackling the influx of Hollywood talkies 'is about defending the French mentality and mind against a veritable invasion.'<sup>86</sup>

On Friday 6 December 1929, during the Paris premier of *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929* at the Moulin Rouge, French resentment culminated. Although the all-star revue, hailed in the accompanying programme as '*le triomphe du film parlant*', (Fig. 45), had been graced with technically improved, superimposed subtitles, when the Parisian audience was met with the 'all-talking, all-singing' voices of Hollywood stars, riots broke out, comprising a mob reportedly ripping up carpets and seats until police officers arrived to clear the premises. The Moulin Rouge premiere, *Cinéa* wrote, 'resembled more a frenzied zoo than a cinema': 'Almost 2,000 people, practically in consensus, drowned the Western Electric emission with their howling voices.'<sup>87</sup> *Le*

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<sup>83</sup> 'Do you speak American,' *Pour Vous*, no. 22 (18 April 1929). The text, *Pour Vous* explained in a footnote, had been translated into American 'slang' by colleagues at the Chicago Tribune.

<sup>84</sup> 'French sub-title,' in *ibid.* 'Avez-vous compris tout ce que je viens d'écrire ? Non ? Alors, pour vous la question des films parlants, en langue américaine, est résolue.'

<sup>85</sup> 'French Razzes English Shorts,' *Variety* (12 June 1929).

<sup>86</sup> Bailby, 'Les films parlant'. 'On a essayé de remédier à cet inconvénient par des moyens de fortune ; on donne, sur un petit écran placé à côté du grand, une traduction française. Ou, encore, une main malhabile a tracé, sur la pellicule même du film, des légendes françaises qui tendent d'expliquer sommairement les borborygmes anglais (...). C'est un autre débat que celui du contingentement. Mais ce dernier ne visait qu'à protéger nos producteurs. Ici, au contraire, il s'agit de défendre contre une véritable invasion, la mentalité, la pensée françaises.'

<sup>87</sup> 'Au Moulin-Rouge Cinéma,' *Cinéa* (15 December 1929): 6. 'En effet l'aspect du Moulin-Rouge pendant les premières représentations des Fox-Folies ressemblait plutôt à une ménagerie en délire qu'à une salle de cinéma. Près de 2000 personnes, la quasi-unanimité, couvraient de leurs voix hurlantes l'émission du Western Electric.'

*Figaro* reported that, with only ‘rare explanations’ appearing in ‘deplorable French’, the ‘audience thus manifested its discontent’. Reverberating among the chants, *Le Figaro* wrote, the following words featured ‘as a leitmotif: *‘Donnez-nous des films français... Parlez-nous français!’*<sup>88</sup> *L’Action Française*, in turn, reported of ‘booing and whistling audiences’ using the metal seat number plates as ‘projectiles’ to ‘bombard the stars’ on the screen. When faced with an ‘invasion of *English-speaking* films’, the rightwing nationalist newspaper concluded, ‘incidents are inevitable’.<sup>89</sup>

The following Monday, after a weekend of unrest at the Moulin Rouge, deputy Gaston-Gérard announced to the *Chambre des députés*: ‘today, the problem of cinema has assumed a new form. It is entirely dominated by the question of sound and talking films.’<sup>90</sup> ‘It is an immense, relentless effort of intellectual colonisation that threatens us’, he announced: ‘talking film will be the vehicle of the English language becoming the universal language’. Through ‘seizing our grand theatres *en plein cœur de Paris*’ to ‘show films where our thought and soon our language will be banished’, he continued, the ‘American mentality, the American morals, the American art will slowly impose itself on us’.<sup>91</sup> Deputy Delbos chimed in: ‘The threat is further escalated with talking film. Because, this time, they do not only attack our ideas, but our language too’.<sup>92</sup> After labelling Herriot’s quota system as ‘notoriously insufficient’, announcing that American dominance on French screens had, in fact, expanded since the instalment of the famous decree, Delbos ensured his superiors that:

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<sup>88</sup> Henri Hugault, ‘Au Moulin-Rouge: Le public manifeste contre la projection d’un film sonore américain,’ *Le Figaro* (9 December 1929): 3. ‘Les rares explications sont écrites dans un français déplorable, voisin du plus pur charabia. (...) Le public a alors manifeste son mécontentement, et le chahut devint tel que la direction dut supprimer la seconde représentation. (...) Parmi les cris du public, retenons ces mots, qui revenaient comme un leit-motiv: *Donnez-nous des films français... Parlez-nous français!*’

<sup>89</sup> Claude Jeantet, ‘L’écran de la semaine,’ *L’Action Française* (13 December 1929): 4. ‘Des incidents bruyants et violents se sont produits cette semaine, au cours des premières représentations des *Folies-Fox* au MOULIN-ROGUE. Les spectateurs ont hué, sifflé, conspué les scènes de la revue parlante : ils ont même usé ou cherché à user de certains projectiles, les numéros métalliques de leurs fauteuils, par exemple, pour bombarder les vedettes, qui, naturellement, puisqu’il s’agit d’un film, continuaient à danser, à chanter, ou à gambader. A la sortie, les mécontents voulaient réclamer le prix de leurs places et dissuadaient les nouveaux arrivants d’entrer dans la salle. Il a fallu à plusieurs reprises faire intervenir la police ; l’affaire tournait à l’émeute et les esprits commençait à s’échauffer dangereusement. (...) N’y a-t-il pas en effet plusieurs semaines que nous essayons ici de mettre en garde exploitants et... exploités contre l’invasion des films *parlant anglais* ? Les incidents étaient inévitables. (...) En tout cas, il a semblé évident à chacun qu’une revue française enregistrée aurait été supérieure à *Folies-Fox*.’

<sup>90</sup> ‘2e séance du 9 Décembre 1929,’ 4174. ‘aujourd’hui, le problème cinématographique a pris un autre aspect. Il est tout entier dominé par la question des films sonores et parlants.’

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. ‘le film parlant sera le véhicule de la langue anglaise qui deviendra la langue universelle. (...) ‘La mentalité américaine, les mœurs américaines, l’art américain se seront peu à peu imposés chez nous, aux dépens de notre personnalité. Petit à petit, notre art disparaîtra, nos écrivains, nos dramaturges, nos musiciens plagés, dépouillés, ne trouveront plus aucun débouché, ne pourront faire connaître, aimer, triompher notre pensée, notre civilisation latine. C’est un immense effort de colonisation intellectuelle, implacable, qui nous menace. (...) ‘Je demande, toutefois, dès maintenant, au Gouvernement d’examiner s’il n’y a pas lieu de frapper de redevances spéciales les sociétés étrangères qui, en plein cœur de Paris, s’emparent de nos grands théâtres, comme le Vaudeville qui, pendant cinquante ans, a présenté au monde les chefs-d’œuvre de notre littérature (*Applaudissements*), afin de n’y plus présenter que des films d’où notre pensée et bientôt notre langue seront bannis. (*Très bien ! très bien !*)’

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. ‘La menace s’accroît encore avec le film sonore et parlant. Car, cette fois, on ne s’attaque pas seulement à nos idées, mais aussi à notre langue.’

what you will do to defend cinema, at once from the invasion of foreign film and against the failures or shortcomings that we have to deplore within our own country, will serve not only the prosperity of France, but also the safeguarding and spread of our national spirit.<sup>93</sup>

Despite the *sous-secrétaire d'État des beaux-arts* ambitiously promising that 'no capitulation' had occurred, and that possible 'measures will once more be contemplated in detail' when the quota arrangement was set to expire a few months later, the original Hays-Herriot agreement from 1928 – already widely deemed flawed – was once more extended for another year.<sup>94</sup> 'Thanks to the *talkies*, the whole world will soon have to learn English', announced *Le Journal* at the start of 1930.<sup>95</sup> 'These words and these facts,' the newspaper continued, bringing forth 'the painful evocation of a certain victorious treaty of Versailles, where English was exchanged for French as the diplomatic language', 'forces us to reflect on the great danger facing the French language once more, formerly the vehicle of human thought.'<sup>96</sup> The same year, Édouard Herriot, as part of a bid to federate a *United States of Europe*, fit to retaliate against the ongoing Americanisation of the continent, warned of future where 'Jeanne d'Arc is in danger of being represented by a young Californian'.<sup>97</sup>

The arrival of talkies, thus, was energetically debated and negotiated in interwar France. Its anticipated impact on French culture and identity was digested and dystopically envisioned in both popular and political discourse. Soon, this charged motif spilled over into the avant-garde journal *Documents* too. As we will see, however, when *Documents* entered this galvanised debate,

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 4175-4176. 'En premier lieu, le régime du contingentement, tel qu'il a fonctionné jusqu'ici et tel qu'il fonctionnera encore jusqu'au 1<sup>er</sup> octobre 1930 théoriquement, et, pratiquement, jusqu'au 1<sup>er</sup> octobre 1931, est notoirement insuffisant. (*Applaudissements.*) (...) Je ne mets en doute ni votre bonne volonté, ni vos qualités d'intelligente initiative, et je suis sûr que ce que vous ferez pour défendre le cinématographe, à la fois contre l'invasion des films étrangers et contre des défaillances ou les carences que nous avons à déplorer à l'intérieur de notre propre pays, servira non seulement à la prospérité de la France, mais à la sauvegarde et au rayonnement de notre génie national. (*Vifs applaudissements.*)'.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 4179-4180. 'Il n'y a eu capitulation d'aucun côté. (...) Et vous pouvez être assurés que, lorsque nous songerons de nouveau aux mesures de détail, pour protéger et encourager la production française, la subventionner au besoin par la création d'un fonds analogue à celui que nous mettons à la disposition de nos théâtres (...) : car il s'agit de défendre l'indépendance de la pensée et des mœurs de notre pays. (*Applaudissements.*)' For detail on the new agreement, see e.g.: Ulf-Møller, 121-122. The following quota year (1931-1932), France gave American films free entry. Ulf-Møller writes: 'The liberal policy did not cause an increase in the number of imported films, but as a result almost all dubbing into French took place in Hollywood. The overtly friendly policy towards Hollywood may have contributed to the downfall of the major French film studios in 1934 and 1935.' (122).

<sup>95</sup> José Germain, 'Les 'talkies' font courir un grave danger à la langue française,' *Le Journal* (27 February 1930). 'Grace aux *talkies*, le monde entier sera bientôt obligé d'apprendre la langue anglaise'.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 'Ces mots et ces faits rapprochés de l'évocation douloureuse d'un certain traité victorieux de Versailles où l'anglais s'était substitué au français comme langue diplomatique, nous obligent à réfléchir au nouveau grand danger que court la langue française, jadis véhicule des pensées humaines.'

<sup>97</sup> Herriot, *The United States of Europe*, 219.

the social and political tension surrounding the motif of the talkie was eagerly repurposed and the anguished terrain it inhabited in interwar France was subversively mined to critical ends.

### *Talkies in Documents: 'The English language is the language of love'*

Across the fifteen issues published between 1929 and 1931, numerous references to Hollywood talkies appeared in the Parisian avant-garde journal *Documents*. Stills from 'all-talking' films, such as *Broadway Melody*, *Hollywood-Revue*, and *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929* were featured. Portraits of well-known talkie-actors, amongst them Joan Crawford, Bessie Love, and Maurice Chevalier, appeared too. The fourth issue of the journal's first year, published in September of 1929, even included a reproduction of the American poster promoting *The Jazz Singer*-star Al Jolson's new talking film, *Say it With Songs*, (Fig. 46). The film, not yet shown in France, had premiered at the Warners' Theatre in New York the previous month, on the three-year anniversary of the studio's Vitaphone sound-on-disc technology, pioneeringly used for *The Jazz Singer*.<sup>98</sup> As we have seen, *Documents*' 'Critical Dictionary' issued a definition of 'Talkie', alongside the American publicity poster for *Our Dancing Daughters* and a still from *Weary River*, (Fig. 43). Reviews of two Hollywood talkies, *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929* and *Hallelujah*, were also published. The review of the former, appearing in the seventh issue of the journal's first year (1929), had been announced on the final page of the preceding issue. Alongside the reproduction of two stills from the film, (Fig. 4), the caption read: 'FOX FOLLIES: the new talking film that will soon show at the Moulin Rouge and which we will review in the forthcoming issue.'

Writing in *La Ressemblance informelle*, Didi-Huberman singles out one of the *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929* stills as a heightened articulation of the destabilising montage found at the heart of *Documents*' critical operation. The still, featuring the bare legs of five female actors symmetrically lined up on a stage, the top-half of whom are covered by the partly lowered curtain, Didi-Huberman writes, 'illustrates no text in particular' and instead enters into another type of 'relationship' with other images in the journal.<sup>99</sup> 'Bataille, in his texts as in the figurative decisions accompanying them', Didi-Huberman writes, produces 'critical connections of resemblance that constrain the reader to heterogeneity' through a movement that 'is something like a *deforming*

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<sup>98</sup> Crafton, 280.

<sup>99</sup> Didi-Huberman, 73. 'dans le même numéro (...) nous trouvons une image qui n'illustre aucun texte en particulier, mais qui vient incontestablement boucler le rapport d'images déjà établi (...) il s'agit d'une photographie qui montre cinq paires de jambes féminines coupées... par un rideau de scène dans une revue hollywoodienne destinée au Moulin-Rouge et intitulée *Fox Follies*.'

*ballet*.<sup>100</sup> Drawing our attention to the ‘incurable conflict’ between the *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929*-still and a photograph, shot by Eli Lotar, featuring severed hooves, lined up against a slaughterhouse wall at La Villette, (Fig. 3), Didi-Huberman writes that between the images, both appearing in *Documents* (6:1929), ‘there is a resemblance, but a cruel one: no synthesis will ever be completed, each image remains alone, exasperated, in the laceration that is produced as it nonetheless *touches* the other image...’<sup>101</sup> Forms deform. Resemblances rupture. The very notion of notion of mimesis is put under pressure: that ‘which is signified remains *unknown*’, being ‘at once a sign of laceration and a laceration of the sign’.<sup>102</sup>

Drawing on Didi-Huberman’s interpretation, Baker announces in the opening essay of *Undercover Surrealism*: ‘The *Fox Follies* images, liberated from their text, are thus purposefully and effectively stranded. Whilst waiting for the occasion when they might be called upon as illustrations, they begin to do other work, entering into a strange play of visual echoes.’<sup>103</sup> As ‘the dismembered dancers’ legs hark back to the neatly stacked hoofs’, he writes: ‘The DOCUMENTS reader is encouraged to reach the conclusion that finding affinities (...) is symptomatic of a disruptive glitch in the process of representation.’<sup>104</sup> ‘In fact,’ Baker concludes:

a primary doctrine of the magazine could be said to be abandonment to the possibility of misrecognition: objects are reproduced in close-up, at confusing scales; illustrations turn up uninvited in the wrong places; images act as spanners in the smooth workings of earnest, determined arguments, and echo uncannily in the spaces between unrelated ideas.<sup>105</sup>

Examining another talkie still published in *Documents*, this time that of *Broadway Melody*, appearing in the fourth issue of the journal’s first year (1929), Steer identifies a similarly disruptive interrelationship, (Fig. 47).<sup>106</sup> As a result of its ‘provocative juxtaposition’, sitting alongside

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 75-77. ‘Bataille, dans ses textes comme dans les décisions figuratives qui les accompagnent à titre ‘documents’, aura créé des *liens critiques de ressemblance*, qui contraignent le lecteur à cet hétérogène-là : (...) c’est quelque chose comme un *ballet défigurant*’.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 386. ‘dans le conflit inapaisable de ces *deux images* (au moins) montées dans le contact et dans la déchirure. Il en est de même dans *Documents* : entre les pattes d’animaux de la Villette et les jambes féminines du Moulin-Rouge, entre le poisson qui dévore son semblable et l’homme qui dévore son propre visage dans une tête de mort, une *ressemblance* a bien lieu, mais cruelle : une *synthèse* n’aura jamais vraiment lieu, chaque image demeurant seule, exaspérée, dans la *déchirure* qui la fait pourtant *toucher* l’autre image...’

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 387, 391, 395. ‘un perpétuel mouvement *déformant* (...). Lorsque le semblable s’ouvre au dissemblable (...) il engage une ‘sémiotique’ paradoxale qui n’est plus la *sémiologie* des cliniciens de l’âge classique, qui n’est plus la *sémiologie* des linguistes et des chercheurs de ‘dispositifs’ fonctionnant sans reste. Le symptôme, s’il est encore un signe, est le signe le plus équivoque qui soit, le plus déroutant : ce qu’il signifie demeure *inconnu* (...) à la fois signe de déchirure et déchirure du signe.’

<sup>103</sup> Baker, ‘Doctrines,’ 36.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 36, 38

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>106</sup> Steer, 51-81.

another appropriated image, a late nineteenth-century ethnographic photograph shot by Ernest Robin in the French colony of New Caledonia, the montage, Steer writes, ‘destabilizes the viewers sense of order’ and begins ‘to break apart the very notions of self and other.’ The critical result of such radical reframing, she concludes, unveils meaning as ‘wonderfully undecidable.’<sup>107</sup>

The deconstructionist interpretation of *Documents* and its critical work is, thus, once more constricting. Preoccupied with locating the criticality of the journal in an ability to disrupt and sabotage stable signification, the *unstable* but nonetheless experienced socio-cultural currencies these signs did carry, and the ways in which these currencies fuelled the critical strategy at play, are left unexamined. The ‘social work’ of the sign is ignored, ‘the lucidity of the undecidability in a text’ is prioritised over ‘the identifiable power of the text’.<sup>108</sup> The criticality enacted by Hollywood talkies, within the pages of *Documents*, is decontextualised and dehistoricised. Yet again, Bataillean *excess* is morphed into Derridean *écriture*. Yet again, the subversive heterogeneity championed by *Documents* and Bataille is transposed to a textual universe detached from the materiality of lived experience, where it is set to partake in a deconstructionist operation of semantic disruption. Once re-inserted into the visual culture of interwar France and reinterpreted through Peircean semiotics, however, a different critical strategy emerges.

In interwar France, as we have seen, *talkies* were anxiously received as a concentrated signifier of an all-encompassing American dominance. Radically highlighting a motif that agitated Third Republican anguish, thus, *Documents* not only undermined its identity of supposed superiority on the world stage but forced a radical recalibration of such lofty portrayal. Indeed, exploiting the incapacitating significance this motif denoted in culture, generated through repeated use in discourse, *Documents* strategically repurposed its debilitating force against the grain, to expose a different, decidedly deglorified, image of mankind. ‘For we are again at the point’, Bataille wrote alongside two stills from the 1929 talkie *Hollywood-Revue*, (Fig. 48), ‘where any activity whatsoever has no other purpose than to procure some respite, some rest for the unhappy fool.’ The piece, entitled ‘Places of Pilgrimage: Hollywood’, thus concluded: ‘This all helps to understand why, at present, Hollywood is the navel of the Earth, as it is the only place where the sole dream is to entertain the rest of the world, to persuade us that the moon is made of green cheese!’<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 65, 80, 81.

<sup>108</sup> Lentricchia, 50; Said, 214.

<sup>109</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘Places of Pilgrimage: Hollywood,’ trans. Dawn Ades, *Undercover Surrealism*, 74-77. See also Ades’ commentary in *ibid.*, 77-81.

Once more, the ‘Critical Dictionary’ proved a privileged platform for such anti-idealist reconfiguration of reality. In sharp contrast to official Third Republican discourse, Leiris’ ‘Talkie’-entry frames the U.S.-patented sound technology not as a menacing vehicle of deplorable Americanisation but celebrates the novel format as a necessarily noisy antidote to a restricted modern existence. Indeed, embracing the arrival of talking film as ‘an important date in the history of cinema’, Leiris complained: ‘The narrow-minded have not failed in their grubby task with respect to talkies, warning of disaster, like they always do, in this case the end of cinema.’ Countering such dystopian prophecies, Leiris instead turned to glorify the unsettling reverberations bodied forth by the new sound technology. ‘Thanks, then, to these talking films’, he wrote, ‘we can at last allow ourselves to be possessed body and soul by scenes of ardent sensuality, cast adrift on the raft of voices while everything collapses around us’: ‘The English language is the language of *love*, such is the great lesson’.<sup>110</sup>

Two issues later, when reviewing *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929*, a film that, as we have seen, triggered furious riots when premiered at the Moulin Rouge, Leiris denounced the Parisian audience’s insular intolerance: ‘*The Fox Movietone Follies, shown at the Moulin-Rouge, ran only for a short time. The public’s xenophobia had a good deal to do with its lack of success.*’<sup>111</sup> Inverting established tropes in discourse, framing talkies as a ‘moral invasion’ diluting French identity and, thus, displacing its supposed superiority, Leiris turned instead to exalt the ‘brilliant scenes’ of *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929*:

the superb *first names* of *Sue Carol*, *Sharon Lynn* blur every species of verbiage under their adorable makeup, and no further questions, serious or not, occur to the heart or the mind, except those a child might ask himself, when one very simply takes him to a fairy play.<sup>112</sup>

After celebratorily comparing a sequence from the Hollywood talkie to an episode in Raymond Roussel’s ‘inspired play’ from 1914, *Locus Solus*, Leiris turned his attention to the ‘short-skirted chorus girls’, to ‘the same shaking leg multiplied innumerable times’, engendering ‘all the cheap eroticism, the easy sensuality, the sentimentality that ‘drives one to tears’’.<sup>113</sup> A recurring feature of early transition-era talkies, the image of legs had become a motif intimately attached to the

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<sup>110</sup> Leiris, ‘Talkie’.

<sup>111</sup> Leiris, ‘Fox Movietone Follies of 1929’.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

new format, featuring in cinema ads and programmes, (Fig. 49), as well as in reviews and reactions to the novel sound technology.<sup>114</sup> When *Cinéa* reported on the riots at the Moulin Rouge, legs loomed at the centre, as a legible signifier denoting the genre as a whole:

We have to recognise that it is disagreeable for a brave trader of the boulevard de Clichy, having come with his wife, mother-in-law, and his children (total 80fr), to hear for the duration of one hour talking and singing in the language of Broadway. To have beautiful legs, and to show them with generosity, is not enough to excuse these nasal voices (...).<sup>115</sup>

‘Decidedly, whatever one may think of it’, *Cinéa* declared, ‘*la place Blanche* is still in Paris.’<sup>116</sup> In the visual culture of interwar France, thus, contrary to the analysis of Didi-Huberman, subsequently reinforced by Baker, *legs* appeared as a recognisable motif signifying the new talkie-format. In the hands of *Documents*, therefore, it posed as a privileged sign with which the avant-garde journal could effectively highlight and pressurise the French concerns accompanying the arrival of the novel sound technology.

Whilst the French establishment sought to curb the influx of Hollywood *talkies*, thus, as part of a long-standing effort to impede American dominance in the aftermath of the war, *Documents* ran a form of dissident counter-campaign, subversively celebrating their arrival and as well as the disruptive effects it enacted in France. Indeed, as Georges Henri Rivière announced in the fifth issue of the journal’s second year (1930), as part of a brief text championing the Parisian Cinéma du Panthéon, known for screening talkies in their *version intégrale Américaine*: ‘I welcome with the noisiest satisfaction the opening of this cinema specialising in English-speaking talking films.’<sup>117</sup> However, the official Third Republic, and its attempt to rectify France’s bruised self-image, was not the only target of *Documents*’ contrarian embrace of the Hollywood talkie. Also implicated was the cinematic avant-garde, who, as we will see, similarly rejected the novel technology, albeit

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<sup>114</sup> In fact, the opening chorus of *Fox Movietone Folies of 1929* featured a song entitled ‘Legs’. For an analysis of this motif, see Siegfried Kracauer’s 1927 essay ‘The Mass Ornament’. Comparing the chorus line of the Tiller Girls to a taylorised production line, Kracauer writes: ‘The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls (...) The mass ornament is the aesthetic reflection of the rationality that is striven for in the ruling economic system.’ (See e.g.: Henrik Reeh, *Ornament of the Metropolis: Siegfried Kracauer and Modern Urban Culture*, trans. John Irons (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 93-105.

<sup>115</sup> ‘Au Moulin-Rouge Cinéma’. ‘Il faut reconnaître qu’il est désagréable pour un brave commerçant du boulevard de Clichy venu avec sa femme, sa belle-mère et ses enfants (total 80 fr) d’entendre pendant une heure parler et chanter de la langue Broadway. Il ne suffit pas d’avoir de jolies jambes et de les montrer avec générosité pour faire excuser cette voix venues des fosses nasales.’

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. ‘Décidément quoiqu’on en pense, la place Blanche est toujours à Paris.’

<sup>117</sup> Georges Henri Rivière, ‘Cinéma du Panthéon,’ *Documents* (5: 1930). ‘Je salue avec la plus bruyante satisfaction l’ouverture de ce cinéma spécialisé dans les films parlant de langue anglaise.’ For further detail on the Cinéma du Panthéon, see Eric Smoodin, *Paris in the Dark: Going to the Movies in the City of Light, 1930-1950*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 26.

for a different set of reasons. Indeed, to the cinematic avant-garde in interwar Paris, the modern sound technology impaired the artistic purpose of film by contaminating its pure visual language and forcing the medium to regress to its earlier state of filmed theatre. In the 1929 words of the experimental filmmaker, René Clair: 'It is too late for those who love the art of moving pictures to deplore the effects of this barbaric invasion.'<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Clair, *Reflections on the Cinema*, 90.

## A ‘barbaric invasion’: Talkies and the Cinematic Avant-Garde in Interwar Paris

During the First World War, when American films first began to inundate French theatres, the Parisian avant-garde had been quick to enthusiastically embrace elements from the novel world of Hollywood cinema.<sup>119</sup> Charlie Chaplin provoked particular excitement. Lovingly nicknamed *Charlot*, Chaplin quickly emerged as a favoured muse to the radical artistic circles of the French capital, triggering a wave of poems and essays written in homage to the comedic performer, whose films they viewed as remarkable realisations of the artistic capacities of the cinematic medium.<sup>120</sup> Louis Aragon’s first published poem, appearing in a 1918-issue of *Le Film*, was titled ‘Charlot sentimental’.<sup>121</sup> In 1921, as part of the first lengthy French treatise on Chaplin, Louis Delluc, a critic and long-time admirer of the Hollywood actor, announced that *Charlot* – having become more famous than ‘Joan of Arc, Louis XIV, and Clémenceau’ – was a ‘pioneer’ and ‘in some measure responsible for the plaything having become an art’.<sup>122</sup> In interwar Paris, thus, *Charlot* emerged as an avant-garde hero, celebrated for the universality and purity of his expression.<sup>123</sup> As a result, apart from continuing to grace numerous covers of periodicals and

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<sup>119</sup> For an avant-garde account of the arrival of Hollywood films during the war, see e.g.: Philippe Soupault, ‘Cinema U.S.A.’ in *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, ed. Paul Hammond (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000), 55.

<sup>120</sup> Already in 1919, Tristan Tzara announced Chaplin’s adherence to the Dada movement, see *Dada*, no. 4-5 (15 May 1919). The following year, the Paris Dada-group drafted a *faux* press release advertising that Chaplin was to appear at a Dada-event in February of 1920. The Berlin Dada-group too expressed their appreciation of Chaplin, see e.g.: *Der Dada*, no. 3 (April 1920). In March of 1921, Charlot was listed among ‘famous men and friends’ in *Littérature*, alongside Marquis de Sade, Isidore Ducasse, and John Stuart Mill. The following month, Elie Faure published an article entitled ‘Charlot’ in *L’Esprit Nouveau*, no. 6 (April 1921): 657-666. In 1924, the Belgian journal *Le disque vert* published a special issue on Chaplin, featuring writings by Blaise Cendrars, Jean Cocteau, Max Jacob, Philippe Soupault, and Elie Faure, including René Crevel’s ‘Bonjour Charlot’. In a 1927-issue, *La Révolution surréaliste* defended Chaplin in ‘Hands Off Love’. Later, in his 1929 Surrealist Manifesto, Breton eulogised Chaplin alongside Hegel, Marx, Freud, and Trotsky. For an account of avant-garde receptions of Chaplin, see e.g.: de Haas, 593-598; Sherwin Simmons, ‘Chaplin Smiles on the Wall: Berlin Dada and Wish-Images of Popular Culture,’ *New German Critique*, no. 84 (Autumn, 2001): 3-34; Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London and New York: Verso, 2002); Jennifer Wild, *The Parisian Avant-Garde in the Age of Cinema, 1910-1923* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015).

<sup>121</sup> Louis Aragon, ‘Charlot sentimental,’ *Le Film*, no. 105 (18 March 1918). Two months later, Aragon published ‘Charlot mystique,’ *Nord-Sud*, no. 15 (15 May 1918). See also e.g.: Philippe Soupault, ‘Charlot voyage,’ *Littérature*, no. 6 (August 1919): 22; Philippe Soupault, *Charlot* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1931).

<sup>122</sup> Louis Delluc, *Charlie Chaplin*, trans. Hamish Miles (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1922), 20, 16. The book was originally published as *Charlot* (Paris: Maurice de Brunoff, 1921). See also: Donna Kornhaber, ‘Charlot as Cinema: Louis Delluc and Charlie Chaplin at the Dawn of Film Criticism,’ *Film History*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2015): 141-159.

<sup>123</sup> Jean Cocteau celebrated Chaplin for having invented a ‘rire Esperanto’, or Esperanto laughter (*Le Rappel à l’ordre* (Paris: Librairie Stock, 1926), 94).

other publications, (Fig. 50), as well as being the subject of further written celebrations and treatises, Chaplin's recognisable silhouette would feature in visual products from this period too. A notable example is Fernand Léger's portrait of the Hollywood performer – an assemblage in wood, entitled *Charlot cubist* – which also appeared an honorary cast member of Léger's 1924 experimental film, *Ballet mécanique*, (Fig. 51).<sup>124</sup> In 1928, when Delluc's disciple, the film critic, Léon Moussinac, published a genealogy of filmic art, Chaplin's 1915 appearance on French screens was listed as one of its earliest manifestations.<sup>125</sup> When the Parisian avant-garde rejected talking films, thus, it was not purely on the basis of their American origin. Something else was bothering them.

### *An Avant-Garde Rejection of Talking Film: Medium-Specificity and the Extra-Cinematic Excess of Sound*

To the cinematic avant-garde, the genre-blurring inclusion of speech, a feature normally housed in the category of theatre, was a severe disruption not only to the established conventions of filmmaking, but much more problematically, to the perceived artistic essence of the filmic medium. Indeed, as we will see, as part of a long-fought attempt to establish cinema as a recognised fine art, the cinematic avant-garde circles in Paris had, since as early as the 1910s, been articulating the medium-specific qualities of cinema in both theory and practice. Its artistic status, they argued, lay in an exploration of its unique formal features. The extra-cinematic excess of speech would therefore, they feared, contaminate the purity of film, transgress its medium-specific domain, and destabilise its established identity as an autonomous artform.

‘Isn't the Art of cinema the art of visual beauty in combination with movement and with light?’ asked the avant-garde filmmaker, Germaine Dulac in a 1928-issue of *Ciné-Journal*, published in June: ‘Joining them with words is to destroy cinema in its most profound sense. It's a regression, not progress.’<sup>126</sup> In November of the same year, some two months before *The Jazz Singer* premiered in Paris, Georges Charensol – a writer frequenting the artistic circles of the French capital – prophesied: ‘talking films, those which claim to bring us the human voice, only give us

<sup>124</sup> For an account of *Ballet mécanique*, see e.g.: De Haas, 89-94; Judi Freeman, ‘Léger's *Ballet mécanique*,’ in *Dada and Surrealist Film*, edited by Rudolf E. Kuenzli (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1996), 28-45.

<sup>125</sup> Léon Moussinac, ‘Les étapes du Septième Art,’ *Les Amis de Spartacus*, no. 3 (15 June 1928): 4. Bibliothèque nationale de France, GR FOL-RK-19691.

<sup>126</sup> Dulac (1928), in Roger Icart (ed.), *La révolution du parlant: vue par la presse* (Perpignan: Institut Jean Vigo, 1988), 150. ‘L'Art du cinéma n'est-il pas l'art de la beauté visuelle dans la combinaison du mouvement et de la lumière ? Leur adjoindre le verbe, c'est le détruire dans son sens le plus profond. C'est une régression, non un progrès.’

a vulgar imitation of theatre. And we know well that Cinema will not reach the dignity of an art without deliberately distancing itself from theatre.<sup>127</sup> Indeed, with the addition of recorded speech disrupting the medium-specific identity of film, talkies triggered profound anxieties regarding the future of the filmic medium in the cinematic avant-garde circles of interwar Paris. ‘*There is an old word for ‘talking cinema’*’, wrote film critic Lucien Wahl in the autumn of 1928: ‘*it’s theatre.*’<sup>128</sup>

To charge transition-era talkies with an overt theatricality was not far-fetched. As the recording of synchronous sound implied serious restrictions on practically all creative variables of silent cinema – camera movement, editing options, and acting style – the early years of talking films emerged as a trial period, where there, in Crafton’s words, ‘was no obvious formula for mastering the new medium.’<sup>129</sup> In the ruins of formal conventions and aesthetic norms, one particular format emerged as a favoured strategy, immediately becoming symptomatic with early talkies: the musical. Crafton elaborates: ‘the musical became the testing ground upon which sound film proved itself, an agent for the exhaustive trials and tests – technical and aesthetic alike – that turned sound from a freak gimmick to a standard-bearer.’<sup>130</sup> In this period of formal uncertainty, the fixed formula of musical theatre could act as a stabiliser, as a form of aesthetic scaffolding – visually and sonically – against which the new medium could lean.

*The Jazz Singer*, signalling the success of talkies in both America and France, had originally been a Broadway show, running from September 1924 to July 1926. The day before the final show, Warner Brothers bought the rights for fifty thousand dollars. Proving a commercial hit, all studios were soon bringing in actors and producers from Broadway to put together their own ‘all talking, all singing, all dancing’ talkies. A ‘musical virus’, Barrios writes, had infected Hollywood.<sup>131</sup> When MGM’s first talkie-musical, *Broadway Melody*, subsequently premiered in Hollywood on 1 February 1929, Barrios writes, the genre was rigorously established ‘as something more than a garish fad’.<sup>132</sup> A few months later, *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929* successfully

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<sup>127</sup> Georges Charensol, ‘Films sonores et Films parlants’. Unspecified newspaper clipping dated to 10 November 1928. Bibliothèque nationale de France (Fonds Léon Moussinac), 4-COL-10/14 (28). ‘les films parlants, ceux qui prétendent nous apporter la voix humaine, nous donnent seulement une grossière contrefaçon du théâtre. Et on sait bien que le Cinéma n’atteindra à la dignité d’un art qu’autant qu’il s’éloignera délibérément du théâtre.’

<sup>128</sup> Lucien Wahl quoted in article by Raymond Huguenard. Unspecified newspaper clipping dated to August-September 1928. Bibliothèque nationale de France (Fonds Léon Moussinac), 4-COL-10/14 (28). ‘*Il existe un vieux mot qui veut dire ‘cinéma parlant’ c’est théâtre.*’

<sup>129</sup> Crafton, 352. See also: David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 35-38.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>131</sup> Barrios, 31-32, 220.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

introduced an alteration to the template of musical theatre: the revue. The format, proving an effective platform to showcase in-house talent, was soon mimicked. In June of 1929, MGM's *Hollywood-Revue* premiered, consisting of a series of stage performances, all introduced by Jack Benny's stand-up comedy and framed with opening and closing curtains. These early productions, thus, brought with them a remarkable aesthetic shift. Contrary to silent cinema, the early talkies were filmed stage performances, recorded with a static camera positioned in the point-of-view of a supposed in-situ theatre audience, (Fig. 52).<sup>133</sup>

The 'all singing, all dancing' talkies of the transition-era, thus, agonisingly confirmed the Parisian cinematic avant-garde's worst fears of heightened theatricality in the new genre-blurring format. 'We are certainly on the eve of', wrote Wahl in his *The Jazz Singer*-review, 'the reign of cinema-theatre'.<sup>134</sup> Léon Moussinac, in turn, described talkies as 'a sentimental, banal, imbecilic genre, utilising all the ravings of comedies and operettas'.<sup>135</sup> He later declared that 'the cinematographic interest' of *The Jazz Singer* 'is nil'.<sup>136</sup> When asked during a 1929 interview if talking film 'fatally pulls cinema into a form of imitation of theatre', Marcel L'Herbier responded: 'Obviously... and it is a deplorable result'.<sup>137</sup> 'Cinema', he continued, 'has become – with some difficulties – an original and independent art': 'It would be disastrous if one profited off a technical progress only to return backwards, artistically speaking. From this point of view, the registration of speech will have regrettable consequences'.<sup>138</sup> Over a year later, as American talkies were still echoing loudly across French screens, Vuillermoz, as part of a 1930 review of *Hollywood-Revue*, wrote: 'It is a vulgarisation of music-hall that the future holds'.<sup>139</sup> 'My god, there's nothing more to say', wrote another reviewer: 'It is not cinema'.<sup>140</sup>

This perceived antithetical relation between *talkies* – excessive and extra-cinematic – and *avant-garde cinema* – pure and medium-specific – was efficiently dramatised in a 1929-issue of *Cinéa Pour*

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 84, 98-99, 162.

<sup>134</sup> Lucien Wahl, 'Le Chanteur de Jazz,' *L'Information* (3 February 1929). Bibliothèque nationale de France (Fonds Léon Moussinac), 4-COL-10/13 (73). 'Nous sommes certainement à la veille (...) d'un règne du cinéma-théâtre'.

<sup>135</sup> Léon Moussinac, 'Prévisions et réalités,' *L'Humanité* (24 September 1929): 4. 'un genre sentimental, banal, imbecile utilisant toutes les élucubrations des faiseurs de comédies et d'opérettes.'

<sup>136</sup> Léon Moussinac, 'Panoramique du cinéma : 1929,' in *L'Âge Ingrat du Cinéma* (Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 1946), 130.

<sup>137</sup> Claude Doré, 'Ce qu'ils pensent du cinéma parlant,' *Mon Ciné* (12 January 1929). Bibliothèque nationale de France (Fonds Léon Moussinac), 4-COL-10/14 (28). 'Le film parlé ne ramène-t-il pas d'ailleurs fatalement le cinéma à une espèce d'imitation du théâtre ? Évidemment... et c'est un résultat déplorable, insiste Marcel L'Herbier.'

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. 'Il serait désastreux qu'il profitât d'un progrès technique pour revenir en arrière, artistiquement parlant. A ce point de vue, l'enregistrement des paroles aura des conséquences regrettables.'

<sup>139</sup> Émile Vuillermoz, 'Hollywood-Revue,' *Le Temps* (6 September 1930). Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-RK-5046. 'C'est une vulgarisation du music-hall dont l'avenir est assuré.'

<sup>140</sup> Daniel Abric, 'Images sur L'Écran,' *L'Européen* (17 September 1930). Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-RK-5046. 'Au 'Madeleine' passe *Hollywood-Revue*. Mon dieu, trop rien à dire. Ce n'est pas du cinéma'.

*Tous*.<sup>141</sup> Under the heading ‘Parlant ou Silencieux?’, quotations from Al Jolson, defending talkies, and Charlie Chaplin, promoting a protection of silent film, were juxtaposed to stage a *faux* battle of sorts. Indeed, Chaplin, having long posed as a hero for the Parisian avant-garde, had become, Crafton writes, a ‘spokesman for anti-talkies’ and his diatribes were frequently reproduced in the press.<sup>142</sup> This time, in the duel orchestrated by *Cinéa Pour Tous*, Chaplin declared: ‘Talking film attacks the traditions (...) on which cinematic art should be judged’: ‘Talking film destroys all the technique that we have acquired.’ ‘I do not think’, he continued, ‘that my voice would add to any of my comedies. On the contrary, it would ruin the illusion I wish to create, that of a humble symbolic silhouette.’<sup>143</sup> ‘Personally’, Jolson responded, ‘I think Charlie Chaplin is committing an error’: ‘Chaplin has said that speech ruins beauty. He is wrong.’ ‘Come on, my dear Chaplin, abandon your superb and glorious isolation, come join us,’ continued Jolson: ‘Come on, Charlie Chaplin, record your first talking film now.’<sup>144</sup> Despite Jolson’s tongue-in-cheek invitation, Chaplin would continue to refuse talkies until 1941.<sup>145</sup>

The agony that talking films activated within the Parisian avant-garde and, in particular, the marked sensitivity to what was perceived as a heightened theatricality seeping into the medium-specific domain of film, however, was not solely a result of clumsy transition-era productions. Instead, to flesh out fully the complex stakes at play in the reaction provoked within these circles, this episode must be understood in context, viewed in relation to and situated within the early history of French film. Because in France, the avant-garde effort to distinguish cinema from other art forms, to purify film from any extra-cinematic elements, had partly been triggered and subsequently contoured by an earlier, pre-war attempt to elevate the status of film by means of an entirely opposing strategy, namely, by seeking to merge cinema with an already established form of bourgeois art: classical French theatre *à la Comédie-Française*. Indeed, it was against this genre-blurring concoction that the avant-garde claim to medium specificity initially emerged.

The arrival of talkies, felt to be forcibly proposing a renewed theatricality in film, therefore signified more than an abstracted threat of theoretical boundary-blurring. Hitting at the very heart of longstanding concerns within the Parisian cinematic avant-garde, talking films denoted a

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<sup>141</sup> ‘Parlant ou Silencieux: Al Jolson répond à Chaplin,’ *Ciné Pour Tous* (15 September 1929): 11-12.

<sup>142</sup> Crafton, 488.

<sup>143</sup> ‘Parlant ou Silencieux,’ 11. ‘*Le film parlant s’attaque aux traditions (...) sur quoi l’art cinématographique doit être jugé.* Le film parlant détruit toute la technique que nous avons acquise. (...) Je ne crois pas que ma voix puisse ajouter à l’une de mes comédies. Au contraire, elle détruirait l’illusion que je veux créer, celle d’une petite silhouette symbolique.’

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, 11-12. ‘Personnellement, déclare Al Jolson, je pense que Charlie Chaplin commet une erreur. (...) Chaplin dit également que la parole détruit la beauté. Il se trompe. (...) Allons, mon cher Chaplin, abandonnez votre superbe et glorieux isolement, venez parmi nous (...). Allons, Charlie Chaplin, tournez vite votre film parlant.’

<sup>145</sup> Chaplin’s first *talkie* was *The Great Dictator* (1941).

sharp threat of atavistic retrogression, ripping up old wounds and undoing the long-fought-for avant-garde construction of film as an autonomous artform. ‘With the advent of talkies,’ wrote René Clair, ‘it seems that the adventures of the first age of silent films are about to start all over again.’ More specifically, Clair added, pointing back to those pre-war productions, the talkies threatened a painful relapse to the period when, round ‘about 1907’, the ‘academy as well as the Comédie-Française were invited to enter the studios’. The ‘newly-born art had so much unsuitable medicine poured down its throat’, Clair deplored, ‘that it is a miracle that it managed to keep alive.’<sup>146</sup>

### *Prewar ‘film d’art’-Productions: Merging Cinema with Theatre à la Comédie-Française*

In the early days of cinema, films were exhibited at vaudeville theatres, music halls, and fairgrounds, to primarily working-class audiences. It was a cultural product more closely aligned to magic tricks than to bourgeois theatre or literature, engaging its audience not through linear modes of storytelling but via technological spectacle.<sup>147</sup> It was a period dominated by what Tom Gunning calls a ‘cinema of attractions’, where the ‘story simply provides a frame upon which to string a demonstration of the magical possibilities of the cinema.’<sup>148</sup>

By 1906, however, as the commercial success of film had become clear, Pathé and Gaumont, the two French film giants, sought to expand the distribution to the middle-classes. Film theatres opened on the grand boulevards. To attract a bourgeois clientele, however, it was felt that a new form of cinematic text also had to be modelled. The industry’s answer to the perceived need to bump up the social status of film was simple: to merge cinema, a low-brow cultural form of ‘entertainment’, with an already established high-brow ‘artform’, theatre. The resulting *film d’art* productions aimed to elevate films simply by stuffing them with as much bourgeois cultural capital as possible: traditional academic subjects (primarily literary or historical adaptations) enacted by famous performers from the France’s national theatre, the Comédie-Française.<sup>149</sup> In

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<sup>146</sup> Clair, *Reflections on the Cinema*, 104.

<sup>147</sup> For a general account of early cinema, see e.g.: Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town*; Richard Abel (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>148</sup> Tom Gunning, ‘The Cinema of Attractions: Early Cinema, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde,’ in *Early Cinema: Space-Frame-Narrative*, eds. Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), 58.

<sup>149</sup> Abel writes: ‘Emerging in 1907-8, *film d’art* referred to a certain kind of fiction film whose aim was to ennoble the cinema through an association with literature and theatre, often through adaptations of historical drama. (...) In February 1908, Paul Lafitte founded Film d’Art, from which the name for this kind of film derived. (...) Other companies soon followed’. (Abel, ‘film d’art,’ in *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, 236.) See also: Alain Carou, ‘Le Film d’Art ou la difficile invention d’une littérature pour l’écran (1908-1909),’ *Revue de l’association française de recherche sur l’histoire du cinéma*, 56 (2008): 9-38; Rémy Campos, Alain Carou, Aurélien Poidevin (eds.), *De la scène à la pellicule: Théâtre, musique et cinéma autour de 1900* (Paris: L’œil d’or, 2021).

this way, Hayward notes, the effect of *film d'art* was a totalising celebration of French culture.<sup>150</sup> The first of its films to premiere in Paris, *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise* (1908), featured a cast almost exclusively drawn from the Comédie-Française, (Fig. 53). Charles Le Bargy, a renowned performer at the national theatre who had been a mainspring in the generation of *film d'art* productions, both co-directed the film and starred in the role of Henry III. The film, accompanied by a musical score written for the occasion by the prominent composer Camille Saint-Saëns, was referred to by *Photo-Ciné-Gazette* as the most important cinematic event since Lumière's 1895 screening.<sup>151</sup>

*Film d'art* productions, therefore, mark a point in French cinema history where film was, Hayward writes, more than ever tied to a literary and academic convention. The effect of this, she continues, was two-fold: working 'on the one hand, to seal its legitimacy as an art form and, on the other, to leave it less free as a new art form to explore its aesthetic potential.' As a result, Hayward elaborates, these films ended up provoking a discussion around the meaning of film as an artform.<sup>152</sup> Similarly, Abel notes that it was precisely the stuffy theatricality of *film d'art* – framing film as 'canned theatre' and, perhaps worse, arguing that this conceptualisation would elevate cinema to an artform – that fuelled the modernist response seeking to posit film as an autonomous domain, the essence of which was ontologically distinguished from theatre, through an exploration of its medium-specific qualities in both theory and practice. 'Although the end effect of the Film d'Art productions was undeniably stultifying to the development of French films', Abel writes, 'it naturally stimulated strong reactions that led to an alternative vision.'<sup>153</sup>

### *An Avant-Garde Definition of Cinema: Purity, Medium-Specificity, and the Autonomous Artform of Film*

The first concrete articulation of this alternative vision, promoting the artistic status of film on the basis of its medium-specific qualities, came in 1911, when Ricciotto Canudo, an Italian writer living in Paris since 1902 and inhabiting the avant-garde circles of the French capital as a close friend of Guillaume Apollinaire, published his 'Manifesto of the Seven Arts'.<sup>154</sup> Inserting cinema as an autonomous artform alongside architecture, painting, sculpture, music, poetry, and dance,

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<sup>150</sup> Hayward, 98.

<sup>151</sup> Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town*, 246.

<sup>152</sup> Hayward, 75-76.

<sup>153</sup> Richard Abel, 'The Contribution of the French Literary Avant-Garde to Film Theory and Criticism (1907-1924),' *Cinema Journal* (Spring 1975): 19.

<sup>154</sup> Ricciotto Canudo, 'Manifeste des Sept Arts,' in *L'Usine aux images* (Paris: Étienne Chiron, 1927), 5-8. Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-RK-54. Canudo also edited the art journal *Montjoie!* (1913-1914).

Canudo announced: ‘The theory of the seven arts has quickly gained ground in all thinking and is spreading across the world. The complete confusion of genres and ideas has brought about a rediscovered preciseness of source.’<sup>155</sup> The essence of cinema’s artistic capacities, Canudo clarified, is contingent on a set of qualities unique to the filmic medium: ‘*to capture and to fix the rhythm of light*. That is Cinema.’<sup>156</sup> Later the same year, Canudo expanded his argument by turning to emphasise the ontological difference between cinema and theatre:

The reels of the engraved celluloid unroll in front of and within the beam of light so rapidly that the presentation lasts for the shortest possible time. No theatre could offer half the changes of set and location provided by the cinematograph with such vertiginous rapidity, even if equipped with the most extraordinarily modern machinery.<sup>157</sup>

Whilst admitting that cinema, still stuck in an imitative phase, ‘conditioned as it is to being the *copy*’, is ‘not yet an art’, ‘the cinematograph’, Canudo enthusiastically prophesied, ‘points the way’ towards ‘the powerful current of a new aesthetic function, whence, in a most astonishing apotheosis, the *Plastic Art in Motion* will arise.’<sup>158</sup> The following year, the filmmaker Abel Gance chimed in with the Italian theoretician. ‘The Cinema?’ wrote Gance: ‘as my friend Canudo says, it is (...) yet to advance beyond its first stammerings’. Concluding his article, Gance echoed Canudo’s modernist prophecy:

Let the cinema be naturally grandiose and human instead of what the popular novels of the past fifty years have been to literature. Let it be innovative instead of following either a maudlin sentimentality or the mechanical comic film which seems to be in fashion, because the true way has yet to be mapped out. Let it not be theatrical especially, but allegorical, symbolic.<sup>159</sup>

Long before the arrival of sound, thus, provoked by the genre-blurring theatricality of pre-war *film d’art* productions, the emerging cinematic avant-garde circles in Paris argued for the

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 5. ‘La théorie des sept arts a gagné rapidement le terrain de toutes les logiques et se répand dans le monde entier. Dans la confusion totale des genres et des idées, elle a apporté une précision de source retrouvée.’

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 8. ‘*capturer et fixer les rythmes de la lumière*. C’est le Cinéma.’

<sup>157</sup> Ricciotto Canudo, ‘The Birth of a Sixth Art,’ trans. Ben Gibson, Don Renvaud, Sergio Sokota, and Deborah Young, in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907-1939, Vol. 1*, ed. Richard Abel, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 59. The article was originally published in *Les Entretiens Idéalistes* (25 October 1911).

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 61, 59.

<sup>159</sup> Abel Gance, ‘A Sixth Art,’ in *ibid.*, 166.

ontological distinction between film and theatre, delineating the artistic essence of cinema along medium-specific lines. As we will see, in the interwar period, this argumentation would be ritualistically repeated as mantra-like motto, working to unify the cinematic avant-garde and strengthen their claims concerning the identity of cinema as an autonomous artform. A central platform for this growing avant-garde discourse on cinema was the emerging field of film journalism. Indeed, although film columns were not unique to France, the French discourse on cinema was, as Hannah Lewis notes, unique in its focus on such ontological and theoretical issues.<sup>160</sup>

### *Infrastructure for an Avant-Garde Vision of Cinema: Film Journalism*

Parallel to the emergence of cinema, a body of film journalism began to take form in France. By 1908, as the first *film d'art* production premiered in Paris, reviews and listings frequently appeared in all large newspapers. This journalistic discourse, expanded during the 1910s to include weekly cinema columns as well as a handful of specialised film magazines, would soon become a crucial infrastructure for debates around the new medium, negotiating its nature and possibilities.<sup>161</sup>

First to promote cinema as an autonomous artform on a regular basis was Louis Delluc. Having taken over as editor-in-chief of *Le Film*, a deluxe magazine aimed primarily at literary and intellectual circles, in 1917, as well as begun to pen a weekly column, 'Cinema et cie', for *Paris-Midi* in 1918, Delluc emerged in the early interwar period as a pioneering voice in French film criticism.<sup>162</sup> Soon, a loosely defined circle of likeminded thinkers began orbit around him, articulating and exploring the artistic conditions of the cinematic medium both in theory and in practice. *Le Film*, remaining under the editorship of Delluc until 1919, was a primary forum for debates during the initial interwar years, publishing texts by leading figures in the Parisian avant-garde including radical filmmakers such as Abel Gance and Marcel L'Herbier, the actor Jacques Catelain, as well as experimental poets like Philippe Soupault, Louis Aragon, and even Apollinaire. New journalistic voices were also introduced, most notably, Léon Moussinac, whose first text on film appeared in a 1919-issue of *Le Film*.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Lewis, 6.

<sup>161</sup> For detailed account of the emergence of this discourse, see Abel, *French Film Theory*, 5-34, 95-124, 195-223, 321-348.

<sup>162</sup> Delluc's column became a daily recurrence from January 1919. Many of his early writings on cinema were collected in the volume *Cinema et cie* (Paris: Grasset, 1919).

<sup>163</sup> See e.g.: Marcel L'Herbier, 'Hermès et le silence,' *Le Film* (29 April 1918); Louis Aragon, 'Du Décor,' *Le Film* (16 September 1918); Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Avant le cinéma,' *Le Film*, 135-6 (21 October 1918); J. G. Catelain, 'Le Film Français est-il Français?,' *Le Film* (7 January 1919).

Echoing Canudo's 1911 dictum, the ontological separation between film and theatre remained a primary occupation. Cleansing film from any extra-cinematic excess was paramount. '[W]e have been drowning in chiaroscuro and 'modern passion'', deplored Delluc in a 1918-issue of *Le Film*: 'the scenarios are as silly as they are poorly devised', either 'adopted from rickety plays' or 'melodramatic novels'.<sup>164</sup> 'And, worst of all,' he continued, 'the acting is still behind the times in its 'theatrical' manner. Their heavy masks come manufactured in bulk by the French Theatre.' Announced as an avant-garde antidote to the current state of cinema, Delluc hailed Gance's *La Dixième Symphonie* as a moment of 'artistic importance' that 'magnifies and synthesises all the revolutionary developments which we have noticed'.<sup>165</sup> In 1921, after announcing that the question of whether 'if Cinema is an art?' was currently 'discussed everywhere', Canudo himself, as part of an article series entitled 'L'Esthétique du Septième Art' published across multiple issues of *Le Film*, reiterated his appeal for medium-specificity: 'Do not search for analogies between Cinema and Theatre. *There is none.*'<sup>166</sup> Identifying the work of Gance, L'Herbier, and – of course – Charlie Chaplin as frontrunners, Canudo enthusiastically announced: 'the Art of Cinema will very quickly seize its stature, chronologically the seventh as I have affirmed'.<sup>167</sup>

As the new decade began, with many more film magazines circulating and most of Paris' newspapers printing weekly cinema columns, this theoretical discourse, initially spearheaded by Canudo and Delluc, had come to encompass a host of writers and journalists regularly writing about film as an autonomous art across popular as well as specialised press. Indeed, when looking back at the early 1920s, 'very different people', Clair elaborated, 'fully concurred on one point: cinema is an autonomous medium of expression which must find its future within itself'.<sup>168</sup> 'Round about 1923', he continued: "'purity' was on everybody's lips."<sup>169</sup> With American films increasingly dominating French screens in the aftermath of the war, leaving the domestic industry radically stifled, however, it soon became clear that a material infrastructure, maintaining and distributing these avant-garde productions, was needed too. As a result, the twenties saw the

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<sup>164</sup> Louis Delluc, 'Notes to Myself: *La Dixième Symphonie*,' trans. Richard Abel, *French Film Theory*, 144. The article originally appeared in *Le Film* 99 (4 February 1918): 3-4.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> The series appeared across multiple issues of *Le Film* (no. 180-183). Reprinted in *L'Usine aux images*, 13-26. 'Ne cherchons pas d'analogies entre le Cinéma et le Théâtre. *Il n'y en a aucune.*' (19).

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. 'Et l'Art cinématographique prendra très rapidement son rang, chronologiquement le septième ai-je affirmé, au milieu de cette figuration supérieure de la vie rêvée, que l'on appelle : l'Art.'

<sup>168</sup> Clair, *Reflections on the Cinema*, 16.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 60. Responding to a poll conducted by Clair in 1923, Léger declared: 'What I hope for in the future is the following: A cinematographic concept which can find its own medium. *As long as the film remains literal or theatrical in origin, it will be nothing.*' Paul Valéry, in turn, announced: 'What should be instituted is pure cinema art, or cinema reduced to its own media.' (*Ibid.*, 15-16). See also: Malcolm Turvey, 'The Medium Matters! In Defense of Medium-Specificity in Classical Film Theory,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Theory*, edited by Kyle Stevens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 95-116.

development of a new form of structural scaffolding, nurturing that ‘alternative’ discourse in cinema, wholly unique to the French context: the *ciné-club*.

### *Infrastructure for an Avant-Garde Vision of Cinema: Ciné-Clubs and Alternative Cinemas*

Initially theorised by Delluc in 1920, it was Canudo who founded Paris’ first *ciné-club* in 1921.<sup>170</sup> Announcing the launch of his *Club des amis du septième art* in the second issue of Delluc’s new magazine, *Cinéa*, Canudo proclaimed its primary aim: ‘To affirm by all means possible the artistic character of cinema.’<sup>171</sup> The *club* hosted private screenings as well as dinners, and members included high-ranking figures of the Parisian avant-garde: Germaine Dulac, Marcel L’Herbier, Léon Moussinac, Fernand Léger, Jacques Catelain, Blaise Cendrars, Jean Cocteau and, of course, Louis Delluc himself, (Fig. 54). In 1922, the publishing of a periodical, entitled *Gazette des sept arts* and edited by Canudo, was added to the list of activities, (Fig. 55). Léon Moussinac featured on the *comité de rédaction*, and club members published articles regularly. Later the same year, Moussinac launched the *Club Français du Cinéma*. Like Canudo’s earlier iteration, Moussinac’s *ciné-club* exclusively screened avant-garde film. On the committee were filmmakers as well as journalists, and – as repeatedly announced on newsletters and other correspondence – the aim of the organisation was ‘the defence, the development, and the progress of cinematic art.’<sup>172</sup>

After the death of Canudo in November of 1923, soon followed by that of Delluc in the spring of 1924, Moussinac merged his *ciné-club* with that of the former to form the *Ciné-Club de France*, the official aim of which was ‘to advocate the study, development, and defence of the cinema as Art’.<sup>173</sup> Apart from showing films by French avant-garde filmmakers, a novel focus, largely resulting from Moussinac’s more regular involvement in the Communist party, was the projection of Soviet cinema.<sup>174</sup> Despite these political aims, however, the club was still fundamentally exclusive. As the invitation card to a 1926 screening of *Battleship Potemkin* details,

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<sup>170</sup> For an in-depth account of Parisian *ciné-clubs*, see Christophe Gauthier, *La passion du cinéma : cinéphiles, ciné-clubs et salles spécialisées à Paris de 1920 à 1929* (Paris: École des Chartes, 1999).

<sup>171</sup> Ricciotto Canudo, ‘L’Art Pour le Septième Art,’ *Cinéa*, 2 (13 May 1921): 16. ‘Affirmer par tous les moyens le caractère artistique du cinéma. Le cinéma étant indéniablement un Art’.

<sup>172</sup> Léon Poirier, ‘Club Français du Cinéma’. Bibliothèque nationale de France (Fonds Léon Moussinac), 4-COL-10/28 (1). ‘Le Club Français du Cinéma a pour but la défense, le développement et le progrès de l’art cinématographique.’ Committee members included e.g. Lucien Wahl and Germain Dulac.

<sup>173</sup> Abel, *French Cinema*, 254–255.

<sup>174</sup> In 1928, together with the filmmaker Jean Lods, Moussinac launched *Les Amis de Spartacus - a ciné-club* with official ties to the French Communist Party. Apart from a stricter political adherence - resulting in a critique of cinema censorship, in particular that of Soviet film, and a critique of commercialisation of the cinema industry, heightened in the image of Hollywood - however, their overarching aim was similar to earlier *ciné-clubs*: ‘l’amélioration de la production cinématographique’. For an account of Moussinac’s political ambitions, see e.g.: Gauthier, 169–181; Valérie Vignaux, ‘Léon Moussinac and L’Humanité as a Cinematic Force: Activist Cinema and Cultural Activism in the Interwar Years in France,’ *Études photographiques*, 27 (2011): 1–13.

events were limited to members only, (Fig. 56).<sup>175</sup> Indeed, as Abel notes, ‘the ciné-club movement remained basically elitist, appealing to a restricted number of artists, intellectuals, cinephiles and ‘boisterous snobs’.<sup>176</sup>

By the mid-twenties, this material infrastructure supporting and maintaining the production and distribution of avant-garde films in interwar France was reinforced and expanded to include a group of alternative film theatres that had begun to crop up across Paris. First out was Jean Tedesco’s re-purposing of the Théâtre Vieux-Colombier, opening as a specialised cinema on 14 November 1924. Tedesco was a member of Moussinac’s *Ciné-Club de France* and, correspondingly, his programming was preserved for avant-garde films or, in Tedesco’s words, ‘quality films that the commercial industry had not allowed the majority of the public to see.’<sup>177</sup> In January of 1926, another *Ciné-Club de France*-member, Armand Tallier, along with Laurence Myrka, opened the doors to the Studio des Ursulines. Exclusively screening avant-garde and pre-war films, the cinema sought to recruit its audiences, Tallier and Myrka announced, from ‘the elite of writers, artists, intellectuals of the *quartier latin*’.<sup>178</sup> In 1928, yet another cinema in the row of alternative, Parisian film theatres specialising in avant-garde cinema opened its doors – *Studio 28* – where, in April 1929, a retrospective of Delluc’s films were screened.

Towards the end of the decade, then, a field of film critics, theorists, filmmakers, and artists – initially orbiting around Canudo and Delluc, but soon widened to inhabit a multi-layered network, consisting of ciné-clubs and alternative cinemas as well as a plethora of publications and newspapers – was cemented, working to construct and preserve the artistic autonomy of film in both practical and theoretical terms.<sup>179</sup> As a clear mark of their success, throughout the twenties, cinema was increasingly accepted and exhibited within official institutions and spaces traditionally exclusive to the fine arts. Already in 1921, Canudo and Moussinac persuaded the president of the Salon d’Automne, Franz Jourdain, to include film screenings as part of the

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<sup>175</sup> In 1926, the club had no more than fifty-eight members, including writers and journalists (e.g.: Moussinac, Vuillermoz, Jeanne), filmmakers (e.g.: Clair, Dulac, Gance, L’Herbier) and actors (e.g.: Catelain, Toulout).

<sup>176</sup> Abel, *French Cinema*, 264.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 257. Starting in the winter of 1925, a series of conferences was organised at the Vieux-Colombier together with *Ciné-Club de France*, featuring talks by e.g. Dulac, Epstein, L’Herbier. (‘Le Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier organise avec le concours des *Cahiers du Mois* et du Ciné-Club de France deux séries de Conférences sur le Cinéma’. Invitation Card. Bibliothèque nationale de France (Fonds Léon Moussinac), 4-COL-10/29 (6).

<sup>178</sup> ‘Studio Ursulines’. Letter by Tallier and Myrka announcing the opening of their cinema. Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-RK-776. ‘Nous nous proposons de recruter notre public parmi l’élite des écrivains, des artistes, des intellectuels du quartier latin’. A quote from Moussinac graced all communication and programs from Studio Ursulines (‘Un art naît, se développe, découvre une à une ses lois propres, marche lentement vers sa perfection. Un art qui sera l’expression même, hardie, puissante, originale de l’idéal des temps modernes.’)

<sup>179</sup> Abel, *French Cinema*, 260.

exposition of 1921, a feature which was later repeated in 1922 and 1923.<sup>180</sup> As both Abel and Bordwell point out, these screenings marked the earliest semi-official recognition of cinema as an artform.<sup>181</sup>

Shouldering the legacy and ambitions of Canudo and Delluc, Moussinac arranged the first exhibition devoted solely to film at the Parisian Musée Galliera in 1924, featuring works by Lumière, Gance, and L'Herbier. Its success prompted *cinéastes* to lobby for a permanent film museum in France.<sup>182</sup> The following summer, an even larger exhibition of cinema featured at the 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*. The display, organised by Moussinac, included works by Germaine Dulac, René Clair, as well as Louis Delluc.<sup>183</sup> Two years later, as the *Ciné-Club de France* held its *salon du cinéma* at the *Galérie d'art de la Grande maison de Blanc* for the second consecutive year, a posthumous anthology of Canudo's writings, including the 1911 manifesto, was published in Paris. The first line of the preface quotes the film maker Jean Epstein, celebrating Canudo as 'a missionary of cinematic poetry': 'There are many of us here who can remember having been converted to cinema by this apostle.'<sup>184</sup>

As the cinematic avant-garde in Paris, after long-term campaigning across popular as well as specialised press, and the intricate construction of an alternative distribution network, was finally gaining official acknowledgement, and film, as a result, had begun to be discursively treated as an autonomous artform worthy of attention, the first talkies arrived in the French capital, threatening to undo its work. 'As a result of all that so-called technical progress, the seventh art is in danger of getting bogged', warned Vuillermoz.<sup>185</sup> The despair provoked by the novel boundary-blurring sound technology was palpable already in an article published in the inaugural issue of *Pour Vous* as André Arnoux, in the role of editor-in-chief, travelled to London in 1928 to review the first talking film screened on European soil:

I am deeply attached to the cinema. For me, its play of black and white, its silence, the rhythmic succession of its images, its power to relegate the word, the ancient symbol of human bondage, to the background, seemed to me the

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<sup>180</sup> See e.g.: Ricciotto Canudo, 'Le Cinéma au Salon d'Automne,' *Le Petit Journal* (4 November 1921): 4.

<sup>181</sup> Abel, *French Cinema*, 252-253 and Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 23-24.

<sup>182</sup> For a discussion on the idea of a French film museum, see e.g.: Christophe Gauthier and Laure Brost, '1927: Year One of the French Film Heritage?', *Film History*, vol. 17, no. 2-3 (2005): 289-306.

<sup>183</sup> Vigereux, 2.

<sup>184</sup> Fernand Divoire, 'Préface,' in *L'Usine aux images*, 1. 'Canudo (...) a été un missionnaire de la poésie au cinéma (...). Ils sont bien quelques-uns parmi nous qui peuvent reconnaître avoir été convertis au cinéma par ce missionnaire'.

<sup>185</sup> Vuillermoz quoted in Clair, *Reflections on the Cinema*, 85.

promise of a new and wonderful art. Now a barbaric invention comes to destroy them all. So may I be forgiven for being a little bitter, and perhaps unjust? To have worked so hard and hoped so much, simply to end up with the old down-at-heels theatrical formula, and be forced to submit once more to the tyranny of words and noises, made even more unbearable by a mechanical intermediary!<sup>186</sup>

Some six months later, whilst Hollywood talkies had firmly inundated Parisian cinemas, René Clair envisioned a gloomy future for the filmic medium. In his review of *Broadway Melody*, published in a 1929-issue of *Pour Vous*, Clair deplored: ‘It is too late for those who love the art of moving pictures to deplore the effects of this barbaric invasion.’<sup>187</sup>

To the Parisian cinematic avant-garde, thus, the novel noise engendered by the new sound technology not only transgressed the autonomous identity of cinema but, moreover, transformed talking films into a menacing vehicle of atavistic regression, threatening to push cinema backwards to its earlier existence of filmed theatre. As a result, avant-garde rejections of the new filmic format frequently conflated the talkie-phenomenon with that of *film d’art* productions, suggesting that the former bodied forth a devastating relapse to the boundary-blurring breakdown of the latter. In 1927, Clair explained: ‘Towards 1907, one wanted to make *film d’art*. (...) This gross error has produced the fruits with which you are familiar’.<sup>188</sup> After eulogising avant-garde efforts through which, he wrote, ‘film was purified’ as a result of ‘having been separated more and more from theatrical and literary forms that suppressed its childhood’, Clair turned to emphasise a renewed ‘duty to defend cinema’, the future of which, he continued, ‘is today gravely threatened’:

I am not talking of colour film (...) but of, for example, talking cinema, dreadful monster, creation against nature, thanks to which the screen will become a poor theatre. (With a shiver, we learn that that certain American industrials, among the most dangerous, view talking film as the spectacle of the future and work as we speak to realise this frightening prophecy.)<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Arnoux (1928) quoted in *ibid.*, 87.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>188</sup> René Clair, ‘Le Cinématographe contre l’Esprit,’ *Cinéma-gazette* (11 March 1927). 464. ‘Vers 1907 on voulut faire du film d’art. (...) Cette grossière erreur a produit les fruits que vous connaissez’.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. ‘Déjà, grâce aux efforts de ceux qui refusent de voir dans le cinéma uniquement un métier routinier, une évolution s’accomplit. Trop lentement pour que nous puissions nous en rendre compte avec netteté, le film se purifie. Depuis une dizaine d’années il tend – dans ses meilleures parties – à se séparer de plus en plus des formes théâtrales et littéraires qui ont opprimé sa

In a 1928-issue of *Pour Vous*, as a number of cultural celebrities responded to a questionnaire on the new format, the Comédie-Française, from where the *film d'art* productions had recruited their actors, similarly loomed as a metaphor for excessive theatricality threatening the purity of film.<sup>190</sup> Franz Jourdain, who, as we have seen, had been persuaded by Canudo and Moussinac to include film in the Salon d'Automne in 1921, announced: 'I do not understand the necessity of talking film.' 'If I wish to hear the marvellous harmony from the verses of *The Misanthrope*,' he continued, 'I would logically go and pass the morning or evening at the Comédie-Française at not at the cinema.'<sup>191</sup> Fernand Léger, in turn, after dubbing the new sound technology 'dangerous', and an attempt to transpose 'theatre to the screen', projected an anguished prophecy: 'Imagine, with the stars of the Comédie-Française (the worst shambles from which one might recruit human cinematic material), they will make them speak as if at Comédie-Française!'<sup>192</sup> Similarly, when reviewing the Paris premiere of *Hollywood-Revue* in 1930, Vuillermoz dubbed the American musical a '*Comédie-Française voyage*'.<sup>193</sup> Indeed, as Vuillermoz had summarised in 1934, when looking back at the arrival of talking film:

The main grievance against the sound cinema's invention was the fear of seeing the filmic art transformed into a sort of inferior theatre, at the moment when the principle of its independence, of its own technique, seemed to triumph (...). Twenty years of struggle to make the cinema into something more than a succession of mimed scenes (...) risked being lost (...).<sup>194</sup>

When *Documents* embraced the Hollywood talkie, the critical gesture it amounted to was not only a challenge to long-standing Third Republican fears of Americanisation, sabotaging the maintenance of France's self-image of supposed superiority on the world stage. It was also a subversive attack on the cinematic avant-garde. In stark contrast to the more-or-less

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jeunesse. Mais, dans tous les pays, et à tous ceux qui se rendent clairement compte de la situation, s'impose le devoir de défendre le cinématographe (...) Car, cet avenir à l'avènement duquel tant d'efforts sont voués, est gravement menacé aujourd'hui. (...) Je ne parle pas du cinéma en couleurs (...) mais, par exemple, du cinéma parlant, monstre redoutable, création contre-nature, grâce à laquelle l'écran deviendrait un pauvre théâtre (...) (On n'apprendra pas sans frémir que certains industriels américains, parmi les plus dangereux, voient sans le cinéma-parlant le spectacle de l'avenir et qu'ils travaillent dès maintenant à réaliser cette effrayante prophétie.)'

<sup>190</sup> 'Ce qu'ils pensent du son et de la couleur...', *Pour Vous* (6 December 1928): 2.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid. 'Je ne comprends pas la nécessité du film parlant. (...) Si je tiens à écouter la merveilleuse harmonie des vers du *Misanthrope*, je devrai logiquement aller passer une matinée ou une soirée à la Comédie-Française et ne pas arriver devant l'écran.'

<sup>192</sup> Ibid. 'Ils sont dangereux pour 99% des metteurs en scène qui sont archi-médiocres, car ils vont sauter là-dessus pour faire de 'l'imitation de la vie' du théâtre à l'écran. Pensez donc, avec des vedettes de la Comédie-Française (le plus mauvais des chantiers où l'on peut aller recruter du matériel humain cinématographique), ils vont les faire parler comme à la Comédie-Française !'

<sup>193</sup> Vuillermoz, '*Hollywood-Revue*'.

<sup>194</sup> Vuillermoz (1934), quoted in O'Brien, 41.

homogenous rejection of talking films in the artistic circles of interwar Paris, to whom – as we have seen – the extra-cinematic excess of sound was felt not only to jeopardise its medium-specificity and autonomy as an artform, but also to trigger a painful backslide to the genre-blurring ‘mistake’ of prewar *film d’art* productions, *Documents* turned to praise precisely those elements that had troubled the cinematic avant-garde: the uncurbed impurity, excessive theatricality, and the lack of elevation or aesthetics.

*Talkies in Documents: ‘There is not the slightest suspicion of an aesthetic in this spectacle’*

When reviewing *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929*, Leiris enthusiastically elaborated: ‘There is not the slightest suspicion of an aesthetic in this spectacle (...), everything here is popular, admirably cheap.’<sup>195</sup> Celebrating ‘the absolute deficiency of any idea, the unimaginable puerility of the scenario, the tawdry luxuriousness, the almanac jokes, the quality reminiscent of old phonographs, provincial Folies-Bergère, sham virginity’, Leiris went on to announce: ‘*What is more, intellectual circles could feel only contempt for such a simple, unpretentious spectacle. It is not so easy to recapture the freshness of childhood ... Even less easy than to learn English.*’<sup>196</sup> The ‘brilliant scenes in *Fox Follies*’ were thus identified as a form of corrective – unbridled and excessive – to a stuffy and restricted modern culture, a ‘society’ instructing us to ‘live to be bored, and scorn others, from the heights of’, Leiris deplored, ‘seriousness, nobility, morality...’<sup>197</sup>

In a later issue, when Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes reviewed *Hallelujah*, a 1929 MGM-talkie directed by King Vidor, he similarly championed its ‘denuded production’.<sup>198</sup> ‘The intrigue is without complication’, he writes: ‘there is no record of any aesthetic’. ‘Are we far from cinema?’ Ribemont-Dessaignes asked, only to subversively invert the well-rehearsed avant-garde critique of talkies: ‘On the contrary, this is nothing but cinema.’<sup>199</sup> The review appeared in print months before *Hallelujah* premiered in Paris. ‘It is rather surprising that one has to defend a work before

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<sup>195</sup> Leiris, ‘Fox Movietone Follies of 1929’.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, ‘Hallelujah: Film de King Vidor,’ *Documents* (4: 1930): 237-238. ‘une réalisation dénudée’. *Hallelujah*, set in the American South, was the first film to feature an all-black cast and traded liberally in familiar racist stereotypes, see e.g.: Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 19-51. As such, *Documents* celebration of *Hallelujah*’s supposedly unpretentious and unmasked purity must be understood in terms of wider primitivist discourses traversing interwar Paris. Notably, *The Jazz Singer* too trades in racist discourses, most blatantly through the use of blackface in numerous scenes.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid. ‘L’intrigue est sans complication (...) il ne fait état d’aucune esthétique (...). Nous sommes loin du cinéma ? Il ne s’agit au contraire que de cinéma’.

the public knows of it, particularly if it is a film’, admitted Ribemont-Dessaigues.<sup>200</sup> Rather than a traditional review, therefore, the article instead amounts to a criticism of its delayed premiere. ‘One delivers the worst ineptitudes to the masses’, he deplored, ‘but one refuses it *Hallelujah*’.<sup>201</sup> ‘So as we sink into mediocrity’, Ribemont-Dessaigues concluded, it might be ‘necessary to, once and for all, give up hope of the national mentality as a result of its vote, and of the intellectuals because of their silence.’<sup>202</sup>

*Documents*’ crusade for a French screening of the Hollywood-*talkie* was extended in the following issue as a campaign-poster of sorts was published, appealing for its immediate importation, (Fig. 57). Across a full-page spread, the American poster for *Hallelujah*, announcing ‘A METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER ALL TALKING SINGING DANCING DRAMA’, featured alongside a programme from its New York screening. Encircling the poster, a text, superimposed by *Documents*, reads: ‘No cinema-owner here is RICH ENOUGH to let us SEE and HEAR ‘HALLELUJAH’ the most beautiful film in the WORLD’. Satirising the protectionist phraseology propelled both ciné-clubs and the Third Republican establishment, *Documents*’ campaign slogan called not for the curbing of Hollywood *talkies*, but on the contrary, for acceleration of their import to French cinemas.<sup>203</sup>

On the preceding page of the same issue, where Georges-Henri Rivière eulogised the opening of the Cinéma du Panthéon, a theatre that specialised in screening Hollywood films in their original language, he correspondingly portrayed the venue as a much-needed respite, as a dissident counter-space to that alternative distribution circuit constructed by the Parisian avant-garde since the early 1920s: ‘In a pleasant and comfortable theatre, all those who despise both the ridiculous productions of many European cinéastes and the avant-garde chapels of mouldy odour will be able to see and hear excellent *talkies*’.<sup>204</sup> After once more bemoaning the fact that the Parisian theatre had not yet been able to show *Hallelujah* for ‘material reasons’, Rivière went on to express his hopes for an imminent screening of *Paramount on parade* – an all-star revue produced by

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid. ‘C’est un prodige assez étonnant qu’il faille défendre une œuvre avant que le public en ait connaissance, particulièrement s’il s’agit d’un film.’

<sup>201</sup> Ibid. ‘On livre à la foule les pires inepties avec une frénésie qui, si on l’analysait, révélerait à la fois un mépris bouleversant et des intentions diaboliques, mais on lui refuse *Hallelujah*, à moins qu’avant de le présenter on n’exécute des manœuvres telles qu’on provoque par la même les réactions les plus funestes.’

<sup>202</sup> Ibid. ‘Alors que nous sombrons dans la médiocrité (...) nous devons voir, avec l’apparition possible d’*Hallelujah*, s’il faut désespérer une fois par toutes de la mentalité à cause de sa voix, et des intellectuels à cause de leur silence.’

<sup>203</sup> For example, an advertisement for Vieux-Colombier claimed to screen ‘films de qualité dont l’exploitation commerciale n’a pas permis à la majorité du public de les voir.’ (*Cinéa*, 1 November 1924). The ad lists e.g. Gance, Delluc, Epstein, L’Herbier, and – of course – Chaplin.

<sup>204</sup> Rivière, ‘Cinéma du Panthéon,’ 306. ‘Dans une salle plaisante et confortable, tous ceux qui méprisent également les ridicules productions de maints cinéastes d’Europe et des chapelles d’avant-garde à l’odeur de moisi pourront voir et entendre d’excellents *talkies*’.

Paramount following the success of format manifested by *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929* and *Hollywood-Revue*.<sup>205</sup>

In June of 1930, when Leiris reviewed *Hallelujah* after its sought-after Paris premiere, his celebratory article, published in *La Revue du cinéma*, was dedicated to Rivière.<sup>206</sup> ‘In an epoch as flat as ours’, wrote Leiris, ‘where saints, sized to measure a civilisation of industrials, traders, and bankers, take on the form of ‘honourable’ and petty figures like Thérèse de Lisieux’:

such a film is important as it comes to remind us of veritable mystique, that which has nothing to do with religion and the abominable airs of white Christian churches, but which can be found everywhere: in eroticism, in alcohol, in the scandal, in the adventure of any order whatsoever – as well as in the hysterical crisis of the sensual swoon and sacred ecstasy.<sup>207</sup>

*Documents*’ dissident counter-campaign, subversively glorifying the arrival of talkies as well as the unsettling reverberations they enacted in France, also comprised an unflinching attack on the cinematic avant-garde, published in an earlier issue (7:1929).<sup>208</sup> The article, entitled ‘Cinéma d’Avant-Garde’, was penned by Robert Desnos, who had been writing film reviews for a handful of newspapers, amongst them *Le Soir*, *Paris-Journal*, *Le Journal littéraire* and *Le Merle*, since the mid-1920s.<sup>209</sup> Much like Canudo had done in 1911, Desnos set off by identifying a jarring ‘confusion’: ‘a mistaken kind of thinking has created much inauspicious confusion in the cinema.’<sup>210</sup> Radically upending the long-standing avant-garde dogma, however, the dangerous entanglement identified by *Documents* is not that of genre-blurring – jeopardising the autonomy and, thus, the artistic status of cinema – but, on the contrary, a misinformed avant-garde desire to identify film as an elevated artform in the first place. ‘An exaggerated respect for art and a mystique of expression’, Desnos satirised:

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid. ‘Nous y serons malheureusement privés, m’assure Marc Allégret, de *Hallelujah*, pour des raisons d’ordre matériel’.

<sup>206</sup> Michel Leiris, ‘Saints noirs,’ *La Revue du cinéma*, no. 11 (1 June 1930): 30-33. Reprinted in *Zébrage*, 21-25.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid. 24-25. ‘À une époque aussi plate que la nôtre, (...) cette époque pourrie où les saints, taillés à la mesure d’une civilisation d’industriels, de commerçants et de banquiers, prennent la forme de figurines ‘honorables’ et mesquines genre Thérèse de Lisieux, un tel film est important parce qu’il vient nous rappeler quelle est la mystique véritable, celle qui n’a rien à voir avec la religion et les abdominales simagrées des églises chrétiennes blanches, mais peut se retrouver dans tout : dans l’érotisme, dans l’alcool, dans le scandale, dans l’aventure de quelque ordre qu’elle soit – aussi bien dans la crise d’hystérie dans la pâmoison sensuelle et l’extase sacrée.’

<sup>208</sup> Robert Desnos, ‘Cinéma d’Avant-Garde,’ in *French Film Theory*, 429-432.

<sup>209</sup> Much of Desnos’ writings on cinema, including that appearing in *Documents*, has been collated in Robert Desnos, *Les rayons et les ombres : Cinéma*, edited and introduced by Marie-Claire Dumas (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

<sup>210</sup> Desnos, ‘Cinéma d’Avant-Garde,’ 429.

has led a whole group of producers, actors, and audiences to the creation of so-called avant-garde cinema, remarkable for the rapidity with which its productions become obsolete, for its absence of human emotion, and for risks it obliges all cinema to run.<sup>211</sup>

Framed as a particularly deplorable articulation, stills from L'Herbier's 1924 *Inhumaine*, starring Jacque Catelain and featuring a set-design by Fernand Léger illustrated the article, alongside three stills from Hollywood films: Georges Bancroft in *Underworld*, Erich von Stroheim and Fay Wray in *The Wedding March*, and Betty Compson in *The Docks of New York*. 'I will not harp too much on the ridiculousness of our actors', wrote Desnos:

A comparison between photographs of Bancroft and of Jacque Catelain is enough to show the grotesqueness and vanity of the latter, who we may take to be the prototype of the avant-garde actor, just as Monsieur Marcel L'Herbier is the prototype of the director.<sup>212</sup>

Although such 'works have had their apologists', Desnos continued: 'It is enough, to be convinced of the incredible degree of error and artifice to which critics aspire, to read the article by M. Moussinac devoted to his brother-in-law's film *24 heures en 30 minutes*.'<sup>213</sup> The film, produced by Jean Lods and Boris Kaufman, the former of which had helped found Moussinac's 1928 *ciné-club*, *Les Amis de Spartacus*, was screened at the Vieux-Colombier in October of 1929.<sup>214</sup> Writing in *L'Humanité*, Léon Moussinac praised it as 'the first *scientific* effort realised in France, apart from some fragments in the works by Gance.'<sup>215</sup>

Dubbing these avant-garde efforts 'hair in the soup cinema', Desnos scathingly announced: 'Only candor is revolutionary. Insincerity and lying are characteristics of reaction.'<sup>216</sup> 'It's this candor that enables us today', he continues, to separate 'the real revolutionary films' – such as, Desnos listed, *Battleship Potemkin*, *The Gold Rush*, *The Wedding March*, and *Un Chien andalou* – from

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. Desnos had dubbed Hollywood 'the last refuge for the tumultuous emotions of the human spirit' and a 'city of dream and miracle'. ('Hollywood,' *Le Soir*, 23 April 1927). The following year, as the debate around Herriot's quota echoed across the French press, Desnos announced that the agreement would lower the French film industry 'to the most mediocre rang.' (*Le Soir*, 27 September 1928).

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 430.

<sup>214</sup> For an more detail on *Les Amis de Spartacus*, see n174p167.

<sup>215</sup> Léon Moussinac, 'Sur trois films dits d'avant-garde,' *L'Humanité* (6 October 1929): 4. 'On peut dire que c'est le premier essai *scientifique* qui est réalisé en France, à part certains fragments des œuvres de Gance.'

<sup>216</sup> Desnos, 'Cinéma d'Avant-Garde,' 430-431.

disingenuous productions such as L’Herbier’s *Inhumaine* or Jean Epstein’s *La Chute de la maison Usher*, the latter of which reveals, Desnos explained, ‘Epstein’s lack, or rather paralysis, of imagination’.<sup>217</sup> Indeed, after ridiculing the Parisian cinematic avant-garde for claiming to have had “discovered” Chaplin four or five years after the man in the street’, Desnos went on to declare: ‘Whosoever assumes to count himself among these timorous revolutionaries is simply playing the game of ‘if the cap fits, wear it.’ Fine disguises, but you don’t fool us.’<sup>218</sup> ‘The question is,’ Desnos teased, ‘avant-garde of what?’<sup>219</sup> ‘To appreciate these advanced souls to the full it would suffice to observe their attitude when sound film came along’, he deplored: ‘Naught but a cry of horror left those delicate lips.’<sup>220</sup>

Desnos’ tirade ends on a suggestive note, envisioning *talking film* as a possible way out of the pretentious cul-de-sac currently constricting French minds. ‘Meanwhile’, he elaborated, ‘outside of all artistic theory’, ‘on the screen, Betty Compson signals that she has something to say. And she will say it.’<sup>221</sup> Fuelled with unbridled excess, the talkie thus amounted to an ideal instrument with which *Documents* could contaminate lofty visions of cinematic purity and celebratorily shatter the idealising pretensions looming at the heart of the cinematic avant-garde. The boundary-blurring transgression of talking film, as Leiris wrote in his dictionary-definition of the timely

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid. Reviewing Buñuel’s film in *Le Merle*, Desnos celebrated the humanity of its violence. ‘*Un Chien andalou*’, he writes, ‘is certainly morbid’. But, he continues, turning directly to the reader, ‘with your hand on your heart... are you not a bit morbid?’. ‘Buñuel’s film addresses therefore the most well-kept secrets of the human soul and it addresses them poetically (...) placing man face to face with his own image, stripped, skinned, autopsied without pity.’ (*Le Merle*, 28 June 1929). In *Documents* (4:1929), as part of his dictionary-entry on ‘Eye’, Bataille too celebrated the excessive base-reality of the film: ‘Buñuel himself, after filming the slit-open eye, remained sick for a week’. Moreover, Dalí – arriving in Paris in 1929 to work on *Un Chien andalou* with Buñuel – soon joined Breton’s Surrealist circle, after Bataille had failed to recruit the Spanish artist. As a result, when Bataille published an essay on Dalí’s *The Labyrinthine Game* in *Documents* (7:1929), the text amounted to a disguised critique of Bretonian Surrealism. Indeed, after having been denied permission to reproduce the painting in *Documents*, Bataille defiantly responded by instead including a sketch drawing of it. Spiteri writes: ‘The catalyst for the emergence of the Breton-Bataille polemic was Salvador Dalí’. (‘Georges Bataille, André Breton, and the Culture of Surrealism,’ 129).

<sup>218</sup> Desnos, ‘Cinéma d’Avant-Garde,’ 430-431.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 431.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid. In the essay, Desnos makes a distinction between *film parlant* and *film sonore*, briefly stating that, since we have not yet seen ‘real talking films’, he will leave it out of his current discussion. The difference between ‘sound film’ (where sound had been post-synchronised) and ‘talking film’ (featuring direct-recorded sound) was blurry in the early transition period, since even films such as *The Jazz Singer* – advertised in France as ‘LE VÉRITABLE FILM PARLANT’ – only featured segments of synchronised sound. However, it should be noted that, within the broader avant-garde, this distinction carried some weight in discourse, as the idea of a nonsynchronous sound-montage, placed in disjunction with the image, was discussed as a possible use of the novel technology by e.g., Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Gregori Alexandrov.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid. Betty Compson had featured in *Weary River*, the American poster of which was used to illustrate Leiris entry on ‘Talkie’. Before splitting with the Surrealists in 1929, Desnos had expressed doubts of *talking films*, fearing that they would jeopardise the possibility of ‘freedom’ and ‘dream’ in cinema. His primary concern, however, was not that of preserving a medium-specific cinematic purity, but rather issues arising when translating Hollywood films with dubious dubbing techniques: ‘Imagine (...) Betty Compson talking in the grotesque voice of some actor of *la rue de Richelieu*!’ (‘Films Parlants,’ *Le Soir*, 26 June 1928). In an earlier article, Desnos had similarly announced: ‘Talking film will without a doubt be very good, but I would be curious to know how one will translate films to foreign languages.’ (*Le Soir*, 15 June 1928). Indeed, when reviewing *The Jazz Singer*, Desnos emphasised the ‘international character’ of sound film, regardless of its language: ‘noise and sound, are they not the source of emotion in all nations, regardless of their origin? (...) The chant of a muezzin from the top of a minaret at the heart of Fez, does it not affect the European who disembarked the day before even more since he does not know Arabic?’ (‘Le chanteur de jazz,’ *Le Merle* (17 May 1929): 18).

topic, constituted a liberating corrective to a ‘narrow-minded’ modernity of ‘seriousness, nobility, and morality’.<sup>222</sup>

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In interwar France, the apocalyptic image of Hollywood invading, influencing, and incapacitating French identity and culture was anxiously prophesied by both the Third Republican establishment and the dominant cinematic avant-garde. Telling of its legibility in discourse, and of the uncompromisingly destabilising signification it denoted, the devastating prophecy had been satirically evoked in an earlier issue too. Indeed, when Bataille set off to ridicule modern civilisation in the illustrated essay ‘Figure Humaine’, published in *Documents* (4:1929), he wrote: ‘It is probably a rooster’s crow, muffled but nonetheless intoxicating, that can be heard when the globe of the earth appears before our eyes trampled under the heels of a dazzling American star in a bathing suit.’<sup>223</sup>

The rooster, or *coq*, of course, is not only the symbol of France but, more specifically, the logo of Pathé, proudly disseminated since 1905, often accompanied by the company slogan: ‘Je chante haut et clair’. The image of a rooster’s crow ‘muffled’ as it is squashed ‘under the heels of a dazzling American star in a bathing suit’, thus, composes a painfully frank portrayal of the interwar ascendancy of America and the concomitant decline of French power on the world stage. Contrary to the official establishment and the prevailing cinematic avant-garde circles in Paris, however, Bataille, writing in ‘Figure Humaine’, did not seek to counteract this Hollywood-invasion, via quota-agreements or alternative *ciné-clubs*, but instead subversively welcomed it as a refreshing recalibration of swindling self-images. ‘Why, in fact, be ashamed of such sudden fascination?’ he writes: ‘Why hide that our few remaining exhilarating dreams are portrayed by the swift bodies of some young American girls?’<sup>224</sup>

Moreover, in fact, the visual metaphor for cultural imperialism used by Bataille – the globe of the earth trampled underfoot – is the same as that found in Jules Dalou’s *The Triumph of the Republic* (1899), (Fig. 58). This bombastic bronze sculpture, gracing Paris’ Place de la Nation, had been commissioned by the City of Paris as part of celebrations for the centenary of the Revolution.

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<sup>222</sup> Leiris, ‘Talkie’; Leiris, ‘Fox Movietone Follies of 1929’.

<sup>223</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘Figure Humaine,’ *Documents* (4:1929): 200. ‘Et il y a probablement un cri de coq étouffé, mais grisant, dans la phrase où le globe terrestre apparaît à nos yeux sous les talons d’une éblouissante star américaine en maillot de bain.’

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 200. ‘Pourquoi, en effet, aurait-on la pudeur d’une aussi brusque fascination ? Pourquoi cacher que les rares espoirs grisants qui subsistent sont décrits par les corps rapides de quelques jeunes filles américaines ?’

Marianne, personifying the Republic, is stood *on top of the world*, flanked by allegorical representations of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In Bataille's vision, Marianne has been replaced by 'a dazzling American star in a bathing suit'. Alongside the influx of American films, publicity material featuring Hollywood stars had been spreading throughout the visual culture of interwar France. In September of 1929, the same month as 'Figure Humaine' was printed in *Documents*, a full-page spread, entitled '*les joies de la plage*', featuring talkie-celebrities such as Bessie Love and Joan Crawford on the beach, appeared in *Cinéa*, (Fig. 59).

Accompanying Bataille's text in the pages of *Documents* is a set of photographic portraits, primarily shot by Nadar and mainly featuring famous stage performers from France's national theatre, the Comédie-Française, (Fig. 60).<sup>225</sup> In fact, many of the actors depicted had participated in the notorious pre-war *film d'art* productions that sought to elevate the cinematic medium to a bourgeois artform by merging it with classical theatre.<sup>226</sup> In the visual culture of interwar France, thus, the assemblage of photographic portraits published in *Documents* signify precisely the type of theatricality that the avant-garde sought to purify the filmic medium of, the ghostly reappearance of which, through the novel format of talking film, was terrorising Paris' cinematic circles as Bataille penned his article.<sup>227</sup> Significantly, on the final page of 'Figure Humaine'

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<sup>225</sup> Didi-Huberman positions these images as an 'iconographic counterpoint', enacting a 'decomposition of anthropomorphism' by setting up 'a conflict impossible to resolve', an 'irritant' enacting a 'breach against (...) all iconographic 'agreements' with the visible world in general.' (41-69). This perceived glitch was subsequently mined for further deconstructive interpretation by Linda Steer. The appropriated photographs illustrating 'Figure Humaine', she writes, reveal 'the discontinuity between past and present'. 'For Bataille', Steer explains, 'the photograph is not the point of identification but the point of recoil and negation.' As such, the critical effect of such subversive reframing, is 'a slippage between the photographed and the real': 'The past, of which the photograph continues to furnish evidence and, in fact, to produce it, does not guarantee the continuity of identity, but negates it, opening up the incompatible abyss of difference.' (141-142).

<sup>226</sup> Most notably: Cécile Sorel, who has starred in *La Tosca* (1909), a film based on the late nineteenth-century play written by Victorien Sardou; Gabrielle Réjane, who had featured in one of the earliest *films d'art* productions, *Britannicus* (1908), based on a play by famous playwright and member of the French academy, Jean Racine, as well as in *Madame Sans-Gêne* (1911); and Jean Mounet-Sully, who after having featured alongside Réjane in *Britannicus*, went on to star in an array of *films d'art* productions, such as *Hamlet*, *Baiser de Judas*, and *Oedipe Roi*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, when Pathé, in 1910, produced a poster featuring portraits of their most famous *film d'art* stars, Mounet-Sully featured at the very top, soon followed by Cécile Sorel, (fig. 61). As a result of such widespread fame, the renown of these performers still reverberated in the interwar period. When Réjane died in 1920, *Le Figaro* announced the loss 'of the soul of Paris'. Cécile Sorel, in turn, who only retired in 1933, after having been at the Comédie-Française since 1904, had, by the interwar period, become intimately tied with the image of national theatre. As a result, Sorel often featured as a target of ridicule in the various satirical treatments of the lofty institution and its members. Tellingly, when an anthology of satirical drawings of the Comédie-Française was published in 1930, a drawing of Sorel graced its cover. In 1933, when *L'Illustration* published a full-spread eulogy of the veteran actress, the same photograph that had featured in *Documents*, shot by Nadar, was reprinted.

<sup>227</sup> It should be noted that some of the portraits, appearing on the final page of Bataille's essay, have been arranged similarly to the well-known Surrealist format, as seen in the final issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*. As a result, Didi-Huberman, and others, have made a connection between the images and Bataille's polemic relation to Breton during the *Documents*-years. However, since the Surrealist collage was published in December of 1929, and 'Figure Humaine' appeared in *Documents* already in September of the same year, as noted by Baker, such immediate connection appears more strenuous, see Simon Baker, 'The thinking man and the femme sans tête,' *RES*, vol.38, no.1 (Autumn, 2000): 186-210. Nonetheless, a similar formatting had appeared in earlier Surrealist collages, notably that appearing in the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924), featuring portraits arranged around a larger photograph of the anarchist Germaine Berton. The Surrealists, of course, had been engaging with and partaking in these cinematic avant-garde circles. As we have seen, Aragon and Soupault published in Delluc's *Le Film* already in 1918. Breton himself had collaborated with Canudo during the second incarnation of the *Montjoie!* festival in January 1918. During the 1920s, they were often frequenting screenings at Ursulines where Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* had first premiered in June 1929. A year later, when *L'Age d'Or* premiered at Studio 28 in November 1930, André Breton decided to make a gala event of it with a foyer

loomed a large portrait of Jean Mounet-Sully, the very same Comédie-Française actor, having featured in multiple *film d'art* productions, that René Clair had used as a reference point in 1927, when anticipatorily deploring the arrival of talkies as a regressive return to the theatrical pre-war productions, (Fig. 61). Whilst eulogising avant-garde efforts to purify cinema, Clair reminded his readers of the painful 'error' of prewar film, in which 'the poor Mounet-Sully (...) tragically yawned on a white screen impervious to alexandrines'.<sup>228</sup> A week prior to Clair's tirade, a commemorative plaque honouring the illustrious career of Mounet-Sully had been unveiled on the façade of the Comédie-Française. The event, reported on in all major newspapers, had been led by none other than the French *ministre de l'instruction publique et des beaux-arts* himself, Édouard Herriot, who had, a month prior, launched a cinema commission seeking to protect France's cultural heritage from the influx of Hollywood, (Fig. 62).

Instead of appealing for an avant-garde spirit to purge the genre-blurring confusion currently threatening the autonomy of film, the dissident Bataille exploited the charged, anxiety-ridden terrain these tropes inhabited. Rather than mobilising the terror these theatrical motifs triggered within the avant-garde circles of interwar Paris as a prompt for idealist improvement, Bataille used it to expose a jarring incongruence at the heart of a corrupted modernity seeking to dispense of any impure roots in order to facilitate a shiny image of superiority, order, and progress. Subversively redirecting such unsettling force against the grain, Bataille framed the theatrical photographs illustrating his essay as a rightfully ridiculous portrayal of a 'hideous' and 'shameful' civilisation, the 'senile paradox' and 'involuntary, contradictory excessiveness' of which can only ever be partly covered up by persistent 'efforts to recover, at last, a *human face*'.<sup>229</sup> Indeed, the lowly existence 'of the *self* within a metaphysical whole', Bataille reminded his readers, is comparable only to 'that of a fly on an orator's nose'.<sup>230</sup> And, once more, the extra-cinematic excess of Hollywood talkies is suggested by *Documents* as a suitably debased exit route

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exhibition of paintings by Masson, Dalí, Ernst and others. As such, it is likely that Bataille, as part of this scathing critique of modern civilisation, mobilised the charged debates within the cinematic avant-garde as a platform to, once more, ridicule the lofty ideals of Breton and his fellow Surrealists.

<sup>228</sup> Clair, 'Le Cinématographe contre l'Esprit,' 464. 'Tout a été gâché par l'intrusion de l'*art* obligatoire. Vers 1907 on voulut faire du film d'*art*. De cette idée naquit cette série de films d'un comique facile où l'on voyait le pauvre Mounet-Sully (...) bâillant tragiquement sur une toile blanche imperméable aux alexandrins.'

<sup>229</sup> Bataille, 'Figure Humaine,' 194, 200. 'la simple vue (par la photographie) de ceux qui nous ont précédés (...) n'en est pas moins hideuse. (...) le plus clair de notre temps s'est passé, semble-t-il, à effacer jusqu'à la plus petite trace de cette honteuse ascendance. (...) le paradoxe sénile et l'outrance contradictoire involontaire se sont donné libre cours jusqu'aux premières années du XIXe siècle seulement et personne n'ignore que, depuis lors, les efforts les plus obstinés ont été poursuivis par le blanc et la blanche pour retrouver enfin *figure humaine*.'

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 196. 'si l'on envisage, en effet, un personnage choisi au hasard parmi les fantômes ici présentés, son apparition au cours des séries indiscontinues exprimées par la notion d'univers scientifique (...) aussi choquante que celle du *moi* dans le tout métaphysique, ou plutôt, pour revenir à l'ordre concret, que celle d'une mouche sur le nez d'un orateur.' In fact, it was this comment that prompted Breton to dub Bataille an 'excrement-philosopher' with a 'phobia about 'the idea''. (Breton, 'Second Manifesto,' 184).

from such deplorably exalted existences and inflated ideals. In ‘the chime of the music box as much as in the innocent vice, bawdy fervour, and lyrical fumes’, Bataille wrote, seemingly evoking the theatricality of early transition-era talking films, ‘there is absolutely no thought, despite all obsessions to the contrary, of dispensing with this repugnant unsightliness’.<sup>231</sup>

Once re-inserted into the visual culture of interwar France and reinterpreted through Peircean semiotics, then, the critical strategy that emerges is one very different from that identified in the deconstructionist reading of *Documents*. It is a strategy that did not seek to sabotage meaning-production but to critically participate in such cultural processes, a strategy whose criticality stemmed not from an unveiling of the ‘undecidability’ of signs or enacting a ‘reduction of meaning’, but, on the contrary, from subversive re-dissemination of the charged currencies those signs carried in culture. Eagerly promoting an unflattering existence conditioned by uncontrollable excess, the talkie, and the anguished currencies it carried in culture, posed as a prime tool with which to prod and pressurise French anxieties. Re-circulating a motif that challenged deep-set fears, be that those of the official Third Republican establishment or the dominant avant-garde, *Documents* therefore not only undermined shiny self-images of supposed superiority but forced a radical recalibration too, generating a different, decidedly deglorified portrayal of a France, as Bataille enthusiastically wrote, ‘trampled under the heels of a dazzling American star in a bathing suit’.<sup>232</sup>

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Embedded within the visual fabric of the Hollywood talkie loomed another menace, the importation of which, to the Third Republic, denoted another deplorable process of Americanisation: the *skyscraper*. Indeed, posing as a marker of American modernity, the motif of the skyscraper was frequently featured in Hollywood films.<sup>233</sup> *Broadway Melody*, for example – an American talkie screening in Paris in 1929 and scathingly dubbed a ‘barbaric invasion’ by René Clair – opens with aerial footage of a skyscraper-clad New York. Throughout much of the film,

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 200. ‘A nos yeux tant d’étranges personnages, monstrueux seulement à demi, apparaissent encore animés des mouvements les plus niais, agités comme un carillon de boîte à musique par autant de vices innocents, de chaleurs égrillardes, de vapeurs lyriques... En sorte qu’il n’est absolument pas question, en dépit de toute obsession contraire, de se passer de cette odieuse laideur’.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 200. ‘Et il y a probablement un cri de coq étouffé, mais grisant, dans la phrase où le globe terrestre apparaît à nos yeux sous les talons d’une éblouissante star américaine en maillot de bain.’

<sup>233</sup> On the motif of the skyscraper in Hollywood films, see: Barbara Turquier, ‘L’édification du gratte-ciel, motif du cinéma d’avant-garde américain,’ *Transatlantica*, 2 (2010); Merrill Schleier, *Skyscraper Cinema: Architecture and Gender in American Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

skyscrapers graced the theatrical backdrop behind the performers, (Figure 13). The next chapter will explore how *Documents* subversively negotiated the skyscraper to dissident ends.

## Chapter Three: *Documents and Architecture*

The first definition to appear in *Documents*' recurring 'Critical Dictionary' was an entry on 'Architecture'.<sup>1</sup> Listed in the fourth issue of the journal's first year (1929), the definition, written by Bataille, is expansive, encompassing monuments, palaces, cathedrals, as well as 'architectural construction' in physiognomy, dress, music, and painting. After highlighting the allegorical weight embedded in built structures, framing architectural edifices as a symbolically charged surface reflecting images and ideals of mankind, Bataille turned to pressurise the aggrandising architecture of humanity, causing its carefully constructed façade to crack. Since 'the human and architectural orders make common cause, the latter being only the development of the former', he explained, 'an attack on architecture (...) is necessarily, as it were, an attack on man.'<sup>2</sup>

In *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, Denis Hollier declares the deconstructive implications engendered by the theme of 'architecture' within Bataille's work. It was for 'reasons that have nothing to do with the alphabet', Hollier explains, that the *Documents*-dictionary opened with an entry on 'Architecture'.<sup>3</sup> After emphasising the etymological link between structuralism and architecture, Hollier posits 'architecture' as a master metaphor for systems of all kinds: systems of signification, of representation, systems, that is, of meaning production:

There is consequently no way to describe a system without resorting to the vocabulary of architecture. When structure defines the general form of legibility, nothing becomes legible unless it is submitted to the architectural grid. Architecture under these conditions is the archistrukture, the system of systems. The keystone of systematicity in general, it organises the concord of languages and guarantees universal legibility. The temple of meaning, it dominates and totalizes signifying productions, forcing them all to come down to the same thing, to confirm its noologic system. Architecture is a

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<sup>1</sup> Bataille, 'Architecture'.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 31.

compulsory loan burdening of all ideology, mortgaging all its differences from the outset. (...) Without architecture the world would remain illegible.<sup>4</sup>

Bataille's critical engagement with architecture, exemplified by the dictionary-entry, therefore amounts 'a nonconstructive gesture' that, Hollier writes, 'undermines and destroys everything whose existence depends on edifying pretensions.'<sup>5</sup> This deconstructionist operation is symptomatic of Bataille's oeuvre: 'Bataille's writing is antidiscursive (endlessly deforms and disguises itself, endlessly ridding itself of form). (...) Instead of completion, obliteration. (...) There is no meaning except through sacrifice – which is meaningless.'<sup>6</sup> In fact, Hollier elaborates, the 'Critical Dictionary' is an illustrative example of such 'antiarchitectural' and, thus, 'antidiscursive' ambitions. Whilst a traditional dictionary seeks to 'retain meaning' and is 'bound up with a representational and communicational conception of language', Hollier explains, *Documents'* version is an 'antidictionary' where 'lexical units' are 'wrested from the symbolic code', thus, no longer referring 'to a process of representation or communication'. 'To write here', Hollier concludes, 'is to organize around the word the void allowing the charge of its fissile energy to shatter the accumulation of meaning.'<sup>7</sup>

Once more, thus, a deconstructionist interpretation ends up abstracting *Documents'* subversive work to a linguistic realm, disassociated from the fabric of lived experience, and limiting its criticality to a Derridean gesture of semantic destabilisation. To counteract the dehistoricising effects of such manoeuvre, this chapter situates *Documents'* critical probing of architecture within ongoing French discussions, popular as well as political, concerning the edifice of its capital. As we will see, once rehistoricised and recontextualised, the subversive strategy that emerges is not an 'antidiscursive' one, set to 'shatter the accumulation of meaning', but, on the contrary, a strategy that actively intervened into infected debates only to redeploy the anguished currencies they carried in culture to decidedly dissident ends.

The architecture of Paris was fervently negotiated in interwar France.<sup>8</sup> Despite unprecedented attention to the built space of the French capital, however, few plans were realised. Plagued by

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 33, 35. For an account of Bataille, 'architecture', and Hollier, see also: Christopher Green, *Picasso: Architecture and Vertigo* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 20-34.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 24, 25, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 26-31. This deconstructionist interpretation of the implications enacted by the motif of 'architecture' was subsequently reinforced in *Formless: A User's Guide*, where it is extrapolated out of *Documents* and Bataille's critical oeuvre onto later artists such as Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark (185-191).

<sup>8</sup> For a general account on architectural debates in interwar Paris, see e.g.: Anthony Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris: The Defeat of Town Planning, 1850-1970* (London: Edward Arnold, 1970); Norma Evenson, *Paris: A Century of Change, 1878-1978* (New

insufficient funds, radically aggravated by war debts and interwar inflation, Third Republican authorities tended towards caution, prone to passivity and postponement. This deadlock was further reinforced by an increasingly powerful preservationist movement calling for conservation of the traditional urban fabric.<sup>9</sup> The resulting inertia bred a discomforting desperation. Indeed, as the twenties drew to a close, these architectural debates, fraught with anxieties, presented a privileged site for *Documents'* anti-idealist attack on contemporary culture.

Part One, 'Skyscraper Paris: Third Republican Preservationism and Le Corbusier's Purist City' focusses on a particular sign that, as we will see, was widely disseminated across image and text: the skyscraper. The French reception of this distinctly American building style was divisive. To the Third Republican preservationist movement, the question of *height* had long been a deeply symbolic issue, comprising concerns of increased American influence and, thus, the image of an enfeebled France. At the same time, however, modernist utopians like Le Corbusier not only embraced the vision of Parisian skyscrapers but, moreover, argued that the city's survival hinged on their immediate erection. Superimposing his well-rehearsed Purist rhetoric onto interwar Paris, deemed 'terrifying in its confusion', Le Corbusier sought to produce a rational and geometrically ordered cityscape.<sup>10</sup> When *Documents* entered the interwar debate on skyscrapers, publishing a dictionary-entry on the topical theme in 1930, the subversive gesture was two-fold, capable of challenging both the preservationist Third Republican establishment and the utopian skyscraper-campaigner, Le Corbusier. Indeed, whilst embracing these American edifices as 'modern and marvelous symbols', thus disturbing the dominant conservationist dictum, when subsequently envisioning the type of modern existence such structures were constitutive of, the avant-garde journal radically inverted Le Corbusier's lofty vision, framing the skyscraper as a marker not of a Purist urge towards rational order but of debased desires for violent aggression and irresolvable contradiction.<sup>11</sup>

Part Two, 'The Irrepressible Excess of Base-Paris: Statues, Sewers, Slaughterhouses, and the Slums of Saint-Merri' continues to excavate ways in which *Documents* intervened into the urban fabric of Paris in order to stage a critique of modern civilisation. Traversing a variety of structures and spaces that by the interwar period appeared increasingly insufficient or defunct –

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Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979); Anthony Sutcliffe, *Paris: An Architectural History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993); Évelyne Cohen, *Paris dans l'imaginaire national de l'entre-deux-guerres*, (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> For an account of the preservationist discourse in Paris, see e.g.: Ruth Fiori, *L'Invention du Vieux Paris: Naissance d'une conscience patrimoniale dans la capitale* (Wavre: Éditions Mardaga, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow and Its Planning*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), 280.

<sup>11</sup> Leiris, 'Skyscraper'.

Third Republican statutory programmes, the *tout-à-l'égout* sewerage system, the abattoir at la Villette, and, finally, the notorious slum lurking at the heart of historical Paris, Saint-Merri – the avant-garde journal foregrounded points of perceived Parisian frailty. Calling attention to sites within the French capital where lofty Third Republican efforts to construct a rational and orderly Paris were malfunctioning, *Documents* could unveil in its place a different, deliberately incongruous image of the city and its *citoyens*. Indeed, recirculating signs that troubled French constructions of a glorified capital – be that those of preservationists or modernists – the dissident journal mobilised the cityscape of interwar Paris as a stage to expose a radically revised and decidedly defiled counter-image: a base-Paris, inhabited by base-Parisians.

## Skyscraper Paris: Third Republican Preservationism and Le Corbusier's Purist City

### *The American Skyscraper in French Discourse*

When *Documents* published a dictionary-entry on 'Skyscraper' in the seventh issue of the journal's second year (1930), alongside two full-page photographs, (Fig. 63), France was in the midst of what Isabelle Gournay has dubbed a 'skyscraper fad'.<sup>12</sup> Marked by an unprecedented wealth of information – visual and textual, professional and popular – the motif of the skyscraper permeated the visual culture of interwar France, frequently appearing in films, travel literature, newspapers, magazines, and specialised press.<sup>13</sup> This period of heightened interest was aided by another, parallel phenomenon: the increased American export of photographs, boosted by an emerging network of photographic news agencies such as New York Edison Co., Underwood and Underwood, Keystone View Co. The latter even had an office in Paris.<sup>14</sup> The two photographs reproduced in *Documents*, displaying the Empire Building in construction and a skyline-shot featuring the Chrysler Building at the centre, were credited to Underwood and Underwood. 'For the first time', Gournay reports, 'the French gained an awareness of a specifically American building type'.<sup>15</sup> As the twenties came to an end, she continues, the image of skyscrapers had 'reached the status of popular icons' to the French public.<sup>16</sup>

Looming at the heart of France's interwar preoccupation with American towers lay an infected question. To the French, the image and idea of skyscrapers was more than a foreign phenomenon provoking modernist admiration or conservative repulsion from a distance. From

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<sup>12</sup> Isabelle Gournay, *France Discovers America: 1917-1939* (PhD, Yale University, 1989), 18. Gournay dates this 'fad' to 1925-1932.

<sup>13</sup> All-American issues, featuring images and treatises on the skyscraper, were frequent. The motif featured prominently in French anti-Americanist literature too: see e.g.: Luc Durtain, *Quarantième étage* (1927); Paul Morand, *New York* (1930); Duhamel, *America: The Menace* (1930). To the latter, the skyscraper was a marker of a rootless and rushed society: 'A building rises two or three stories a week. Wagner needed twenty years to put together his Teratology, Littré a lifetime to build his dictionary' (35).

<sup>14</sup> Gournay, 64. For further analysis of aerial photography, see e.g.: Anthony Vidler, 'Photourbanism: Planning the City from Above and from Below,' in *The Scenes of the Streets and Other Essays* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2011), 319-327; Jeanne Haffner, *The View from Above: The Science of Social Space* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

the start, France's reception was tied to its own self-image and to the question of whether they too should begin to build vertically. More specifically, to the question of whether such architectural import would mark a necessary injection of youthful vitality into a war-torn Old World or if it would, on the contrary, signify the final nail in the French coffin, announcing American supremacy on the world stage. As an emblem of American modernity, the skyscraper became a figure through which the future of France could be negotiated.<sup>17</sup>

Along with the rest of Europe, the French had experienced their first widespread encounter with the skyscraper at the 1893 World Fair in Chicago.<sup>18</sup> Visited by architects and engineers as well as journalists and writers, all reporting back on their experiences in various French journals, the curious image of a new *type* of city, stretching towards the sky, quickly caught the interest of popular imagination. Even in this early exposure to the novel U.S. architecture, the question of *French* skyscrapers was at the core. Soon, the architect Jacques Hermant reported, 'astounded Europeans will perhaps be obliged to travel across the Atlantic to pick up this new expression responding to novel demands that we seek so passionately but will not find, entangled as we are in academic traditions and collector's mania'.<sup>19</sup> Another corresponding architect, Adolphe Bocage, predicted a future Paris embellished with a 'system of skyscrapers 'reasonable' in height, dotted here and there along our thoroughfares'.<sup>20</sup>

One of the first projections of a Parisian skyscraper was formulated by the modernist architect Auguste Perret, a vocal promotor of industrialised modes of production and early champion and user of modern materials.<sup>21</sup> In a 1905 interview with *La Patrie*, conducted on the roof-top terrace of his controversial building on Rue Franklin, an unornamented structure of exposed reinforced concrete completed in 1903, Perret declared his visions for future Paris: 'We dream of doing even better, and we hope to build one day a house of twenty stories.' 'As in the United States?' the interviewer asked. To which Perret replied: 'Exactly and you can be certain that the aesthetic

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<sup>17</sup> Panchasi writes: 'In debates around the future 'Frenchness' of Paris, participants from across the cultural and political spectrum fixated on the skyscraper. (...) The question: 'Will skyscrapers conquer Europe?' touched on issues of modernization, Americanization, military planning, and the role of Paris in international relations in the interwar years.' (67).

<sup>18</sup> On the French reception of American architecture, in particular the skyscraper, see e.g.: Gournay, 162-248; Jean-Louis Cohen and Hubert Damisch (eds.), *Américanisme et modernité: L'idéal américain dans l'architecture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993); Jean-Louis Cohen, *Scenes of the World to Come: European Architecture and the American Challenge, 1893-1960* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Hermant, 'L'art à l'exposition de Chicago,' *Gazette des beaux-arts*, vol. 123 (September 1893): 246. 'Attendez un demi-siècle, peut-être un siècle, (...). Ce jour-là, les Européens tout étonnés seront peut-être obligés d'aller chercher au delà de l'Atlantique cette expression nouvelle répondant à des besoins nouveaux que nous cherchons tous avec tant de passion et à laquelle nous n'arrivons pas, empêtrés que nous sommes dans les traditions d'école et dans la manie de la collection, du bric-à-brac et des redites.'

<sup>20</sup> Bocage (1894), quoted in Cohen, *Scenes of the World to Come*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> For an account of Auguste Perret's oeuvre, see e.g.: Karla Britton, *Auguste Perret* (London: Phaidon, 2001).

of Paris will not suffer. Imagine our capital surrounded by a belt of huge buildings.<sup>22</sup> In 1920, this time in *L'Intransigeant*, Perret once more laid out his dreams of a vertical Paris: 'This is the city I like to envision. Avenues 250 meters wide and on either side houses that reach to the clouds, spaced blocks connected by bridges.'<sup>23</sup> Two years later, a series of illustrations based on the Perret's sketches were published in *L'Illustration*, (Fig. 64). Alongside the images unveiling a Parisian boulevard lined with skyscrapers was a text written by Jean Labadié. 'The state of the question is this', Labadié explained: 'America, in spite of recognized inconveniences, persists in the erection of the skyscraper. Germany is orientating itself toward the question of building tall. England, traditionalist, hesitates. What is Paris going to do?'<sup>24</sup>

Towards the end of the 1920s, as the first European skyscrapers had begun to rise, the question of *what Paris was going to do* felt more pressing than ever.<sup>25</sup> 'It is no longer only for America to own 'skyscrapers'', wrote one French magazine.<sup>26</sup> *Le Matin*, in turn, asked: 'will we or will we not scrape the sky?'<sup>27</sup> 'The question of adapting North American techniques to our means, to our customs and to our national taste is,' *Le Temps* declared, 'on the agenda'.<sup>28</sup> In 1930, the illustrated magazine *VU* published a survey asking 'Should we ban skyscrapers: Paris 1940?'.<sup>29</sup> Featuring high-ranking politicians and architects, as well as artists and other cultural figures, the article was illustrated with a series of photographic compositions, superimposing skyscrapers onto well-known Parisian sites: the Eiffel Tower, the Champs-Élysées, the Madeleine, the Gare Saint-Lazare, and a Haussmannian boulevard, (Fig. 65). The introduction declared: 'A great question, that of skyscrapers, will soon be judged by popular opinion. The verdict seems undecided.'<sup>30</sup> At the same time, similar montages appeared in André Warnod's *Visages de Paris* (1930).<sup>31</sup> The book, prefaced by Jean de Castellane, president of the Paris municipal council, and illustrated with photographs by Germaine Krull, chronicled the life of the French capital, outlining its history from Lutèce to modernity via regime changes, rowdy revolutions, as well as Haussmann's radical

<sup>22</sup> P. de L., 'Une maison de dix étages,' *La Patrie*, (21 June 1905): 3. 'Nous rêvons de faire mieux et nous espérons bien un jour construire une maison de vingt étages... – Comme aux États-Unis ? – Parfaitement et soyez persuadé que l'esthétique de Paris n'en souffrirait pas. Imaginez-vous notre capitale entourée d'une ceinture de maisons énormes...'

<sup>23</sup> Perret (1920), quoted in Francesco Passanti, 'The Skyscrapers of the Ville Contemporaine,' *Assemblage* (October 1987): 56.

<sup>24</sup> Labadié (1922), quoted in Evenson, 171.

<sup>25</sup> The first European skyscraper was the Boerentoren in Antwerp, constructed between 1929-1932. The development was widely reported in French press. Panchasi writes: 'While visions of towering buildings had appeared in science fiction and architectural fantasies before the war, it was during the interwar period that the debate over the skyscraper really took off.' (67).

<sup>26</sup> 'Un gratte-ciel en Belgique,' *Dimanche illustré* (15 June 1930): 1. 'Il n'est plus que l'Amérique pour posséder des 'skyscrapers''.

<sup>27</sup> Louis Forrest, 'Propos d'un Parisien: Les gratte-ciels,' *Le Matin* (28 September 1930): 1. 'le problème se posera fatalement pour nous, un jour ou l'autre ; gratterons-nous le ciel ou ne le gratterons-nous pas ?'

<sup>28</sup> 'L'évolution dans l'art de construire et la question des gratte-ciel,' *Le Temps* (25 Aout 1930): 2. 'La question de l'adaptation des techniques nord-américaines à nos possibilités et à nos coutumes et à notre goût national est à l'ordre du jour'.

<sup>29</sup> 'Doit-on excommunier les gratte-ciel : Paris 1940 ?,' *VU*, no. 119 (1930): 615-618.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 'Un grand procès va être jugé bientôt par l'opinion, celui des gratte-ciel. Le verdict paraît incertain?'

<sup>31</sup> André Warnod, *Visages de Paris* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1930). Bibliothèque nationale de France, 4-LI3-1241. The photographic compositions were captioned: 'Projets pour le Paris futur'.

renovation. Alongside the photographic projections of a Paris invaded by American skyscrapers, Wernod wrote: 'it is certain that the moment of making decisions and taking responsibility has come. 1930 will no doubt mark a date in the evolution of Paris.'<sup>32</sup>

Standing in the way of the Parisian skyscraper, however, was the law. Indeed, in stark contrast to New York, the French capital had long been under strict building regulations.<sup>33</sup> Tracing the history of these regulations and, in particular, the forceful backlash resulting from a cautious attempt to loosen them up in 1902, the aftershock of which still reverberated in interwar debates on skyscrapers, fleshes out the extent to which the question of height in Paris had, at a time of rapid change and modernisation, become agitated terrain. As we will see, when *Documents* turned to define the skyscraper amid France's interwar 'fad', the fraught issues lodged within the motif, accumulated through longstanding use in discourse, were probed and prodded to critical ends.

### *Parisian Height Regulations: Innovation and Preservation*

The first Parisian building regulations date to 1607, when a royal edict seeking to curb uncontrolled bulging into the streets established the practice of mandatory building permits.<sup>34</sup> In 1783, these regulations were expanded to fix the maximum height of new houses to twenty metres. The new declaration stated: 'the excessive height of buildings is prejudicial to the wholesomeness of the air in a city as large and as heavily populated as Paris'.<sup>35</sup> Maintained throughout the nineteenth century and, thus, throughout Haussmann's renovation of the capital, the height of Paris – despite new achievements permitting much taller constructions, as demonstrated at the 1893 Chicago Fair – remained largely the same at the turn of the century as it had been at the time of the *ancien régime*.<sup>36</sup>

With a new generation of architects entering the scene, influenced by art nouveau and the asymmetrically arabesque, the controlled and rectilinear uniformity of Haussmannian Paris was increasingly perceived as rigid and dull.<sup>37</sup> After a campaign led by the supervising city architect of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 'Il est certain en tout cas que le moment est venu de prendre des décisions et des responsabilités. 1930 marquera sans doute une date dans l'évolution de Paris.'

<sup>33</sup> The 1916 Zoning Law, regulating and limiting the height and bulk of buildings, was the first citywide zoning resolution in New York.

<sup>34</sup> The 'royal edict of 1607 which, in reaction to the medieval heritage of multiple overhangs, attempted to contain building form within a flat façade, in accord classical ideals.' (Evenson, 147).

<sup>35</sup> The royal declaration of 1783, quoted in Evenson, 150.

<sup>36</sup> Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 262-5.

<sup>37</sup> In 1882, a Municipal Councillor complained that the 'narrow and timid' regulations 'have led to a (...) rigid rectilinearity'. Similarly, the Baedeker guide of 1888 described Haussmannian Paris as exhibiting 'an almost wearisome uniformity of style.'

Paris, Louis Bonnier, a new set of building regulations were unveiled in 1902, making it possible to extend buildings to just over thirty meters.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, alignment with adjacent buildings was no longer compulsory, allowing, thus, for a varied roof line, (Fig. 66). Since ‘habits have changed’, Bonnier announced, ‘the regulations should be modified’. The new decree, he added, would permit buildings ‘to rise up in such a way as to be silhouetted against the sky’ – ‘a great thing to achieve.’<sup>39</sup> Despite Bonnier’s enthusiasm, however, a wave of criticism soon hit. It was increasingly recognised that most buildings constructed after 1902 exploited the more generous height regulations for reasons purely motivated by profit maximisation and with little concern for the overall harmony of the cityscape.<sup>40</sup> These reactions were by no means limited to a narrow architectural community. Merging with an already established and progressively powerful preservationist camp, criticism of excessive heights soon became part of popular discourse.

Spurred by Haussmann’s unprecedentedly invasive demolition programme, the early Third Republic witnessed an increasingly vocal movement calling for the conservation of the traditional urban fabric of Paris. Indeed, apart from a number of critics voicing concerns during Napoleon III’s reign, notably Victor Hugo and Charles Baudelaire, it was not until after the fall of the Second Empire that the push for preservation of the capital gained currency. The sense of urgency had been enhanced by the vast devastation brought to Paris during the Franco-Prussian conflict and the subsequently Paris Commune, leaving many of city’s buildings damaged or in ruin. A pronounced example of the latter was the Palais de Tuileries: the royal residence, located at the heart of the capital, set on fire during the Commune. As the Third Republic was installed in the aftermath of these destabilising events, the conviction that Paris was fragile and had to be protected became increasingly widespread.<sup>41</sup>

The popular interest in the traditional urban fabric was manifested in the 1884 formation of the *Société des amis des monuments parisiens*, self-described as a ‘group of humanists, artists, politicians, and intellectuals’ reacting against ‘the modern Paris being erected in front of our eyes’.<sup>42</sup> On a

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Reporting to the Prefect in 1896, the director of public works also stressed a desire for ‘projections more accentuated, more plastic, which could give to our buildings a less banal physiognomy, and thus contribute to the beautification of the city.’ (Evenson, 147-150).

<sup>38</sup> For detail on the 1902 decret, see: Louis Bonnier, *Conférences faites dans l'hémicycle de l'École nationale des beaux-arts, les 22 et 29 octobre 1902, sur les règlements de voirie* (Paris: Éditeur Charles Schmid, 1903). Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-F-14941. For an account of Bonnier’s life and work, see: Bernard Marrey, *Louis Bonnier: 1856-1946* (Liège: Pierre Mardaga, 1988).

<sup>39</sup> Bonnier, *Conférences*, 4, 30. ‘Les mœurs ont changé, les règlements doivent se modifier. (...) Partout, dans les règlements d’origine récente, les constructions décoratives et légèrement en saillie sur les façades peuvent monter de façon à se silhouetter sur le ciel. C’est une chose bonne à retenir.’

<sup>40</sup> See e.g.: Evenson, 142-6; Paul Léon, ‘La beauté de Paris,’ *La Revue de Paris* (15 November 1909).

<sup>41</sup> Fiori, 19-108; Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 179-212.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Normand, *Société des amis des monuments parisiens constituée dans le but de veiller sur les monuments d’art et la physionomie monumentale de Paris* (Paris: Librairie Léopold Cerf, 1884), 1-2. Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-LC21-86. ‘telles que le Paris

mission to ‘preserve old Paris’, ‘popularise a sentiment of preservation throughout the nation’, and ‘flag the dangers threatening it’, the society, featuring Victor Hugo in the role of honorary president, was concerned not only with the conservation of existing structures but also opposed what they perceived as intrusive projects, such as the elevated *Métro* line.<sup>43</sup> ‘The destruction of the Tuileries’, they declared, ‘signalled and emphasised the need for such a Society’: ‘Still, ruins accumulate everyday!’<sup>44</sup>

Their cause soon attracted support from government officials, prompting the *préfet de la Seine* to set up the *Commission du Vieux Paris* in 1897. Charged with the task of identifying, studying, and conserving vestiges of ‘Old Paris’, the commission soon became a nucleus of preservationist action in Third Republican France and, thus, a primary platform channelling the widespread concern around excessive heights in Paris following the 1902-decree.<sup>45</sup> One member identified the resulting structures as ‘ceaseless attacks’ on the beauty of Paris.<sup>46</sup> Another warned: ‘If we continue to apply the 1902-regulation, Paris will be unrecognisable in five years.’<sup>47</sup> Despite strong repudiations continuing to reverberate across popular press and political discourse, however, the 1902 decree was still in place at the time when *Documents* entered the debate on Parisian skyscrapers in 1930. By then, as we will see, the preservationist stance against the 1902-decree, allowing buildings to stretch just over thirty meters in the French capital, had effectively morphed into a firm rejection of the American skyscraper, capable of reaching a height of hundreds of meters.

There was one case of post-1902 construction that, due to their proximity to a high-status landmark, proved particularly provoking to Parisians: two hotels at Place de l’Étoile, encircling the Arc de Triomphe. The public outcry triggered by these slightly taller structures, erected in 1907, soon reached the Chamber of Deputies. During a 1909 debate, deputy Chastenet deplored:

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moderne qui s’élève sous nos yeux (...) Un groupe d’humanistes et d’artistes, d’hommes politiques, de savants, frappés par ces considérations et par plusieurs autres qu’il serait trop long de développer ici, s’est donné pour mission de poursuivre la réalisation de toutes les mesures propres à conserver l’aspect de l’ancien Paris à lui assurer une physionomie plus monumentale dans les productions contemporaines, à créer dans la nation un sentiment populaire de préservation des œuvres d’art ; l’intelligence de nos concitoyens promet de favoriser cette idée propre à donner à Paris un aspect plus magnifique encore.’

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 8. ‘popularise dans la foule l’amour de ces œuvres que nous défendons : qu’il signale, au besoin, les dangers qui les menacent et les mesures propres à donner à la capitale un aspect qui la rende plus digne encore de son grand renom.’

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 2, 8. ‘La destruction des Tuileries, qui a si vivement affligé le public artiste, a donné le signal et fait ressortir le besoins d’une telle Société. (...) Pourtant, que de ruines chaque jour accumulées !’

<sup>45</sup> *Arrêté préfectoral* (18 December 1897) quoted in Charles Lortsch, *La beauté de Paris et la loi* (Paris: Librairie Recueil Sirey, 1913), 271. ‘Cette Commission (...) est chargée ‘de rechercher les vestiges du Vieux-Paris, de constater leur état actuel, de veiller, dans la mesure du possible, à leur conservation, de suivre au jour le jour les fouilles qui pourraient être entreprises et les transformations jugées indispensables et d’en conserver les preuves authentiques.’

<sup>46</sup> Georges Cain quoted in Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 195. Cain had been a member of the commission since its installment in 1897.

<sup>47</sup> Émile Massard quoted in Lortsch, 187. ‘Si on continue à appliquer le règlement de 1902, avant cinq ans Paris sera méconnaissable.’ Massard became a member of the commission in 1914.

‘these great buildings *à l’américaine*, these skyscrapers which insolently stretch up to dominate a place that is not made for them.’<sup>48</sup> After calling for the 1902 decree to be reworked, Chastenet concluded his speech with a quote from Baudelaire’s 1861 reaction to Haussmann’s intrusive interventions: ‘Mon vieux Paris, n’est plus’.<sup>49</sup> The government responded by setting up a *Commission des perspectives monumentales*: an interministerial committee of deputies, officials, architects, and scholars tasked with safeguarding and preserving the beauty of Paris.<sup>50</sup> In 1911, an additional article was passed, giving the City of Paris the power to refuse building permits for any constructions perceived as aesthetic intrusions damaging perspective views.<sup>51</sup>

For the growing preservationist camp, however, this was not enough. In his 1913 *La beauté de Paris*, Charles Lortch, a fervent campaigner for conservation, complained: ‘The commission is forming slowly, their deliberations are even slower’.<sup>52</sup> The book reads as a manifesto of sorts, composing a collage of citations from various preservation advocates and members of the *Commission du Vieux Paris*. The 1902 decree was still a primary target. Bringing ‘a near-mortal blow to the beauty of Paris’ and ‘inaugurating an era of sacrilege’, Lortsch exclaimed, ‘the calamitous effects’ of the decree – leaving the capital ‘irredeemably compromised’, ‘covered with warts and tumours’ – has triggered ‘protests from all corners’.<sup>53</sup> ‘For two centuries,’ he elaborated:

France has been the great artistic educator for Europe; a situation that for our nation has been a source of glory and fortune. Is it still the case? We must recognize that it no longer remains so, that our prestige is seriously damaged. Have foreign peoples made more progress, have they achieved superior productions? Not in the slightest. It is we who, little by little, have lost the

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Séance du 24 Juin 1909,’ *Journal officiel de la République française. Débats parlementaires. Chambre des députés : compte rendu in-extenso* (25 June 1909): 1618-1630. ‘Hélas, cette place merveilleuse de l’Étoile (...) est maintenant encuvée et toute déséquilibrée par ces grands ‘buildings’ à l’américaine, ces gratte-ciels qui haussent avec insolence pour dominer une place qui n’est pas faite pour eux. (*Très bien ! Très bien !*)’ (1620).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1619. ‘Je ne viens pas m’écrier avec le poète : ‘Mon vieux Paris n’est plus, la forme d’une ville change aussi vite, hélas ! que le cœur d’un mortel.’

<sup>50</sup> Lortsch, 173-174; Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 194-6.

<sup>51</sup> Article 118 of *la loi de finances* (13 July 1911), quoted in Lortsch, 191. ‘Le constructeur devra se soumettre aux prescriptions qui lui seront faites par l’administration dans l’intérêt de la sûreté publique et de la salubrité *ainsi que de la conservation des perspectives monumentales* et des sites, sauf recours au Conseil d’État par la voie contentieuse’.

<sup>52</sup> André Hallays quoted in Lortsch, 175. ‘Un des tours les plus ingénieux, écrit M. Hallays dans le *Journal des Débats*, que les gouvernants aient imaginé pour mystifier le public, c’est de créer ‘de grandes commissions’ chargés d’étudier les questions, cela dispense de les résoudre et de préparer des règlements nouveaux, cela dispense de les édicter, cela dispense même d’appliquer ceux qui existent. (...) La commission se constitue lentement, délibère plus lentement encore’.

<sup>53</sup> Lortsch, 75, 187, 78, 13. ‘D’une façon générale, le décret de 1902 a produit les effets les plus désastreux. Il a porté un coup quasi-mortal à la beauté de Paris. (...) Le décret de 1902 a inauguré une ère de sacrilège dans la ville sacrée du goût et de l’harmonie, qu’il disparaisse ! (...) Voilà, indiqué sommairement, les effets du décret de 1902, effets calamiteux, à tel point que la beauté de Paris en a semblé aussitôt irrémédiablement compromise, et que les protestations se sont fait entendre de toutes parts. (...) Paris, jusque dans ses plus beaux quartiers, se couvre de verrues et de tumeurs.’

force of our artistic production and our self-confidence, stupidly adopting, through snobbery, the taste of nations with a mediocre and barbaric artistic temperament. In America, these gigantic structures may have their utility, their raison d'être. Here they would be a heresy and, in our dear and beautiful city, an injury to our national artistic sense based on measure and harmony. Let us therefore remain French (...).<sup>54</sup>

A full chapter was dedicated to those particularly provoking hotels, encircling the Arc de Triomphe.<sup>55</sup> These 'skyscrapers' – 'intact and arrogant' – are, Lortsch explained, 'characteristic of the regime under which Paris is currently subjugated.'<sup>56</sup> 'The public authorities have failed,' he concluded: 'It is up to Parisians to save Paris!'<sup>57</sup>

The episode of the 1902 decree, thus, triggered a widespread interest in the aesthetic dimensions of the French capital's identity. Indeed, merging with and amplifying a longstanding and progressively more powerful Parisian preservationist movement, the resulting debate demonstrates how narratives of national selfhood were becoming inextricably interwoven with images and ideals of the traditional urban fabric of Paris.<sup>58</sup> Firmly cemented in both popular and political discourse, the 'conviction that the beauty of Paris was unique, fragile and threatened', Evenson writes, became a consistent feature in discourse.<sup>59</sup> In particular, the event of the 1902 regulation articulated the high stakes at play in the question of height in Paris: signifying, at once, the dilution of a traditional national identity and a corresponding American influence; a seemingly self-inflicted dethronement of the self and the enthronement of the other.

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<sup>54</sup> Letter from M. Cormon to M. Massard, quoted in Lortsch, 91. 'Pendent deux siècles, la France a été pour l'Europe la grande éducatrice artistique ; situation qui pour notre pays, a été une source de gloire et de fortune. En est-il ainsi maintenant ? Nous sommes bien obligés de reconnaître qu'il n'en est rien, que notre prestige est sérieusement atteint. Les peuples étrangers ont-ils fait des progrès, sont-ils arrivés à des productions supérieures ? Pas le moins du monde. C'est nous qui, peu à peu, semblons perdre notre puissance de production artistique, nous qui perdons peu à peu notre confiance en nous et adoptons sottement, par snobisme, le goût des nations au tempérament artistique médiocre ou barbare. Ces constructions gigantesques de l'Amérique peuvent avoir là-bas leur utilité, leur raison d'être. Ici elles seraient une hérésie et, dans notre chère et belle ville, autant d'injures à notre sens artistique national, fait de mesure et d'harmonie. Restons donc Français, améliorons-nous, si nous le pouvons, en imitant les qualités des étrangers, mais n'adoptons pas les manifestations inférieures de leur civilisation.'

<sup>55</sup> Lortsch, 107-119. The chapter was titled 'Un cas topique: l'Étoile'.

<sup>56</sup> Lortsch, 115, 107. 'l'hôtel Astoria, intact et arrogant, se dresse toujours contre l'Étoile (...). Le cas de l'Étoile est caractéristique du régime auquel Paris est actuellement soumis.'

<sup>57</sup> Lortsch, 313. 'Les pouvoirs publics ont failli. A l'opinion publique, souverain juge et suprême autorité, de se prononcer et d'agir. Aux Parisiens de sauver Paris !'

<sup>58</sup> On the effect of the 1902 regulations, Sutcliffe writes: 'In theory, they should have enabled modern buildings in Paris to rival those of Brussels and Barcelona. But, paradoxically, within a few years, they had almost stifled architectural innovation, and given the Parisian preservationist movement one of the biggest boosts that it had ever received' (*The Autumn of Central Paris*, 194).

<sup>59</sup> Evenson, 124.

## *Cementing the Cause for Conservation in a Fragile Interwar France*

Denoting not only a ruthless blow to the French self-image but also the ascendancy of America on the world stage, the First World War exacerbated the urge to safeguard of the nation's capital. By the end of the hostilities, Sutcliffe writes, the conservationist dictum had become so dominant that the debate appeared 'one-sided'.<sup>60</sup> Staying on the good side of the various preservationist societies, cropping up around the turn of the century, became compulsory for Parisian officials.<sup>61</sup> Marking this discursive shift, even Louis Bonnier – who had initiated the notorious 1902-regulation by euphorically envisioning a Paris 'silhouetted against the sky' – increasingly resorted to promote the cause for conservation.<sup>62</sup> When speaking at the 1923 celebration of the *Commission du Vieux Paris*' twenty-fifth anniversary held at the Hôtel du Ville, Bonnier, still in the role of city architect, praised the 'tenacious work' of the delegation that had 'awoken public opinion', whilst describing the streets of Paris as an 'encyclopaedia'.<sup>63</sup> The entertainment for the evening, listed in a program leaflet decorated with romanticising illustrations of pre-Haussmannian Paris, comprised musical performances of various historic works by French composers, (Fig. 67).<sup>64</sup> Three years later, the city demanded the owner of one of the hotels encircling the Arc de Triomphe to demolish its top floors. The decision, councillor Émile Massard announced, will 'satisfy all those who are committed to preserving the great Parisian perspectives'.<sup>65</sup>

Although a special sub-committee, chaired by Bonnier, had been set up to revise the 1902 decree by the *Commission des perspectives monumentales* in 1923, their work was moving slowly.<sup>66</sup> In 1929, when Albert Guérard published *L'Avenir de Paris*, no new height regulation had been presented.<sup>67</sup> Prefaced by Paul Boujou, the sitting *préfet de la Seine* and a member of the *Commission du Vieux*

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<sup>60</sup> Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 211. 'After 1914 (...) conservation was transformed from a pipe dream to the natural state of affairs.' (Ibid., 330).

<sup>61</sup> See e.g.: *Société de l'histoire de Paris et de l'Île-de-France* (1874-); *Société historique du 6<sup>e</sup> arrondissement de Paris* (1898-); *Société historique et archéologique des 3<sup>e</sup>, 4<sup>e</sup>, 11<sup>e</sup> et 12<sup>e</sup> arrondissements de Paris* (1901-); *Société d'iconographie parisienne* (1908-1937).

<sup>62</sup> Bonnier, *Conférences*, 30. 'Partout, dans les règlements d'origine récente, les constructions décoratives et légèrement en saillie sur les façades peuvent monter de façon à se silhouetter sur le ciel. C'est une chose bonne à retenir.'

<sup>63</sup> Louis Bonnier, 'Commission du Vieux Paris (27 Janvier 1923): Salle des Fêtes de l'Hôtel de Ville'. Centre d'archives d'architecture contemporaine, Dossier 035 Ifa 301/1. '... l'opinion publique s'est éveillée sous l'action tenace de la Commission du Vieux-Paris.' (5). 'Les rues de Paris sont une encyclopédie complète' (7). Bonnier had been a member of the commission since 1910.

<sup>64</sup> For more detail on visual imagery of 'historic Paris', see e.g.: Fiori, 19-108; Catherine Eleanor Clark, *Paris and the Cliché of History: The City and Photographs, 1860-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>65</sup> 'Procès-verbaux,' Commission municipale du Vieux Paris (27 February 1926): 42. Bibliothèque nationale de France. 'La solution tant attendue de l'affaire de l'Astoria est venue donner une satisfaction à tous ceux qui sont attachés à la préservation des grandes perspectives parisiennes.' Members present at the meeting included e.g. Louis Bonnier, André Hallays, Lucien Lambeau.

<sup>66</sup> For an account of the 1902-decree and its aftermath, see Paul Meyer-Lévy, *Projet de règlement de construction destiné à la Ville de Paris* (Paris: Vincent, Fréal et Cie, 1950).

<sup>67</sup> Albert Guérard, *L'Avenir de Paris* (Paris: Payot, 1929). Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-LK7-42210.

*Paris*, the book was critical, positioning itself ‘against the inertia’.<sup>68</sup> This ‘famous decree’ that ‘still governs us,’ Guérard explained, has had ‘disastrous effects,’ damaging ‘the delicate charm and fragile perfection of the city’.<sup>69</sup> The hotels encircling the Arc de Triomphe, he continued, ‘even de-domed, are still too high’: ‘Paris is not New York; that which frightens us is not constructions of 100 metres, but those of 30 or 35.’<sup>70</sup> The maximum height, Guérard declared, should be limited to twenty-one metres. To be safe, he added, the whole of Paris should be listed as a historic site: ‘Yes, we have to save everything we can of old Paris.’<sup>71</sup> The following year, Guérard ramped-up his rhetoric, comparing the threat of skyscrapers to that which had imposed itself on the French capital during the war: ‘We trembled when, sixteen years ago, it seemed threatened by the barbarians; we tremble once more as a danger less brusque but more profound risks to offend its beauty.’<sup>72</sup>

In February of 1930, a public lecture on ‘the great problems of modern urbanism’ was held at the Louvre. As advertised liberally across French newspapers, the main speaker was Louis Bonnier, now in the role as *directeur honoraire des services d’architecture de la ville de Paris*.<sup>73</sup> The speech, entitled ‘The transformations and the future of Paris’, was published a few months later as a supplement to *La Construction Moderne*.<sup>74</sup> After tracing the city’s expansion, as well as various attempts to tackle its debilitating effects, including those initiated by Haussmann, Bonnier turned his attention to the question of skyscrapers. Whilst recognising that these vertical structures might be suitable for cities ‘born yesterday’, such as New-York or Chicago – cities, that is, ‘without a past, without history, without art’ – the idea of ‘endowing contemporary Paris with constructions of 300 meters, a height equal to the Eiffel Tower and five times that of the towers of the Notre-Dame’, ‘under the pretext of modernisation and progress’, would be ‘absurd’. In Paris, ‘a city of art’, they would ‘disrupt all proportion, all scale, all harmony’.<sup>75</sup> Illustrating this

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 13. ‘La vie d’une cité est une bataille de tous les jours : non pas contre des ennemis déclarés – ceux-là, on s’en charge ! – mais contre l’inertie, l’égoïsme, le caprice, l’incohérence.’

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. ‘Nous arrivons au fameux décret du 13 août 1902, qui nous régit encore, et que l’on est en train de réviser.’ (67) ‘Le décret de 1902 a produit les effets les plus désastreux’ (68) ‘Depuis 1902, on est en train d’altérer l’échelle parisienne (...) assez pourtant pour endommager, si l’on n’y porte un prompt remède, le charme délicat, la perfection fragile de la cité.’ (66)

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. ‘...même découpolé, est encore trop haut.’ (74) ‘Mais, nous ne saurions trop le répéter, Paris n’est pas New York ; ce qui nous effraie, ce n’est pas la maison de 100 mètres, c’est la maison de 30 ou 35.’ (68).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. ‘À l’intérieur des anciennes limites de Paris, la hauteur totale des constructions jusqu’au faite du toit ne pourra dépasser 21 mètres.’ (362) ‘Nous demandons que Paris tout entier, dans ses limites actuelles, soit classé comme site historique et monumental.’ (72) ‘Oui, il faut sauver tout ce qu’on peut sauver du vieux Paris.’ (29).

<sup>72</sup> Albert Guérard, ‘Appel d’un citoyen américain aux Paris,’ *Congrès du Paris Nouveau, organisé par ‘Le Journal’, 16-20 Juin 1930, sous la présidence de M. André Tardieu*, 147. Archives Nationales, 8AR/449. ‘Nous avons tremblé quand, il y seize ans, il semblait menacé par les barbares ; nous tremblons de nouveau quand un danger moins brusque mais plus profonde risque d’offenser sa beauté.’

<sup>73</sup> The event was listed in e.g.: *Comoedia, Le Quotidien, Le Matin*.

<sup>74</sup> Louis Bonnier, ‘Les transformations et l’avenir de Paris,’ *La Construction moderne* (supplément). The speech appeared across two issues, published on 11 May 1930 and 8 June 1930. Centre d’archives d’architecture contemporaine, Dossier 035 Ifa 300/5 35/03.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 46. ‘Invoquant la crise de l’habitation, sous prétexte de modernisation, sous prétexte de progrès, les snobs de l’américanisme tendent à doter le Paris contemporaine de constructions de 300 mètres de hauteur, celle de la tour Eiffel, plus de

dangerous invasion, labelled by Bonnier a ‘grave danger’ to the French capital, were a series of photographic montages, using the same technique of superimposition as seen around the same time in *VU*, (Fig. 65), and Warnod’s *Visages de Paris*: the Concorde surrounded by looming skyscrapers and the Notre-Dame in the shadow of the Woolworth Building, (Fig. 68).<sup>76</sup>

A few months later, Bonnier’s sub-committee tasked with the revision of the 1902 decree finally released a report on the fraught question of height in Paris. Their stance was firm:

In its general physiognomy, the city of Paris must conserve its own character, its discipline, its quality of order and measure. And so, without exception, building of excessive height, like those which provide the attraction of certain foreign cities, should be forbidden.<sup>77</sup>

‘Reason dictates’, they concluded, ‘that Paris be held to the same order of height as before.’<sup>78</sup> The passing of a new decree, however, still proved difficult. When Bonnier’s subcommittee put forward an amended regulation in 1938, their proposal, which they promised would prevent buildings from reaching ‘the very great heights permitted by the 1902 regulation’, was immediately rejected after showing inadequacies and irregularities.<sup>79</sup> In the end, the 1902 regulation remained intact until 1959.<sup>80</sup>

Throughout the interwar period, thus, the motif of the skyscraper was well-circulated in French discourse, popular as well as political.<sup>81</sup> The possibility of future Parisian towers was negotiated

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cinq fois les tours de Notre-Dame. Certes, on comprend les sky-scrapers dans une ville née d’hier, sans passé, sans histoire, sans art, sur un sol qui les peut supporter et correspondant aux prix excessifs des terrains de New-York ou Chicago, mais, ils seraient absurdes et inutilisables au centre d’une ville d’art, rompant toute proportion, toute échelle, toute harmonie, quelle puisse être la valeur individuelle de ces bâtisses.’

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. Bonnier describes the skyscraper as ‘un autre danger plus grave’.

<sup>77</sup> Commission des perspectives monumentales, *Rapport de la Sous-Commission Chargée de la Révision du Décret du 13 Août 1902* (1930), quoted in Evenson, 175. The subsequent 1938 report dates this to 19 June 1930, see: Commission des perspectives monumentales, *Révision du décret du 13 août 1902 portant règlement sur les hauteurs et sur les saillies des bâtiments dans la ville de Paris* (Paris: La Mécanographie, 1938), 1. Centre d’archives d’architecture contemporaine, Dossier 035 Ifa 307/3.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Commission des perspectives monumentales, *Révision du décret du 13 août 1902*, 46. ‘On peut d’ores et déjà affirmer que le maximum de hauteur des bâtiments résulte de l’application du système de l’enveloppe n’atteindra jamais les très grandes hauteurs permises par le règlement de 1902, et qu’en outre, toutes choses égales d’ailleurs, la masse bâtie sera moindre.’ On the failure of the proposal, see Meyer-Lévy, 3-7.

<sup>80</sup> The 1959 regulation limited building in the city centre to 31 meters, whilst allowing for 37 meters in the periphery of Paris. Later, the *Plan d’Urbanisme* (1967) permitted taller buildings in designated areas (so-called *immeubles de grande hauteur*), thus paving the way for Parisian tower blocks. In the 1970s, following stark reactions to the Tour Montparnasse (1973), skyscrapers were once more banned from the *intra-muros* area.

<sup>81</sup> For an account of the French interwar reception of skyscrapers, see e.g.: Cohen, *Paris dans l’imaginaire*, chapter 6; Panchasi, 43-76; Julie Gimbal, ‘Le gratte-ciel à Paris au début des années 1930 : discours et représentations,’ *Histoire de l’art* no. 65 (2009): 117-128.

and anxiously envisioned in both image and text. When *Documents* joined the debate, the deep-seated concerns it encompassed were subversively agitated to dissident ends.

*Skyscrapers in Documents: 'marvellous and modern symbols'*

Turning to define the skyscraper in the seventh issue of the journal's second year (1930), Michel Leiris proposed an identification that counteracted and jarred with that repetitively propelled by the Third Republican establishment. Indeed, whilst French authorities had officially rejected the Parisian skyscraper, framing it as, in the 1930 words of Louis Bonnier, a 'grave danger' threatening the city, Leiris went to mockingly describe the 'tall buildings of America' as 'marvellous and modern symbols'.<sup>82</sup> The skyscraper, he elaborated, is 'the grandiose ornament of North American cities' and 'the instruments of luxury and comfort as yet unknown in Europe'.<sup>83</sup>

Setting out to provoke a predominantly preservationist Parisian establishment, to whom the motif of the skyscraper denoted not only a seemingly irreversible American dominance following the war but also a disquieting destabilisation of France's traditional identity, the entry was illustrated by two full-page photographs, celebrating the unprecedented height of recent U.S. constructions, (Fig. 63). The first illustration, displaying the Empire State building, was accompanied with a caption: 'NEW YORK. THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING, CURRENTLY UNDER CONSTRUCTION. THIS BUILDING, RISING ON FIFTH AVENUE, BETWEEN 33<sup>RD</sup> AND 34<sup>TH</sup> STREET, WILL BE THE TALLEST AMERICAN SKYSCRAPER.'<sup>84</sup> The second photograph showcased a skyscraper-clad Manhattan, among which the Chrysler Building, centralised, stood the tallest. The official Third Republic, however, was not the only target of *Documents'* dictionary-entry. Indeed, as we will see, the subversiveness of the journal's critical gesture extended further, encompassing a scathing challenge to the primary promotor of the Parisian skyscraper too.

Whilst Parisian authorities denounced the skyscraper, having firmly settled in the preservationist maxim after the war, the discussion on height was also inhabited by an opposing, modernist camp, relentlessly arguing for their necessary erection in the French capital. Its principal

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<sup>82</sup> Bonnier, 'Les transformations et l'avenir de Paris,' 46; Leiris, 'Skyscraper'.

<sup>83</sup> Leiris, 'Skyscraper'.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

proponent was Le Corbusier.<sup>85</sup> Throughout the 1920s, whilst the French establishment demanded that certain post-1902 constructions shave off their top floors, Le Corbusier persistently peddled his Plan Voisin, proposing to raze the historic centre of the capital, deemed ‘terrifying in its confusion’, and erect in its place eighteen skyscrapers, each sixty stories high, (Fig. 69).<sup>86</sup> This ultra-utopian vision of a vertical city was presented as a much-needed remedy to interwar Paris, promising to return the French capital and its *citoyens* to their ‘proper environment’, to a ‘universal order’ governed by ‘platonian grandeur’ and ‘geometrical truths’.<sup>87</sup> A *Purist Paris*, that is, inhabited by *Purist Parisians*. ‘To bring about this Utopia,’ Le Corbusier declared in 1924, ‘the city must be built vertically.’<sup>88</sup>

Returning to the realities of interwar Paris, however, Le Corbusier grievously acknowledged: ‘those who regulate the architecture of Paris prohibit vertical building.’<sup>89</sup> To Le Corbusier, therefore, the notorious 1902 decree was not overly generous but far too restrictive. Writing in a 1929-issue of *L’Intransigeant*, he railed: ‘To-day engineers can do what they like and build as high as they wish. But the building regulation of Louis XIV which fixed the cornice *at twenty metres above the ground* still remains in force. One may build no higher!’<sup>90</sup> The preservationist dogma was, in Le Corbusier’s view, holding Paris back, hindering it from progressing. Indeed, when participating in *VU*’s 1930 illustrated survey on the question of skyscrapers in the French capital, he declared: ‘Paris, capital of a modern Europe? Bravo! But that cannot be declared; *that is earned*. And the whole history of Paris demonstrates to me *that we have always dared*. It is only the friends of ‘Vieux Paris’ that stop us from taking action.’<sup>91</sup> In turn, during his 1930 speech at the Louvre, Louis Bonnier denounced Le Corbusier as the ‘Swiss architect’ desiring to ‘demolish all existing streets’.<sup>92</sup> The same year, the vocal preservationist and skyscraper-critic, Albert Guérard, exclaimed: ‘Who, then, contemplates to *New Yorkify* Paris? I am not sure that even Le Corbusier takes his proposal to rebuild the city centre with skyscrapers seriously. Still, the danger is real.’<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Other proponents included e.g., André Lurçat and André Granet. The latter proposed a skyscraper-design for the planned refurbishment of the Voie Triomphale, stretching from l’Étoile to la Défense, for which a competition had been launched by the city of Paris in 1931. In the end, the project was not realised.

<sup>86</sup> Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow*, 280.

<sup>87</sup> Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 8, 31, 110, 72.

<sup>88</sup> Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow*, 177.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>90</sup> Le Corbusier, ‘The Street’ (originally published in *L’Intransigeant*, May 1929), in Le Corbusier, *Œuvre Complète: 1910-1929* (Zurich: Artemis, 1964), 118. The notorious 1902 decree had allowed for additional attic floors and a higher roofline, extending above the cornice which remained at twenty meters.

<sup>91</sup> ‘Doit-on excommunier les gratte-ciel : Paris 1940 ?,’ 616. ‘Paris capitale d’une Europe moderne? Bravo! Mais cela ne décrète pas ; *cela se mérite*. Et tout l’histoire de Paris me montre *qu’on a toujours osé*. Il n’y a que les amis du ‘Vieux Paris’ qui nous interdisent d’agir.’

<sup>92</sup> Bonnier, ‘Les transformations et l’avenir de Paris’.

<sup>93</sup> Guérard, *L’Avenir de Paris*, 66. ‘Qui donc songe à *new-yorkiser* Paris ? Je ne suis pas sûr que même M. Le Corbusier prenne très au sérieux sa proposition de rebâtir en gratte-ciel le centre des affaires. Et pourtant, le danger est réel.’

As the 1920s drew to a close, the future of Frenchness seemed to hinge on the Parisian skyscraper: to some on its strict prohibition, to others on its immediate instalment. When *Documents* decided to join the polarised dialogue in 1930, the heightened and anxiety-fuelled stakes it encompassed made it a prime terrain for subversive avant-garde activity. Refusing to subscribe to *any* idealising narrative, be that conservative or progressive, the journal's dictionary entry acts dually, cleverly exploiting the unsettling significances these vertical structures denoted in interwar Paris, generated through repeated use in discourse, to ridicule, at once, the dominant preservationist camp and utopian modernists. Indeed, after embracing the arrival of these 'tall buildings of America' as 'marvellous and modern symbols', against the grain of the dominant Third Republican preservationism, *Documents* subsequently re-interpreted what such arrival would signify, in firm opposition to modernist hopes, managing thus to target its chief spokesman, Le Corbusier too.<sup>94</sup> In the hands of the dissident journal, the image of a skyscraper-clad Paris was framed as constitutive of a perennial human existence marked not by rationality and geometric order but, on the contrary, by lowly urges towards, in *Documents'* words, 'spoilation' and 'joyful demolition'.<sup>95</sup>

### *Plan Voisin: Le Corbusier's Parisian Skyscrapers*

In the interwar period, Le Corbusier was the architect most intimately tied to the idea of a Parisian skyscraper.<sup>96</sup> Dispelling Perret's earlier visions of a vertical city, under whom he had worked briefly between 1908 and 1909, as a 'dangerous futurism', (Fig. 64), Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin was designed for immediate use, as an urgent remedy to restore the French capital, currently in 'a state of mortal sickness'.<sup>97</sup> The initial sketch for his Plan Voisin, proposing to raze the historic centre to the ground and erect in its place an urban fabric capable of dealing with the strain of modernity, had first been presented at the 1922 Salon d'Automne.<sup>98</sup> As the accompanying manifesto declared, the plan promised to provide Paris – full of 'rot, illness, sadness, demoralisation' – with 'THE SAFEGUARDING OF ITS THREATENED

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<sup>94</sup> Leiris, 'Skyscraper'.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> For an account of the ideas at play in Le Corbusier's architecture, see e.g.: Mary McLeod, 'Architecture or Revolution?: Taylorism, Technocracy, and Social Change,' *Art Journal*, vol. 43, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 132-147; Mardges Bacon, *Le Corbusier in America: Travels in the Land of the Timid* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001); Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Zürich: Lars Müller, 2019).

<sup>97</sup> Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 58; Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow*, 96.

<sup>98</sup> This presentation was entitled 'Ville Contemporaine'. For more detail, see: Passanti, n38p65. Le Corbusier also extensively discussed his plans for Paris at during his 1923 Strasbourg lecture.

EXISTENCE’, (Fig. 70).<sup>99</sup> Three years later, as part of the Purist Pavilion at the 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*, the Plan Voisin, featuring eighteen skyscrapers, each sixty stories high, was presented in full.<sup>100</sup>

In *Urbanisme*, the theoretical treatise accompanying his skyscraper-plan, first published in 1924, Le Corbusier elaborated: ‘the Great City, which should be a phenomenon of power and energy, is to-day a menacing disaster’.<sup>101</sup> ‘I wish it were possible for the reader’, he continued, ‘to conceive what such a vertical city would be like’: ‘imagine all this junk, which till now has lain spread out over the soil like a dry crust, cleaned off and carted away and replaced by immense clear crystals of glass, rising to a height of over 600 feet’.<sup>102</sup> The Plan Voisin, he declared, would mount ‘a frontal attack on the most diseased quarters’ of Paris and make ‘the city itself a vast garden’.<sup>103</sup> ‘A sky-scraper,’ Le Corbusier joyously declared, ‘is in fact, a whole district, but verticalized!’<sup>104</sup> Juxtaposing photographs of the existing, congested heart of interwar Paris with the ordered grid of his proposed skyscraper-salvation, (Fig. 71), Le Corbusier announced: ‘the time has come to destroy what cannot be mended (...). We must be remorseless. (...) Surgery must be applied at the city’s centre’.<sup>105</sup>

Le Corbusier was not the only one worrying about the state of interwar Paris. On the contrary, alongside the gradually more dominant preservationist discourse, the sense that the French capital was dilapidating had begun to paradoxically set in with equal fervour. The urban problems facing the French capital were frequently discussed in both popular and political discourse. As Le Corbusier wrote in *Urbanisme*:

in 1923 the occasional appearance of articles devoted to this question was significant; people began to be aware that the subject was of vital importance.

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<sup>99</sup> Le Corbusier, *Œuvre Complète*, 38. ‘PARIS ATTEND DE L’ÉPOQUE: LE SAUVETAGE DE SA VIE MENACÉE (...) Des quartiers entiers ne sont plus que de la pourriture, des foyers de maladie, de tristesse, de démoralisation. (...) aujourd’hui, on peut construire des maisons de soixante (...) étages à place de maisons de six étages.’ Elements of this manifesto was also reprinted in *Urbanisme*.

<sup>100</sup> Le Corbusier, *Œuvre Complète*, 98-121; Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow*, 277-289.

<sup>101</sup> Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow*, 25.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 280, 281.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 110, 258. Positioning himself against the idea of a decentralised ‘Garden City’, initially propelled by Ebenezer Howard, Le Corbusier wanted to produce an effective industrial city, capable of further growth. ‘The ‘Voisin’ scheme for Paris means regaining possession of the eternal centre of the city.’ (*Ibid.*, 280). For a comparative account, see e.g.: Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982).

In 1924 *the whole Press gave tongue*, so to speak, almost every day. Town planning *had* to be considered, for Paris was sick, deadly sick.<sup>106</sup>

In 1928, prime minister Poincaré declared the situation an emergency: ‘if the Parisian population continues grow, a great social danger awaits’.<sup>107</sup> Two years later, the fragile state of Paris, seeming more urgent than ever, prompted the organisation of the *Congrès du Paris Nouveau*. Hosted by *Le Journal* and chaired by then sitting prime minister, André Tardieu, the congress was set to ‘examine every question posed by the future of Paris’, to ‘preserve for coming generations’ a ‘Paris of order and reason, intellectual capital and an example to the world.’<sup>108</sup> Promoting the event in June of 1929, André Ménabréa, *secrétaire général* of the congress, explained: ‘Everyone will certainly agree on the necessity of effort and immediate action’.<sup>109</sup>

### *The State of Modern Paris: A Brief History of Urbanisation*

Like all major European cities, Paris experienced an explosive expansion during the nineteenth century, (Fig. 72).<sup>110</sup> In the French capital, still a largely medieval structure, the destabilising impact of such unprecedented influx soon made itself clear. The modern city was a force to be reckoned with. Left uncontrolled, it would lead to devastating effects.<sup>111</sup> Faced with growing slums, epidemics, and social upheaval, Louis-Napoleon, once installed as the Emperor of the Second Empire after a *coup-d'état* in 1851, placed the deplorable state of Paris at the top of his imperial agenda.<sup>112</sup> Disappointed with the cautionary realism of the sitting Prefect, Jean Jacques Berger, who insisted on the financial precarity of his plans, Napoleon III replaced him with the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>107</sup> Peter Hall, ‘Metropolis 1890-1940: Challenges and Responses,’ in *Metropolis, 1890-1940*, ed. Anthony Sutcliffe (London: Mansell, 1984), 51.

<sup>108</sup> André Ménabréa, ‘Rapport Générale,’ *Congrès du Paris Nouveau*, 8, 1, 9, 11.

<sup>109</sup> André Ménabréa, ‘Le congrès du Paris-Nouveau,’ *L’Europe Nouvelle*, no. 591 (8 June 1929): 730. ‘Toutes concluront certainement à la nécessité de l’effort et de l’action immédiate.’ The issue was titled: ‘L’Extension de Paris’ and featured contributions from high-ranking politicians as well as architects. The opening editorial announced: ‘De toutes parts, l’extension des grandes villes modernes fait craquer l’armature administrative des États. Partout où le problème s’est posé, à Londres, à New-York, à Berlin, à Madrid, il a été traité avec l’ampleur qu’il comporte. En France, par contre, presque rien n’a été fait. C’est à M. Tardieu, ministre de l’Intérieur, que revient aujourd’hui la redoutable tâche de présider à l’aménagement de la Région Parisienne.’ (722)

<sup>110</sup> Population rates for Paris between 1800-1925: 1800: 547,000; 1825: 855,000; 1850: 1,314,000; 1875: 2,250,000; 1925: 4,800,000. (Teritus Chandler and Gerald Fox, *3000 Years of Urban Growth* (New York and London: Academic Press, 1974), 323-335.)

<sup>111</sup> For a general account of urbanisation in modern Europe, see e.g.: Sutcliffe (ed.), *Metropolis: 1890-1940*; Anthony Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City: Germany, Britain, the United States and France: 1780-1914* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).

<sup>112</sup> Cholera hit the capital first in 1832 and then again in 1849. The latter outbreak killed 19,000 in Paris alone and vigorously spurred a widespread interest, political and popular, in public health. The city also experiences a series of violent and destabilising upheavals, the first of which erupted in 1830 followed by a second insurrection in 1848. See e.g.: François Delaporte, *Disease and Civilization: The Cholera in Paris, 1832*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1986). On the correlation between epidemics and social upheaval, see e.g.: Richard J. Evans, ‘Epidemics and Revolutions: Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Europe,’ *Past & Present*, no. 120 (1988): 123–46.

more daring and visionary Baron Haussmann in 1853. Together they launched a radical renovation project for urban Paris, unprecedented in scale, designed to modernise the city, to turn Paris into the ‘capital of Europe’.<sup>113</sup>

The primary mechanism of their urban renovation was the instalment of a new network of streets: a web of straight thoroughfares envisioned as an all-encompassing remedy to the urban perils terrorising the capital. Piercing through a dense and congested centre, the new streets – lined with trees and punctuated with open spaces – would inject the city with a much-needed dose of fresh air and light. Their increased width would simultaneously act as an antidote to rowdy insurrections, making the construction of efficient barricades difficult.<sup>114</sup> The planned roadwork would at the same time provide an opportunity to install Paris with up-to-date sewerage and water-supply systems.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, with the 1852 imperial decree, labelling all demolitions carried as part of the street improvement scheme lawful, the renovation also enabled authorities to finally do away with some of Paris’ unsanitary slums. New streets were strategically routed through the poorer districts. Any slum areas maintained in-between the thoroughfares, it was hoped, would be regenerated via the increased proximity to light, fresh air and greenery.<sup>116</sup> As Anthony Sutcliffe writes, Haussmann’s renovation of Paris was presented as ‘an urban panacea’ capable of spurring a total regeneration of the struggling city.<sup>117</sup>

The ambitiousness of their plan, however, meant that money soon ran out.<sup>118</sup> In 1870, Haussmann was dismissed. The following year, after the devastating defeat against Prussia, the Second Empire collapsed. Taking over in 1871, the Third Republic was left with huge debts and an unfinished refurbishment of the capital.<sup>119</sup> The initial strategy was to continue Haussmann’s

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<sup>113</sup> The literature on the Haussmannisation of Paris is vast, see e.g.: David H. Pinkey, *Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958); David Harvey, *Paris: Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>114</sup> Walter Benjamin writes: ‘The true goal of Haussmann’s projects was to secure the city against civil war. He wanted to make the erection of barricades in Paris impossible for all time. (...) Haussmann seeks to neutralize these tactics on two fronts. Widening the streets is designed to make the erection of barricades impossible, and new streets are to furnish the shortest route between the barracks and the workers’ districts.’ (*The Arcades Project*, 12.)

<sup>115</sup> Donald Reid, *Paris Sewers and Sewermen: Realities and Representations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Matthew Gandy, ‘The Paris Sewers and the Rationalization of Urban Space,’ *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1999): 23-44.

<sup>116</sup> For a critical account of the class politics of Haussmann’s urban renovation, see e.g.: Harvey; Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1991)- Buck-Morss explains: ‘class antagonisms were thereby covered up, not eliminated. Haussmann’s slum ‘clearance’ simply broke up working-class neighborhoods and moved the eyesores and health hazards of poverty out central Paris and into the suburbs.’ (89).

<sup>117</sup> Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City*, 132.

<sup>118</sup> Between 1853 and 1870 the City’s debt had risen from 163 million francs to 2,500 million. By 1870, 44.14% of the City’s budget was dedicated to debt charges. (Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 37-42.) For an example of contemporary critique against Haussmann’s daring fiscal plan, see e.g.: Jules Ferry, *Les Comptes fantastiques d’Haussmann* (Paris: Éditeur Guy Durier, 1868).

<sup>119</sup> A 1913 report described early Third Republican Paris as an abandoned worksite. (Préfecture du département de la Seine, *Commission d’extension de Paris : Considérations techniques préliminaires* (Paris: Imprimerie Chaix, 1913), 37. Centre d’archives d’architecture contemporaine, Dossier 035 Ifa 301/3.

plan. Further loans were floated in 1875 and 1876. Jean Alphand, who had overseen the planning of Parisian parks under Haussmann, took over as director of works.<sup>120</sup> Weighed down by debts and lacking the imperial flexibility enjoyed by Haussmann and Napoleon III, however, Third Republican Paris soon moved to a standstill.<sup>121</sup> The period after 1870, Sutcliffe writes, was ‘an anti-climax’.<sup>122</sup>

Haussmann’s renovation had not only accumulated a hefty bill, imposing a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to any further intervention. The Third Republic had also been left with a worsened situation in some areas. Undertaking large-scale demolitions of Parisian slums, whilst failing to provide alternative, low-income housing, meant that a large proportion of the Parisian poor had been left displaced. As a result, the remaining slums left untouched by Haussmann experienced an accelerated influx, leading to further overcrowding and dilapidation. The more slums that Haussmann brought down, the graver the problem became.<sup>123</sup> At the same time, Paris only continued to grow. Between 1861 and 1896, the population increased with 49.6%. By the turn of the century, reports revealed that, in the city’s poorer districts, up to 64.2% of the population lived in overcrowded housing.<sup>124</sup>

As another wave of epidemics hit the city, the prefect tasked Paul Juillerat with compiling a *casier sanitaire des maisons de Paris* in 1894 – a health register of Parisian houses, giving each building its own file detailing the diseases contracted by its occupants.<sup>125</sup> After eleven years of data collection, a report was completed.<sup>126</sup> The shocking results firmly reinforced longstanding assumptions of direct causative links between bad housing and the spread of disease.<sup>127</sup> Tuberculosis, being the deadliest illness, was given special attention. A 1905 report, co-written by Louis Bonnier and Paul Juillerat, explained that scientists ‘have shown that the Koch bacilli is

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<sup>120</sup> A few unfinished street improvements were completed, notably the Avenue de l’Opéra, commenced by Haussmann 1861 and officially inaugurated by President MacMahon in 1877, just in time for the 1878 Paris Exposition, an event designed to signal full French recovery after the loss against Prussia and the subsequent Paris Commune. (Evenson, *Paris: A Century of Change*, 10-11.)

<sup>121</sup> As the supply of vacant land was diminishing rapidly, any construction had to be preceded by demolitions, which - with a debt still making up 40.18% of the City’s total spending in 1879 - could no longer be justified. (Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 45-77). It was only in 1926 that boulevard Haussmann was completed, bringing with it the destruction of the Passage de l’Opéra – a site featured in Louis Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926).

<sup>122</sup> Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City*, 137.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-133; Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 124-7; Fishman, 15-6; Brian Newsome, *French Urban Planning, 1940-1968: The Construction and Deconstruction of an Authoritarian System* (New York and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 10-13.

<sup>124</sup> Newsome, 12-3.

<sup>125</sup> Outbreaks included e.g. cholera in 1884 and typhoid in 1882. For an account of the *casier*, see e.g.: Barnes, *The Making of a Social Disease*, chapter 4; Murard and Zylberman, *L’hygiène dans la République*, 73-75; Yankel Fijalkow, ‘L’enquête sanitaire urbaine à Paris en 1900 : Le casier sanitaire des maisons,’ *Mille neuf cent : Revue d’histoire intellectuelle*, no. 22 (2004): 95-106.

<sup>126</sup> The *casier* was ‘above all an observatory’ (Murard and Zylberman, *L’hygiène dans la République*, 73).

<sup>127</sup> The 1902 public health law also encompassed health regulations for dwellings as well as allowing for inspections which could result in buildings being deemed unfit for use. For a detailed account of the 1902 legislation, see e.g.: Ministère de l’intérieur et des cultes, ‘Loi relative à la protection de la santé publique, 15 février 1902’. Centre d’archives d’architecture contemporaine, Dossier 035 Ifa 303/4.

destroyed only by being exposed to direct sunlight’ – ‘in the dark, however, the bacilli preserves its virulence indefinitely’.<sup>128</sup> As such, they continued, it is not surprising that ‘households of tuberculosis have the same characteristics’: ‘narrow streets’ and ‘buildings that do not permit sunlight to reach the inhabited spaces’.<sup>129</sup> Tuberculosis, they concluded, ‘is above all the illness of darkness’.<sup>130</sup> In 1906, an additional list was published, disclosing six Parisian districts – labelled *îlots insalubres* – where tuberculosis mortality was particularly high. At the top of the list, deemed the area with the highest mortality, was Saint-Merri, an area located at the very heart of the historic centre, just north of the Hôtel de Ville on the right bank.<sup>131</sup>

The disturbing condition of the neighbourhoods triggered a widescale debate. Councillor Ambroise Rendu, one of the most vocal politicians in the fight against Paris’ disease-ridden slums, immediately called for total clearance of the notorious *îlots insalubres*: ‘we must destroy the house, when it harbours the disease. Any palliative would be an illusion.’<sup>132</sup> In 1908, another official, Louis Dausset, chimed in, declaring that if Paris were to maintain its place among the world’s capitals, it was essential that action be taken immediately. Paris, he explained, ‘requires urgent improvements in sanitation, hygiene, ventilation and streets.’<sup>133</sup> In 1913, even Louis Bonnier, in a report written together with one of France’s leading urbanists, Marcel Poète, agreed: ‘Demolish the wretched blocks’.<sup>134</sup> When a loan was finally floated, however, after repeated campaigning, the war came. In 1916, Louis Dausset – now in the role as *rapporteur* of the budget committee – had to reluctantly propose the cancellation of all planned works to consolidate the accumulating war debt.<sup>135</sup>

Returning to the urban problems of Paris after the war, it was immediately noticed that the situation had become much worse.<sup>136</sup> In 1920, the socialist politician Henri Sellier declared: ‘in

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<sup>128</sup> Paul Juillerat and Louis Bonnier, *La Tuberculose et l’habitation* (Paris: Masson et cie, 1905), 2. ‘Les travaux de Koch, (...) de Grancher (...), ont démontré que le bacille de Koch est détruit par une exposition à la lumière solaire directe (...). Au contraire, dans l’obscurité, le bacille conserve indéfiniment sa virulence’. In 1925, the *Ligue nationale contre le taudis* identified Juillerat as ‘le grand apôtre de la lutte contre le logement insalubre.’ (‘Le Taudis,’ *Bulletin mensuel de la Ligue nationale contre le taudis* (July 1925): 9. Bibliothèque nationale de France, JO-82474.)

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. ‘Tous les îlots étudiés et toutes les maisons révélées comme foyers de tuberculose, présentent les mêmes caractéristiques : rues étroites, cours insuffisants bordées de bâtiments élevés ou disposition de construction ne permettant pas aux rayons du soleil ne pénétrer dans les locaux habités.’

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* ‘En résumé, on peut formuler le résultat de ces recherches en disant que ‘la tuberculose est avant tout la maladie de l’obscurité’.

<sup>131</sup> For an account of the *îlots insalubres*, see e.g.: Yankel Fijalkow, *La construction des îlots insalubres: Paris 1850-1945* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998); Elsbeth Kalf, *Le logement insalubre et l’hygiénisation de la vie quotidienne: Paris (1830-1990)* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008), chapter 4.

<sup>132</sup> Rendu quoted in Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 110.

<sup>133</sup> Dausset (1908) quoted in Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 91.

<sup>134</sup> Préfecture du département de la Seine, *Commission d’extension de Paris*, 82. ‘Démolir des quartiers sordides’.

<sup>135</sup> Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 213-214.

<sup>136</sup> The devastation also spurred further awareness of the fragility of Paris, and of France at large. Telling of the interwar momentum is the 1916 organisation of *La Renaissance des Cités*. Concluding their work in 1936, the organization wrote: ‘La grande

the *département de la Seine* as a whole, half of the population is badly housed.’ He also noted that the ‘proportion of tubercular mortality and morbidity has increased during the last five years.’<sup>137</sup> Indeed, with all proposed intervention postponed combined with an increased influx prompted by the war industries located in the capital, the years of hostility had ended up, the city architect Georges Legros explained in 1921, ‘aggravating the shortage’ and, as such, “crystallising’ the pre-war situation’ – the destabilising effects of which ‘are making themselves clear everywhere and are all too well known to be repeated’.<sup>138</sup> An immediate re-count of the *îlots insalubres* commenced. Eleven districts were added to the list of unhealthy areas, designated for immediate demolition. At the top of the list was still Saint-Merri. In ninth place was an area in Clignancourt, added after a bubonic plague broke out in 1921.<sup>139</sup>

Having learnt their lesson from Haussmann’s mistakes, however, French interwar authorities were aware that without simultaneous largescale construction of new, low-cost dwellings, any demolition taking place, especially in densely populated quarters, would only lead to an aggravated housing crisis and the creation of new slums. In his 1921 report, Legros concluded that, unless alternative housing of equal or better standard is offered, demolition of houses currently in use should be forbidden.<sup>140</sup> The same year, the Public Works Committee promised: ‘Naturally enough, we shall evict tenants only if it is possible to do so. It is not our intention to run the risk of aggravating the rent crisis.’<sup>141</sup> Although clearance powers had been strengthened, thus, the accompanying price tag and the crippling fear of further aggravating an already acute housing crisis were enough to paralyze the authorities.<sup>142</sup> As Sutcliffe writes, ‘the lack of resources produced a kind of torpor that seems to have been shared by officials and councillors alike.’<sup>143</sup> The resulting inertia whipped up an increasingly alarmist and dystopian rhetoric, injecting the built space of Paris with increasingly anguished currency. Indeed, as we will see, the

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guerre 1914-1918, accumulant par sa longueur et sa barbarie les désastres de toute sorte, permit aux hommes d’exalter leur sentiment de solidarité’. Listed among its presidents were e.g. Louis Bonnier, Georges Legros, Franz Jourdain, Marcel Poëte. (*La Renaissance des cités : 1916-1935* (Gap: Louis Jean, 1936). Bibliothèque nationale de France, MFICHE 4-V-13019.)

<sup>137</sup> Sellier (1920), quoted in in Evenson, *Paris: A Century of Change*, 212-3.

<sup>138</sup> Georges Legros, *Rapport de la commission pour l’Étude de la crise du logement* (Paris: Société des ingénieurs civils, 1921), 1-2. Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-V PIECE-20510. ‘La crise du logement, ses effets ses causes, la recherche des moyens propres à y remédier, tel est l’objet de ce rapport. Sur les effets, il est inutile d’insister : partout ils se font sentir et ne sont que trop connus. (...) A cet arrête des travaux empêchant la progression normale et constituant, par suite, une réelle diminution, vient s’ajouter, pour aggraver encore le déficit, la désaffectation d’un grand nombre de locaux d’habitation (...). En effet, ‘cristallisant’, pour ainsi dire, la situation locative d’avant-guerre.’

<sup>139</sup> Evenson, 216.

<sup>140</sup> Legros, 7. ‘Interdire la démolition et la désaffectation d’immeubles à usage d’habitation, tant que des locaux de même espèce et d’importance au moins équivalant n’auront pas été préparés, pour recevoir les locataires devant être dépossédés de leurs logements.’

<sup>141</sup> Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 214-5.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 240-4. The most significant yet, in the end, insufficient attempt to prompt the construction of low-income housing was the 1928 *loi Loucheur*.

<sup>143</sup> Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 329.

infected debates around the architectural edifice of the French capital, political as well as public, primed its cityscape for *Documents*' subversive intervention, re-disseminating fraught signs against the grain to agitate Parisian problems and to expose a radically deglorified reality.

In 1925, in the first issue of the newly launched *Ligue nationale contre le taudis*' monthly bulletin, the city's slums – full of narrow streets making 'Vieux Paris-enthusiasts happy' – were labelled a 'haunting leper' and a 'horrific threat to the health of the race and the social order'. 'Our nation's existence is compromised by an excessive mortality and an insufficient birthrate', the organisation announced: 'the slum is one of the primary causes of this condition. It must disappear.'<sup>144</sup> The honorary committee was decorated with high-ranking figures: the minister of hygiene, the *préfet de la Seine* and the president of the Third Republic. In the second issue, published in October of 1925, a speech by the official Raoul Dautry appeared in print. Comparing Parisian slums to the longstanding German military threat, he explained that 'France has two enemies': 'GERMANY has killed 1.600.000 Frenchmen in 50 years, that is 32.000 per year. THE SLUM has killed, on average, 200.000 each year.' 'Please understand', Dautry pleaded, 'that each year the SLUM kills as many Frenchmen as 6 Germanies could.'<sup>145</sup> The following year, the left-wing newspaper *L'Humanité* declared that 'the City of Light' has become 'gigantic nest of contagion'.<sup>146</sup> The seventeen *îlots insalubres*, they wrote, 'are permeated by narrow and badly kept streets' where 'bacilli multiply in the dark' amongst 'accursed houses' to which 'daylight barely penetrates, sunshine almost never.'<sup>147</sup>

None of this loud debate, however, stopped Paris from continuing to grow. With city at capacity, the incoming streams instead flooded into the suburbs, exacerbating the uncontrolled growth of shantytowns that had begun to form in the outskirts at the turn of the century. Large stretches of cheap wasteland were purchased by speculators, parcelled into small allotments, or *lotissements*,

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<sup>144</sup> *Bulletin mensuel de la Ligue nationale contre le taudis* (July 1925), 9, 10, 8. Bibliothèque nationale de France, JO-82474. 'Une rue étroite qui fait la joie des amateurs du Vieux Paris (...) La Ville-lumière a sa lèpre honteuse'. (9, 10). 'Il faut faire connaître la situation dans son horreur menaçante pour la santé de la race et pour l'ordre social (...). L'existence de notre pays est compromise par une mortalité excessive et par une natalité insuffisante : le Taudis est l'une des causes premières de cet état de choses. Il doit disparaître.' (8).

<sup>145</sup> 'Conférence de Monsieur Dautry,' *Bulletin mensuel de la Ligue nationale contre le taudis* (October 1925), 5. 'La France a deux ennemis. L'un qui vous a tous meurtris. Et qui, en frappant depuis des siècles aux portes de l'Est sans avoir pu les abattre, nous a coûté 90.000 hommes en 1870, 1.500.000 morts et 800.000 mutilés de 1914 à 1918. L'autre (...) c'est le TAUDIS. L'ALLEMAGNE a tué 1.600.000 français en 50 ans, soit 32.000 par an. LE TAUDIS en a tué, en moyenne, 200.000 chaque année (...)' 'Retenez, je vous prie, que le TAUDIS tue annuellement autant de Français de 6 Allemagnes pourraient en tuer.

<sup>146</sup> 'La Ville-Lumière est devenue un immense foyer de contagion,' *L'Humanité* (2 January 1926): 2.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* 'Paris 'ville lumière', 'cité de joie' a le triste privilège de posséder des milliers de maisons mortelles, foyers d'infection où le bacille se multiplie dans l'ombre, maisons maudites dans lesquelles des travailleurs leurs femmes et leurs enfants croupissent dans un état de misère bien fait pour révolter les plus timorés. (...) Le Service du Casier sanitaire des maisons de Paris a donc réparé dix-sept îlots insalubres, c'est-à-dire, dix-sept groupes d'habitations ayant enregistré un nombre de décès pulmonaires supérieur à la normale. La plupart de ces îlots sont sillonnées par des rues étroites et mal entretenues ; la lumière du jour y pénètre à peine, le soleil presque jamais.'

and mortgaged to the working-classes at a modest cost.<sup>148</sup> As planning and building regulations were almost non-existent outside of the city, makeshift houses sprang up haphazardly, constructed from discarded materials, scraps of wood and corrugated metal. Lacking fresh water, gas and electricity, paved roads and sewerage systems, the deplorable conditions soon caught widespread attention in both the press and political discourse.<sup>149</sup> In 1927, a senator described the development as ‘a dishonour not only for Paris but for all of France and, as such, for this European civilisation, within which Paris prides itself of holding a central position’. ‘Nothing but chaos, disorder, anarchy, ugliness’, he concluded, ‘that is the Paris of tomorrow.’<sup>150</sup> A year later, one minister compared the suburban proliferation to the growth of ‘cancerous cells’ against which no ‘palliatives’ would suffice.<sup>151</sup> Another described it as a ‘hydrocephalic’ brain, ‘in perpetual extension’, swelling into a ‘disfigured France’.<sup>152</sup> It was after having had to take an unplanned detour through one of these suburban shantytowns, on his way back from a countryside visit, that Poincaré declared the situation a state of emergency: ‘if the Parisian population continues grow, a great social danger awaits’.<sup>153</sup>

The Third Republic, thus, inherited urban crisis from Haussmann and the Second Empire that became acute after the war.<sup>154</sup> As a result, the feeble state of Paris was paid unprecedented attention in both popular and political discourse during the interwar period. In 1919, France’s first planning law – *loi Cornudet* – was passed, demanding all cities with populations over ten

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<sup>148</sup> Whilst the population in the city stayed just under three million during the period between 1921 and 1931, the suburbs witnessed a dramatic increase from 1,505,000 to 2,061,000 (Evenson, 220-1).

<sup>149</sup> Newsome, 29-31; Evenson, 211-230; Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City*, 141-143. On the felt political threat of predominantly left-wing suburbs, see e.g.: Tylor Stovall, *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990). For literature on the notorious *la zone*, a shanty town that had cropped up in the old firing zone around the fortifications, which had been out of use since the 1870s, see e.g.: James Cannon, *La Zone: A Cultural History, 1840-1944* (London: Routledge, 2016). Eugène Atget photographed the area in the early 1910s. For an account of artistic engagements with *la zone*, see e.g.: Walker, 114-143.

<sup>150</sup> ‘Communication de Henri Chardon, Président de Section au Conseil d’État, Séance du 2 Juillet 1927,’ 1, 8. Centre d’archives d’architecture contemporaine, Dossier 343 AA 5/3. ‘Nous laissons se poursuivre actuellement l’extension de Paris dans des conditions désastreuses, qui sont un déshonneur non seulement pour Paris mais pour la France entière et au-delà de la France, pour cette civilisation européenne, dans laquelle Paris s’enorgueillissait de tenir une si grande place. (...) Plus rien que le chaos, le désordre, l’anarchie, la laideur ; et c’est cela, le Paris de demain.’

<sup>151</sup> ‘Discours de M. Albert Sarraut,’ Comité supérieure de l’aménagement et de l’organisation générale de la région parisienne (19 June 1928), 1, 2. Centre d’archives d’architecture contemporaine, Dossier 343 AA 5/2. ‘Quand j’ai entrepris de visiter, aux abords de Paris, ces lotissements misérables envers lesquels la nation entière vient de faire un geste de solidarité, j’ai été frappé par le développement anarchique des cités suburbaines, par cette prolifération qu’on est malgré soi tenté de comparer à celle des cellules cancéreuses. (...) Messieurs, il ne s’agit pas de voiler par des palliatifs commodes le mal dont souffre la région parisienne ; il faut guérir ce mal, et pour cela d’abord le connaître.’

<sup>152</sup> Pierre Laval, ‘Préface,’ in René Bouffet, *Un problème d’urbanisme : l’aménagement des lotissements défectueux (Étude et commentaire de la loi du 15 mars 1928)* (Paris: Pierre Roger, 1930). Bibliothèque nationale de France, 4-F-2483. ‘René Bouffet (...) parle d’un ‘France défigurée’. Je complète son image. Il fait allusion à l’être hydrocéphale que deviendrait immanquablement la France avec sa Capitale en perpétuelle extension, - un être doté d’un cerveau gigantesque, congestionné, qui reposerait sur un corps amaigri, vidé de sa substance vraiment vivante. C’est une idée que j’ai eu souvent, dans la Banlieue même de Paris, l’occasion de développer.’

<sup>153</sup> Hall, ‘Metropolis 1890-1940,’ 51.

<sup>154</sup> Henri Sellier described the interwar situation as follows: ‘Les circonstances économiques et sociales nées de la guerre ont posé, d’une façon particulièrement aiguë, le problème de l’habitation populaire que, déjà avant le cataclysme qui pendant cinq années a bouleversé l’Europe, tous les sociologues et les hygiénistes considéraient comme particulièrement inquiétant.’ (*La crise du logement et l’intervention publique* (Paris: Office public d’habitations à bon marché du département de la Seine, 1921), 3. Bibliothèque nationale de France, MICROFICHE M-16934.)

thousand to compose a comprehensive and long-term plan for the extension and beautification of the city.<sup>155</sup> This, in turn, prompted authorities to launch in the capital the École des Hautes Études Urbains – France’s first formal education platform for urbanist studies. Attached to the school was *La Vie Urbaine* – a periodical, edited by Louis Bonnier, Marcel Poëte and Henri Sellier, dedicated, as declared in the inaugural issue, ‘to the study of the conditions, manifestations and developments of cities, in particular of Paris.’<sup>156</sup> In 1924, the École des Hautes Études Urbains became the Institut d’urbanisme de l’Université de Paris.<sup>157</sup> In terms of research, publication, conferences, exhibitions, and design competitions, Paris provided a major centre for urban study and the dissemination of planning concepts. The word ‘urbanisme’, which had come into use in the years leading up to the war, became part of everyday vocabulary.<sup>158</sup>

Encumbered by war debts and inflation, and a progressively dominant preservationist camp – to whom change was not only too costly but, worse, a symbolic loss of national selfhood at a particularly fragile moment – however, Parisian planning remained ineffective. The *loi Cornudet*, despite an additional, supporting law being passed in 1924, ended up a ‘dead-letter’.<sup>159</sup> In 1928, during a municipal debate on the nagging difficulties troubling and endlessly postponing the expropriation and demolition of the notorious *îlots insalubres*, frustrations were laid bare.<sup>160</sup> One deputy exclaimed: ‘It has been fifteen years since we voted to secure the necessary funding.’<sup>161</sup> Another quickly filled in: ‘Fifteen years and the first *îlot* has still not been demolished.’<sup>162</sup> A third explained: ‘The problem, then, has two sides: we must demolish the *îlots insalubres*; but we must also construct buildings to house those currently living there.’<sup>163</sup> A fourth diplomatically

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<sup>155</sup> In Paris, a planning contest was arranged, set to close in January of 1920, for which submissions were to include a fixed streets plan, outlining open spaces and sites for public buildings, as well as a program for hygienic services – such as sewerage and water supply systems – whilst, at the same time, guaranteeing the conservation of monuments and sites of historic, archaeological, aesthetic, or picturesque value.

<sup>156</sup> ‘Programme,’ *La Vie Urbaine*, no. 1-2 (March-June 1919): 1. Bibliothèque nationale de France, MICROFILM 5618-1. ‘Cette Revue (...) est consacrée, comme l’Institut dont elle est l’organe, à l’étude des conditions et des manifestations d’existence et de développement des villes en général et de Paris en particulier.’

<sup>157</sup> See e.g.: Gérard Chevalier, ‘L’entrée de l’urbanisme à l’Université: la création de l’Institut d’urbanisme (1921-1924),’ *Genèses* 39 (June 2000): 98-120. For detail on the curriculum, see e.g.: ‘Institut d’urbanisme de l’Université de Paris’. (1927-1928). Centre d’archives d’architecture contemporaine, Dossier 035 Ifa 309.

<sup>158</sup> Evenson, 266-7; Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris*, 220-23. Évelyne Cohen writes: ‘Face à une croissance urbaine qu’ils ne maîtrisent pas, (...) Paris devient le champ d’application possible des théories d’urbanisme, un possible lieu d’expérimentation et de projection dans l’avenir.’ (313).

<sup>159</sup> Bouffet, *Un problème d’urbanisme*, 13, 14. ‘Paradoxe irritant ! Déjà tardive pour les raisons que nous avons indiquées, la loi du 14 mars 1919 relative à l’extension et l’aménagement des villes péchait surtout par insuffisance. (...) La loi de 1919 demeura, cela va sans dire, lettre morte.’ The winning plan of the 1920 *concours*, designed by Léon Jaussely, was quietly shelved and soon forgotten. Indeed, France would have to wait for another authoritarian regime to take over, this time that of Vichy, before effective legal basis for town planning was to be provided in 1943.

<sup>160</sup> ‘Expropriation de l’îlot insalubre n°1,’ *Bulletin municipal officiel de la Ville de Paris* (25 January 1928): 618-622.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 621. ‘Il y a quinze ans que nous avons voté les crédits nécessaires.’

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.* ‘Quinze ans et le premier îlot n’est même pas démoli.’

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.* ‘Le problème a donc deux aspects: il faut détruire les îlots insalubres; mais il faut construire des immeubles pour abriter ceux qui habitent ces îlots.’

summarised: ‘We must proceed with both operations parallelly.’<sup>164</sup> To which a fifth asked: ‘How come you will spend 600 million on the Métropolitain, 400 million on the sewers, but you wouldn’t have the courage to spend a few millions on the demolition of the *îlots insalubre*.’<sup>165</sup> Reporting on the debate in their monthly magazine, the *Musée social* – a think tank launched in 1894 that played a central role in Third Republican debates on the social question – declared: ‘Such is the situation which we do not know how to resolve.’<sup>166</sup> In 1930, the *Ligue nationale contre le taudis* deplored: ‘Time passes, the slum remains.’<sup>167</sup>

As the twenties came to an end, it was widely felt that Paris was reaching a make-or-break moment. After the ‘tragic years of 1915 to 1918’ followed by ‘difficult years of 1918 to 1928, paralysing all construction’, Guérard reported in his 1929 *L’Avenir de Paris*, ‘finally the Parisians are waking up’. ‘And,’ he continued, ‘rubbing their eyes, they discover pathological congestion of the city’ and ‘inescapable deformation’.<sup>168</sup> As Ménabréa had explained in the same year, whilst promoting the 1930 *Congrès du Paris Nouveau*: ‘Everyone will certainly agree on the necessity of effort and immediate action’.<sup>169</sup> ‘There are no other options’, he continued:

either Paris, an old and maladjusted city, will descend towards decline or, through a united effort by the State, the city, departments, societies, companies, even private individuals, Paris will overtake the obstacles hindering its growth, fettering its future, and rise towards a new destiny.<sup>170</sup>

Analyses of and potential solutions to the feeble state of the French capital were widely debated, reaching the inner circles of *Documents* too. In 1929, Pierre d’Espezet – co-founder of *Documents* and colleague of Bataille at the Bibliothèque nationale de France – published a special issue of

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. ‘Il faut mener parallèlement les deux opérations.’

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 622. ‘Comment, vous allez dépenser 600 millions pour le Métropolitain, 400 millions pour les égouts, et vous n’auriez pas le courage de dépenser quelques millions pour détruire les îlots insalubres.’

<sup>166</sup> ‘Les îlots insalubres – La question du logement,’ *Le Musée social : revue mensuelle* (April 1929): 185. ‘Telle est la situation, et qu’on ne sait comment résoudre, à laquelle nous: ont acculés beaucoup plus que les circonstances nées de la guerre (car elle était déjà très grave bien avant 1914) cinquante ans d’imprévoyances de stagnation urbaniste.’ For an account of the *Musée social*, see e.g.: Janet Horne, *A Social Laboratory for Modern France: The Musée Social and the Rise of the Welfare State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>167</sup> ‘Hier et aujourd’hui,’ *Bulletin mensuel de la ligue nationale contre le taudis* (February 1930), 6. Bibliothèque nationale de France, JO-83907. ‘Le temps a passé, le taudis reste.’

<sup>168</sup> Guérard, *L’Avenir de Paris*, 11. ‘C’est que la guerre est venue effaroucher toutes ces belles intentions. Quatre ans de fièvre mortelle ; dix ans d’un malaise qui engourdissait les meilleures volontés : enfin l’opinion parisienne se réveille. Et, se frottant les yeux, elle découvre l’encombrement maladif de la cité, l’enlaidissement inéluctable dont la menacent les nouvelles bâtisses, la hideur d’une banlieue livrée à l’anarchie des Mauvais Lotisseurs.’

<sup>169</sup> Ménabréa, ‘Le congrès du Paris-Nouveau’.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

*Les Cahiers de la République* on the future of Paris.<sup>171</sup> Entitled *Vers un Paris Nouveau?*, the issue featured essays penned by prominent figures. A Third Republican official dutifully warned his *citoyens* that, ‘unless we act promptly’, Paris will soon be ‘definitively disfigured’ whilst making utopian promises, envisioning a ‘Paris of tomorrow’ as ‘Minerva, goddess of Order and Reason’.<sup>172</sup> Léandre Vaillat, a household name of the conservative *Le Temps*, featured alongside representatives from the medical field explaining links between overcrowded cities and neurosis, dubbing the French capital: ‘*la ville anxieuse*’.<sup>173</sup> Lucien Zimmer, a member of the Paris police force, wrote on the problem of traffic, identifying the city as ‘a large body suffering from fever’. ‘The arteries, the pulse of Paris beat too fast, too strong’, he continued: ‘Paris has a 39° fever. Paris will reach 40°...’.<sup>174</sup> Even Fernand Léger, a staple of the Parisian avant-garde scene, contributed a poetic fragment outlining his experience of city.<sup>175</sup> The special issue also comprised a questionnaire asking recipients to consider how they would act ‘if the King were to give me Paris’.<sup>176</sup> Respondents included, amongst others, an actress of the Comédie-Française, prominent modernist architects such as Franz Jourdain and Adolf Loos, and *Documents*-patron and board member, Georges Wildenstein. As Georges Hilaire wrote in the introduction, the special issue amounted to an ‘anthology rather than a *somme*’.<sup>177</sup>

D’Espezel too took the chance to voice his opinion on the subject. His contribution, entitled ‘Paris Ancien – Paris Nouveau’, was co-written with Lucien Dubech. ‘The capital of France, at once the head and the heart of our country – one is often told’, they wrote: ‘Why can we no longer live there? Why is it difficult to circulate in the streets? Why are we so rushed, so fatigued by the noise, so anaemic, so nervous?’<sup>178</sup> The duo had collaborated before, publishing their mastodon *Histoire de Paris* in 1926.<sup>179</sup> In this chronological survey of the French capital, the looming issue of Paris’ future occupied a central role. ‘Without a doubt,’ they wrote, ‘a city

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<sup>171</sup> *Les Cahiers de la République des lettres, des sciences et des arts*, XII: *Vers un Paris nouveau ?* (1929). In the introduction to the issue, Georges Hilaire spoke of the need to ‘defend Paris against itself’ (‘Avis aux lecteurs de ce cahier,’ 5). This is also the journal where Bataille published his first essay in 1928, see n24p21.

<sup>172</sup> Henry Puget, ‘La région parisienne : Les problèmes actuels les projets d’aménagement,’ in *ibid.*, 36. ‘Si l’on n’agit promptement, la région qui l’environne sera définitivement défigurée, mutilée. Qu’au secours des divinités de l’Île-de-France dont on saccage le domaine se dresse enfin Minerve, déesse de l’Ordre et de la Raison.’

<sup>173</sup> Léandre Vaillat, ‘L’aménagement de Paris,’ in *ibid.*, 38-49; Gil Robin, ‘Les poisons de Paris,’ in *ibid.*, 112. ‘Paris-toxique. Paris : la ville anxieuse.’ Vaillat was an avid critic of Le Corbusier.

<sup>174</sup> Lucien Zimmer, ‘La circulation,’ in *ibid.*, 113. ‘Paris est un grand corps qui a la fièvre. (...) Les artères, le pouls de Paris battent trop vite, trop fort’ (...) Paris a 39° de fièvre. Paris aura 40 °...’

<sup>175</sup> Fernand Léger, ‘La Rue: objets, spectacles,’ in *ibid.*, 102-103.

<sup>176</sup> ‘Réponses à notre enquête : Si le Roi m’avait donné Paris, sa grand’ville,’ in *ibid.*, 124-144.

<sup>177</sup> Hilaire, ‘Avis aux lecteurs de ce cahier,’ in *ibid.*, 5. ‘Vous connaissez notre formule : *anthologie* plutôt que *Somme*.’

<sup>178</sup> Lucien Dubech and Pierre d’Espezel, ‘Paris Ancien – Paris Nouveau,’ in *ibid.*, 72-78. ‘La capitale de France, à la fois tête et cœur de notre pays – on nous le dit souvent (...) Pourquoi ne pouvons-nous plus nous y loger ? Pourquoi nous est-il difficile de circuler dans ses rues ? Pourquoi y sommes-nous si bousculés, si fatigués par le bruit, si anémiés, si nerveux ?’ (72).

<sup>179</sup> Lucien Dubech and Pierre d’Espezel, *Histoire de Paris* (Paris : Les Editions Pittoresque, 1931). The first edition appeared in 1926. The book was deeply critical of Haussmann’s intervention, deploring ‘la folie des démolitions’ (144).

endlessly transforms itself. But at this stage, the problems of circulation are pending and pressing. It is these that force the question: what will Paris of tomorrow be?<sup>180</sup> In the final chapter, entitled ‘L’Avenir de Paris’, d’Espezel and Dubech announced the stakes at play: ‘Paris is not only the capital of a State. Its grandeur, its beauty, its destiny is bound to the destiny of the French nation.’<sup>181</sup> ‘All the threats of barbarity, revolutions, systems of urbanists or returns of enemy people are endlessly suspended above the fragile splendour of Paris,’ they concluded: ‘If improvidence or folly is to one day leave our city similar to towns of barbarians, we thank the heavens for having let us live in an epoch where it is still possible to taste and celebrate its charm.’<sup>182</sup>

The alarmist tone was further amplified for their *Vers un Paris Nouveau?*-entry. ‘So? So, change regime. Install responsible men and civil servants, few in number but useful’, they announced: ‘All will not be perfect, no doubt, but all will have the chance of being better: fear is the beginning of wisdom.’<sup>183</sup> ‘This advice does not suit you, my dear diseased? The habits of your spirit are disturbed, your religion suffers? Well! Madame, Monsieur, my dear co-citizens’, d’Espezel and Dubech railed, ‘breathe the burnt petrol, fall into potholes, don’t circulate, even die. Die, but don’t tire us anymore with your vain protests.’<sup>184</sup>

The most radical response to the urgent problems of interwar Paris published in d’Espezel’s *Vers un Paris Nouveau?* was, of course, penned by Le Corbusier. Still persistently peddling his Plan Voisin, Le Corbusier proposed – as he had since 1922 – to ‘replace a rotten city centre with a new’, using ‘modern techniques permitting constructions ten times as high’. ‘Paris of tomorrow can be astounding’, he wrote, ‘a new cycle of civilisation.’<sup>185</sup> To Le Corbusier, however, the skyscraper always amounted to much more than simply a pragmatic, hands-on solution to a practical Parisian problem. Indeed, as part of repeated efforts to shake off any ‘functionalist’

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 199. ‘Sans doute, une ville se transforme sans cesse. Mais en ce moment, les problèmes de la circulation sont pendants et pressants. Ce sont eux qui obligent à demander : que sera le Paris de demain ?’

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 219-220. ‘Paris n’est que la capitale d’un État. Sa grandeur, sa beauté, son destin sont liés au destin de l’État français.’

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 220. ‘Toutes les menaces de la barbarie, révolutions, systèmes des urbanistes ou retours des peuples ennemis, sont sans fin suspendues au-dessus de la fragile splendeur de Paris. (...) Si l’imprévoyance ou la folie doivent achever un jour de rendre notre ville semblable aux cités des barbares, nous remercions le Ciel de nous avoir fait vivre à une époque où il est encore possible de goûter et de célébrer son charme.’

<sup>183</sup> Dubech and d’Espezel, ‘Paris Ancien – Paris Nouveau,’ 78. ‘Alors ? Alors, changez de régime. Ayez hommes responsables, des commis, peu nombreux mais utiles. (...) Sans doute, tout ne sera pas parfait ainsi, mais tout aura chance d’aller mieux : la crainte est le commencement de la sagesse.’

<sup>184</sup> Ibid. ‘Cet avis ne vous plaît, mon cher malade ? Vos habitudes d’esprit en sont choquées, votre religion en souffre ? Eh bien ! Madame, Monsieur, mes chers concitoyens, (...) respirez le pétrole brûlé, tombez en des fondrières, ne circulez pas, mourez enfin. Mourez, mais ne nous rompez plus l’oreille de vos vaines clameurs.’

<sup>185</sup> Le Corbusier, ‘On demande un Colbert,’ in *Les Cahiers de la République des lettres, des sciences et des arts, XII: Vers un Paris nouveau ?*, 81, 84. ‘Replacer un centre neuf sur un centre pourri (...). La technique moderne permet de bâtir dix fois plus haut que jusqu’ici. (...) Le Paris de demain pourrait être prodigieux, (...) un nouveau cycle de civilisation.’

labelling, Le Corbusier firmly declared: ‘Architecture goes beyond utilitarian needs. (...) Architecture has graver ends’.<sup>186</sup> As we will see, embedded within Le Corbusier’s Parisian skyscraper lay a metaphysical statement of sorts: a definition of a universal order which, in turn, produced a definition of a perennial human nature. It was this statement, highly idealist in tone, that made these vertical structures a privileged target for *Documents*’ anti-idealist attack.

### *Le Corbusier’s Metaphysics: Perennial Geometry and Purist Constants*

Writing in *Vers une architecture* (1923), Le Corbusier explained that the ‘AIM of architecture’ is to achieve ‘a state of platonic grandeur’ and ‘mathematical order’.<sup>187</sup> ‘Architectural emotion’, he continued, ‘exists when the work rings within us in tune with a universe whose laws we obey, recognize and respect.’<sup>188</sup> Indeed, the universe, Le Corbusier explained, is governed by a perennial ‘geometric principle’.<sup>189</sup> Moreover, it lies within our human nature to ‘obey’ such ‘universal order’, such ‘geometrical truths’.<sup>190</sup> It is a ‘question of morality’, Le Corbusier explained: ‘lack of truth is intolerable, we perish in untruth.’<sup>191</sup>

The misery of interwar Paris, therefore, was the result of a culture having lost touch with universal order of things. ‘The city of to-day’, he declared, ‘is a dying thing because it is not geometrical.’<sup>192</sup> Full of irregular street patterns, misaligned rooflines, and haphazardly laid out shantytowns – the effect of a mistaken ‘passion for twisted streets and twisted roofs’ which ‘deprive us of our proper environment and annihilate us’ – interwar Paris, Le Corbusier declared, was the mark of a society ‘profoundly *out of gear*’.<sup>193</sup> Being ‘a direct consequence of purely geometric considerations’, the Plan Voisin therefore promised to push Paris back into its rightful order.<sup>194</sup> The skyscraper, ‘majestic prisms’ rising vertically against the horizon, promised to return Parisians to harmonious alignment with the ‘universal law’, (Fig. 69).<sup>195</sup> Le Corbusier’s mission to rescue Parisians from post-war disorder by returning them to a world of pure and perennial geometry, however, was not new. It dated back to his very arrival on the Parisian avant-garde

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<sup>186</sup> Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 5, 25.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 72.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>192</sup> Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow*, 175.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 24; Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 8.

<sup>194</sup> Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow*, 177.

<sup>195</sup> Le Corbusier, ‘The Street’, 119; Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 1.

scene in 1918, when he – alongside Amédée Ozenfant – launched Purism.<sup>196</sup> This was an art movement, they explained, that sought to ‘propose constructions that are as clear as geometry’, to compose artworks that are not ‘accidental, exceptional, impressionistic, inorganic, contestatory, picturesque, but on the contrary general, static, expressive of what is constant.’<sup>197</sup>

The Swiss-born Le Corbusier had moved to Paris during the war and was first introduced to Ozenfant by Auguste Perret in 1918 during a lunch hosted by *Art et Liberté*, a group of progressive artists, architects and authors based in Paris. The following day, Le Corbusier wrote in his diary: ‘Yesterday I dined with Amédée Ozenfant; doors were opened onto the beautiful Paris of futures.’<sup>198</sup> Their artistic collaboration immediately took off. Ozenfant, already an established name in the Parisian art scene, encouraged Le Corbusier to explore painting and, later the same year, their first joint exhibition was held at Galerie Thomas. The introductory text to the accompanying exhibition catalogue, ‘Après le cubisme’, would become the first Purist manifesto.<sup>199</sup>

Rejecting a romantic tradition in art, most recently manifested by Cubism, as mistakenly preoccupied with the ‘picturesque, romantic, accidental’, ‘struck only by variations in nature or by individual sensibilities’ and by ‘transient images of our fleeting emotions’, ‘Purist art,’ they explained, ‘should perceive, retain, and express what is invariable.’<sup>200</sup> ‘It seeks out pure elements’ and, as such, they continued, ‘it is consistent with the order of things.’<sup>201</sup> ‘Sensed or seen superficially’, the Purist duo elaborated, it might be that the world ‘appears to be a magma of everchanging, variable events’.<sup>202</sup> Once ‘observed carefully or sensed seriously, however, nature resembles not a fairyland without plan but (...) a geometric pattern’, existing ‘in accordance with laws so rigorous that (...) even what we call chance produces no defects in the fabric’.<sup>203</sup> ‘Laws cannot be constraints,’ Le Corbusier and Ozenfant explained: ‘they are the inevitable but unshakable armature of all things. Armatures are not shackles.’<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> For a general account of Purism and the post-First World War ‘return to order’, see e.g.: John Golding and Christopher Green, *Léger and Purist Paris* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1970); Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989); Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Carol Eliel (ed.), *L’Esprit Nouveau: Purism in Paris, 1918-1925* (Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2001).

<sup>197</sup> Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant, ‘Après le cubisme,’ in *L’Esprit Nouveau: Purism in Paris*, 132-167.

<sup>198</sup> Le Corbusier quoted in Carol S. Eliel, ‘Purism in Paris: 1918-1925,’ in *ibid.*, 16.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-69.

<sup>200</sup> Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, ‘Après le cubisme,’ 145, 152, 151, 161.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 166, 163.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

After centuries of confusion, the Purists continued, technological and industrial progress ‘in this era of scientific research’ has helped illuminate the path forward: ‘Not since Pericles has thought been so lucid.’<sup>205</sup> The role of the modern artist, therefore, was equal to that of the modern scientist. ‘What do pure art and pure science share?’ they asked: ‘Only their technical instruments differ, their goal is the same: the goal of pure science is the expression of natural laws through a search for *constants*. Likewise, the goal for serious art is the search for the *Invariable*.’<sup>206</sup> As such, they concluded their manifesto: ‘The first task of the painter has just been outlined: to establish contact with nature and its laws.’<sup>207</sup> A good example of what such Purist endeavours might look like is Le Corbusier’s 1920 *Still Life with Stacked Plates*, (Fig. 73).<sup>208</sup> Household objects are transformed into a display of pure geometric forms. The stack of plates morph into a column-like cylinder, the opening of a bottle appears a perfect circle: ‘pure elements’ have been distilled from the experience of life; ‘geometrical truths’ have been uncovered.<sup>209</sup> The fragmented and disordered universe of Cubism – in the Purists’ words, ‘a troubled art of a troubled era’ – has been swapped in for one of perennial order.<sup>210</sup>

Purism, then, promoted more than a preferred aesthetic. Their doctrine amounted to an all-encompassing worldview, deeply idealistic in nature.<sup>211</sup> This Purist worldview was to be slowly unfolded throughout *L’Esprit Nouveau*, the journal that Le Corbusier and Ozenfant launched together with Paul Dermée in 1920 and which would soon become their main mouthpiece.<sup>212</sup> Throughout the twenty-nine issues, across an eclectic yet precise amalgamation of texts and images, treating a broad range of topics – art, architecture, Taylorism, geometry, psychoanalysis, sports, technology, cinema, and much more – Purist premises were rehearsed and reinforced. The Purist position, in turn, was solidified.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 141, 142.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>208</sup> For discussions of this painting, see: Stanislaus Von Moos, *Le Corbusier: Elements of a Synthesis* (Rotterdam: 101 Publishers, 2009), 48-49, 278-295 and William Curtis, *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1986), 49-57.

<sup>209</sup> Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, ‘Après le cubisme’, 166; Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 72. Writing in ‘Le Purisme’, Le Corbusier and Ozenfant explained: ‘élément bouteille par exemple, devra toujours comporter, sous réserve de modifications nécessitées par la composition, des constantes caractéristique et invariables de l’objet-thème.’ (*L’Esprit Nouveau* (4 :1921), 377).

<sup>210</sup> Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, ‘Après le cubisme,’ 133.

<sup>211</sup> As Ozenfant himself explained in 1928, Purism was not just a form of art but a ‘super-aesthetic’, an attitude of mind and procedure, a way of life. (Ozenfant (1928), quoted in *Léger and Purist Paris*, 18.)

<sup>212</sup> For more detail on *L’Esprit Nouveau*, see e.g.: Simon Dell, ‘After Apollinaire: *SIC* (1916-19); *Nord-Sud* (1917-18); and *L’Esprit Nouveau* (1920-5),’ in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Vol. III*, edited by Peter Brooker, Sascha Bru, Andrew Thacker, and Christian Weikorp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 143-159.

<sup>213</sup> For an account of the journal’s publishing strategies, see e.g.: Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1994); Jean-Louis Cohen, ‘Introduction,’ in *Toward an Architecture*, trans. John Goodman (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2007), 1-82.

Seeking to demonstrate humanity's primordial urge towards geometry, Le Corbusier and Ozenfant provided their readers with some 'schematic examples' in the first issue, outlining differences between the human experience of a *straight* line versus that of a *broken* line.<sup>214</sup> Whereas the former sets the eye off on a 'continuous movement' thus provoking a sense of 'calm', the latter, broken line, they explained, produces an experience of 'rupture' and 'irregularity': 'muscles tighten abruptly with every change of direction' which, in turn, make 'the blood pulsate aggressively against its vessels.'<sup>215</sup> The misery of modernity could thus be explained: 'The physical and earthly man seeks to evade the constant conditions of nature and it is a bit ridiculous'.<sup>216</sup> Thankfully, however, Le Corbusier announced in another article also featured in the inaugural issue: 'the ENGINEERS of today make use of the primary elements and coordinates them in accordance with laws, achieving great art by making the work of man ring in unison with the universal order.'<sup>217</sup> The following year, in the fourth issue of *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Le Corbusier and Ozenfant thus concluded, rehashing their Purist argument: 'One of the highest delights of the human spirit is to perceive the order of nature and to measure one's own participation in the order of things; the work of art seems to us an exercise in tidying up, a masterpiece of human order.'<sup>218</sup>

Across *L'Esprit Nouveau*, illustrations played a significant role. Photographs, diagrams, and plans are presented as documentary evidence supporting their Purist worldview, helping to persuade readers of what William J. R. Curtis calls this 'grandiose synthesis between mechanization and universal formal values'.<sup>219</sup> Industrially produced forms – steamships, airplanes, factories, ventilators, turbine disks – morph into geometric, thus perennial, forms: circles, squares, straight lines, and right angles. The contour of a 1921 sports car photographed in profile is transformed into a pure, unbroken line. The wheels appear as perfect circles.<sup>220</sup> Modern airplanes, wonders of industrial progress which can transport you from Paris to Prague 'in six hours', take on the shape of a classical temple: columnlike pillars, perfectly cylindrical in form, meet the entablature-like

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<sup>214</sup> Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, 'Sur la Plastique,' *L'Esprit Nouveau* (1:1920), 38-43. See also, Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, 'L'Angle droit,' *L'Esprit Nouveau* (18: 1923).

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 38. 'Exemples schématiques : *Ligne droite* : L'œil est forcé de se déplacer d'un mouvement continu, le sang circule régulièrement : continuité d'effort, calme, etc., etc. *Ligne brisée* : Les muscles se tendent et se détendent brusquement à chaque changement de direction, le sang est cogné contre les vaisseaux, son cours est modifié : brisure, irrégularité ou cadence.'

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 48. 'Les peintres, aujourd'hui, semblent ne chercher qu'à échapper aux lois de la peinture, les architectes aux lois de l'architecture. L'homme physique et terrestre cherche à s'évader des conditions constantes de la nature et c'est un peu ridicule.'

<sup>217</sup> Le Corbusier, 'Trois rappels à MM. les architectes,' *L'Esprit Nouveau* (1:1920), 95. 'les INGÉNIEURS d'aujourd'hui font emploi des éléments primaires et les coordonnant suivant des règles, atteignent au grand art faisant résonner ainsi l'œuvre humaine avec l'ordre universel.' This essay was later reprinted in *Vers une architecture* (1923).

<sup>218</sup> Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, 'Le Purisme,' 370-371. 'L'une des plus hautes délectations de l'esprit humain est de percevoir l'ordre de la nature et de mesurer sa propre participation à l'ordre des choses ; l'œuvre d'art nous paraît être un travail de mise en ordre, un chef-d'œuvre d'ordre humain.'

<sup>219</sup> Curtis, 51.

<sup>220</sup> Le Corbusier, 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...: III, les autos,' *L'Esprit Nouveau* (10:1921).

wings at a 90° angle, (Fig. 74).<sup>221</sup> In return, the Parthenon, which for Le Corbusier posed as the irrefutable proof of a constant human order, is compared to mechanical, industrial forms: ‘The impression of steel, bare and polished. (...) The profile of the corniche is drawn like the line of an engineer.’<sup>222</sup> Through what Cohen has dubbed ‘a deliberate strategy of seduction-by-image’, the *L’Esprit Nouveau*-reader was presented with an ambitious and far-reaching argument.<sup>223</sup> Industrial forms appear to be offering a path that allows humanity a return to its natural order, to a harmonious universe of pure geometry.<sup>224</sup>

### *Le Corbusier’s Plan Voisin: Unveiling a Purist Paris*

In 1925, *L’Esprit Nouveau* abruptly went out of print, marking the end of the official Purist collaboration. ‘Five years is a lot for a magazine,’ Le Corbusier declared, ‘one ought not to repeat oneself continuously.’<sup>225</sup> The final issue coincided with the 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*, where Le Corbusier and Ozenfant had been tasked by the ministry of Industry and Commerce to display their work.<sup>226</sup> The Purist Pavilion stood out. Whilst most exhibitors remained within what Stanislaus Van Moos calls ‘the traditional arts-and-crafts concept of the individually designed piece of furniture or suite’, Le Corbusier and Ozenfant chose to present prototype of a Purist universe, (Fig. 75).<sup>227</sup> A stripped-back, cubic structure of reinforced concrete, designed by Le Corbusier himself, featured Purist paintings, unornamented and standardised furniture, carpets with geometrical patterns, and mass-produced household equipment as well as laboratory tools. Each object served as a Purist statement, presented as, Van Moos writes, ‘symbols of purified form resulting from an industrial process’.<sup>228</sup>

<sup>221</sup> Le Corbusier, ‘Des yeux qui ne voient pas...: II, les avions,’ *L’Esprit Nouveau* (9:1921). ‘Paris-Prague en six heures’.

<sup>222</sup> Le Corbusier, ‘Architecture: III, pure création de l’esprit,’ *L’Esprit Nouveau* (16:1922). ‘Impression d’acier décollé et poli. (...) Le profil de la corniche est tendu comme une ligne d’ingénieur.’

<sup>223</sup> Cohen, ‘Introduction,’ 3.

<sup>224</sup> The Purists were so keen to sway audiences of their perennial and geometrically ordered worldview that they, at points, went as far as to modify images to achieve the purest and most perennial impression. As Ozenfant later admitted, a photograph of a North American silo had been subjected to darkroom manipulation, erasing some decorative moulding on the roof which, they felt, was disrupting the purity of its contour: ‘There were indeed, here and there, atop of these powerful batteries of monumental cylinders resembling donjons, some pediment in the Greek manner. The engineer, or some architect hanging around the calculating tables, wanted to ‘embellish’ the pure work of the technician, as if one could embellish an egg! ... I removed these excrescences with gouache and everything became pure, or rather was restored to purity.’ (Cohen, ‘Introduction,’ 8.)

<sup>225</sup> Le Corbusier quoted in Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity*, 194.

<sup>226</sup> The exposition aimed to promote French interior and decorative design and had initially been scheduled for 1915 but was postponed as a result of the war. For further detail, see e.g.: Le Corbusier, *Œuvre Complète*, 92-121; Eilel, 48-65. For an account of Le Corbusier’s critique of contemporary interior design, see also his 1925 publication *Art décoratif d’aujourd’hui*.

<sup>227</sup> Van Moos, 68.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 71. The final issue of *L’Esprit Nouveau* announced: ‘Le pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau est entièrement construit en éléments standard. Il embrasse un programme si étendu qu’il permet de mettre en cause l’essentiel des problèmes actuellement pendants de l’art décoratif, de l’architecture et de l’urbanisme. Ce programme était un entier ; il exprimait une idée présente.’ (‘Le pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau,’ *L’Esprit Nouveau* (29: 1925), 139-140).

Also on display within this ‘grand summation of Purist aesthetics’ was the Parisian skyscraper.<sup>229</sup> Alongside detailed diagrams, maps, statistics, and sketches, a gigantic 100 m<sup>2</sup> diorama displayed, for the first time in full form, the Plan Voisin, (Fig. 76) – a ‘rationalised and purified’ cityscape where, Tag Gronberg writes, ‘the ‘power of geometry’ reigned supreme’.<sup>230</sup> Promoting the pavilion in the concluding issue of *L’Esprit Nouveau*, Le Corbusier explained that the diorama aimed ‘to materialise *before our eyes*’ the vision of a ‘new city’ permeated by a ‘majestic rhythm of vertical surfaces’, ‘pure volumes’, and ‘skyscrapers’.<sup>231</sup>

The text was an extract from *Urbanisme*, a publication that, Le Corbusier explained, provided ‘the theory of which the Pavilion is the objectivization’.<sup>232</sup> Indeed, amalgamating the recognisable Purist rationale, peddled since 1918, with the urgent and widely debated urban ills of Paris, Le Corbusier’s *Urbanisme* explained that since buildings, streets and cities ‘are points to which human energy is directed’, ‘they should be ordered, otherwise they counteract the fundamental principles round which we revolve; if they are not ordered, they oppose themselves to us, they thwart us’.<sup>233</sup> With its misaligned skyline composed of a ‘jumble of garret windows, tiles and gutters’, interwar Paris, he continued, is therefore ‘a dangerous magma’, ‘using up and slowly wearing out millions of human beings’.<sup>234</sup> ‘We rarely care to look at the silhouette of houses seen against the sky; the sight would be too painful’, Le Corbusier deplored: ‘Throughout the town, in every street, the silhouette seems like a gash, a ragged, tumultuous line with jutting broken forms. And our need of delight and of enthusiasm finds nothing to evoke it in this incoherence.’<sup>235</sup>

‘Our emotion,’ however, Le Corbusier explained, ‘would be of a very different kind if the profile of the town seen against the sky were pure and made us feel it was the result of some potent ordering mind.’<sup>236</sup> ‘And everything,’ he continues, ‘depends on a choice of forms – ‘the eternal forms of pure geometry.’<sup>237</sup> With the Plan Voisin, Le Corbusier therefore continued to

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<sup>229</sup> Eliel, 54.

<sup>230</sup> Tag Gronberg, ‘Modernity on Display at the 1925 International Exposition,’ in *L’Esprit Nouveau: Purism in Paris*, 122-123. As such, Gronberg argues that the politics at play were deeply gendered, championing a masculine rationality against effeminate decoration.

<sup>231</sup> ‘Le Plan Voisin,’ *L’Esprit Nouveau* (29: 1925). ‘J’ai brossé pour le Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau, à l’Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs de Paris, où est exposé le ‘Plan Voisin’, un diorama dont le but est d’objectiver *aux yeux* cette nouveauté (...) on voit s’élever la nouvelle ville. (...) c’est le rythme majestueux des surfaces verticales se prolongeant au loin par l’effet de la perspective des volumes purs. De l’un à l’autre de ces gratte-ciel de verre, s’établissent des rapport de plein et de vide. A leur pied, des places se dessinent. La ville reprend des axes comme dans toutes les œuvres de l’architecture.’ (177).

<sup>232</sup> ‘Le pavillon de L’Esprit Nouveau,’ 150. Le Corbusier lists *Vers une architecture, L’art décoratif d’aujourd’hui, La Peinture Moderne* and *Urbanisme*. ‘Ces quatre volumes étaient la théorie de ce dont le Pavillon devait être l’objectivation.’

<sup>233</sup> Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow*, 15.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 25, 126.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 64, 65.

propheisise, the city of Paris would be transformed into ‘a spectacle of order and vitality.’<sup>238</sup> As ‘square silhouettes of the terraced roofs stand clear against the sky’ and ‘skyscrapers raise immense geometrical facades all of glass’, Le Corbusier enthusiastically announced, ‘the purity of the city’s silhouette is regained’: ‘Optimism fills the mind.’<sup>239</sup> ‘Here is the CITY with its crowds living in peace’, Le Corbusier concluded: ‘a city which has grown in accordance with the spirit of man’.<sup>240</sup>

Held back by insufficient finances, an increasingly dominant preservationist camp as well as rigid height regulations, however, interwar France was, as we have seen, not in any place to realise these controversial plans.<sup>241</sup> Frustrated by the inertia, Le Corbusier thus continued to reiterate and re-disseminate his utopian visions of a Purist Paris in newspapers and magazines, as well as multiple reeditions of his published writings. Writing for *L’Intransigeant* in 1929, Le Corbusier derided: ‘the sky-line present a grotesquely jagged silhouette of gables, attics, and zinc chimneys.’<sup>242</sup> ‘The street’, he continued, ‘is no more than a trench, a deep cleft, a narrow passage’ consisting of ‘a thousand different buildings’ that are ‘dingy and utterly discordant one with another’: ‘It is appalling, but we pass on our way. On Sundays, when they are empty, the streets reveal their full horror.’<sup>243</sup> After once more denouncing the restrictive 1902-decree, Le Corbusier invited his readers to envision his skyscraper utopia: ‘You are under the shade of trees, vast lawns spread all round you. The air is clear and pure; there is hardly any noise.’ ‘And to the right and left, over there, and further away still,’ he narrated:

those gigantic and majestic prisms of purest transparency rear their heads one upon another in a dazzling spectacle of grandeur, serenity and gladness. (...) Their delicate horizontal lines span the intervals between the huge vertical piles of glass, binding them together with an attenuated web.<sup>244</sup>

In 1930, around the time when *Documents* published their illustrated treatise on the skyscraper, the modernist architect was still repeating his utopian maxim: ‘the *only* answer (...) is to *build*

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 177, 178, 232, 186.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 177, 178.

<sup>241</sup> In the final issue of *L’Esprit Nouveau*, Le Corbusier also listed criticisms of his plan. (‘Des mots,’ *L’Esprit Nouveau* (29:1925), 182-184.)

<sup>242</sup> Le Corbusier, ‘The Street,’ 118-9.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

*vertically*, that to say SKYSCRAPERS.<sup>245</sup> As defined by Le Corbusier, thus, the skyscraper presented an all-in-one solution to Parisian interwar troubles. Constructing a cityscape that aligned with the ‘universal law’ of ‘geometrical truths’, the skyscraper, Le Corbusier proposed, would transform a fragile interwar Paris into rational and ordered city, dutifully obeying ‘the constant conditions of nature’.<sup>246</sup>

### *Skyscrapers in Documents: a ‘joyful demolition’*

When Leiris turned to define the ‘Skyscraper’ in *Documents* (7:1930), (Fig. 63), Le Corbusier’s recognisable rhetoric, persistently promoted in interwar Paris, was hijacked and put to use for an opposite, firmly deglorifying effect.<sup>247</sup> Whilst agreeing with Le Corbusier on the fact that the ‘skyscraper’ manifests ‘one of the most important human constants’, the universal human nature that Leiris identifies the ‘skyscraper’ to be constitutive of is one diametrically opposed to that propelled by the utopian modernist.<sup>248</sup> This is one marked not by perennial rationality and geometric order but, on the contrary, by lowly urges towards, in *Documents’* words, ‘spoilation’ and ‘joyful demolition’.<sup>249</sup>

To stabilise this tongue-in-cheek manoeuvre, Leiris recruits Sigmund Freud for theoretical support. In 1929, upon recommendation from Bataille, Leiris had begun psychoanalysis with one of France’s first psychoanalysts, Adrien Borel.<sup>250</sup> The encounter with Freudian theory would have a profound effect on his writing, providing Leiris with a fruitful framework to produce his distinctive brand of self-defeating autobiography. Through ruthless, un pitying self-portraits, often using scenes from the privacy of his own life and childhood, Leiris composed frank, de-idealised images of human existence, unafraid to unveil inadequacies and incoherencies. Indeed, once blended with the ‘self-doubting’ gaze of ethnography, Leiris found in psychoanalysis a

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<sup>245</sup> ‘Doit-on excommunier les gratte-ciel : Paris 1940 ?,’ 616. ‘La seule réponse aux problèmes de l’accroissement des densités et au décongestionnement du centre des grandes villes, c’est la construction en hauteur, donc LES GRATTE-CIEL’

<sup>246</sup> Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 212, 72; Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, ‘Sur la Plastique,’ 48. ‘L’homme physique et terrestre cherche à s’évader des conditions de la nature et c’est un peu ridicule’.

<sup>247</sup> Leiris, ‘Skyscraper’.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> For detail on Adrien Borel, see Élisabeth Roudinesco, *La Bataille de cent ans: Histoire de la psychanalyse en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 24-25. In 1925, Borel famously gave Bataille a photograph of a torture practiced in China (the torture of a Hundred Pieces), which was to have a profound impact on the latter’s philosophical outlook. Borel also encouraged Bataille to write, and read his 1927 *Histoire de l’œil*, which in part deals with childhood traumas, see e.g.: Surya, 93-111. Borel also treated Raymond Queneau.

weapon with which to decompose any axiomatic assumptions around the supremacy of the subject.<sup>251</sup>

Shortly prior to the publication of Leiris' 'Skyscraper'-definition, Freud's *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930) appeared in its French translation. The book, Christopher Green notes, made an immediate impact on Leiris and the *Documents*-group.<sup>252</sup> In particular, it was Freud's characterisation of humanity as being full of violent and debased urges, and, thus, fundamentally at odds with the rationalising and orderly ideals of civilisation that proved a remarkably productive tool with which they could buttress their subversively anti-idealist worldview.<sup>253</sup> Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the Purists, on the other hand, had been critical of Freud's contradictory and chaotic rendition of human nature. A text published in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, entitled 'Freud ou le nick-cartérianisme en psychologie', deplors: 'Psychoanalysis (...), for every healed (and I demand to see him) hundred sufferers must be made.'<sup>254</sup>

In a preceding issue of *Documents*, Leiris had provided his own expository of modern civilisation that, Christopher Green writes, 'anticipated' Freud's 1930 portrayal.<sup>255</sup> 'Civilisation,' Leiris writes:

may perhaps be compared not too inaccurately to the thin greenish layer (...) that forms on the surface of calm water and occasionally solidifies into a crust, until broken up by some eddy. All our moral habits and our polite customs, that delightfully coloured cloak that veils the coarseness of our dangerous instincts, all those attractive forms of culture which we are so proud – since it is thanks to them that we are able to regard ourselves as 'civilised' – are ready to disappear at the slightest turbulence, to shatter at the least impact like the insubstantial mirror of a fingernail whose polish cracks or becomes scratched), allowing our horrifying *savageness* to appear in the interstices (...). Not a day

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<sup>251</sup> Leiris' writings mobilises 'the autobiography itself as a kind of risk' (Stoekl, 59.) See also: J. B. Pontalis, 'Michel Leiris, or Psychoanalysis Without End,' trans. David Macey, *Yale French Studies*, no. 81 (1992): 128-144.

<sup>252</sup> Christopher Green, *Art in France: 1900-1940* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 233-235. Bataille mobilised Freud's theories in his review of Luquet's *L'Art primitif* (*Documents*, 7:1930) and in his text on Miró (*Documents*, 8:1930).

<sup>253</sup> Whilst describing human nature as inherently violent and contradictory, in the end, Freud was championing civilisation. Leo Bersani writes: 'Astonishingly, then, Freud may secretly agree with the society he sternly criticizes: civilization requires sexual repression because unrepressed sexuality might destroy civilisation'. ('Introduction,' in Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: Penguin, 2002), xii).

<sup>254</sup> Jean Epstein, 'Freud ou le nick-cartérianisme en psychologie,' *L'Esprit Nouveau* (16: 1922): 1857-1864. 'La psychanalyse (...), pour un guéri (et je demande à le voir), doit faire cent malades.' Epstein was a French filmmaker, participating in the avant-garde circles outlined in the previous chapter.

<sup>255</sup> Green, *Art in France*, 234.

passes when we don't notice some premonitory sign of just such a catastrophe (...).<sup>256</sup>

When turning to define the skyscraper, once more putting Freud's framework to self-depreciating use, Leiris posits the construction of these vertical edifices as precisely such a 'premonitory sign', as monstrous manifestations of our irrepressible 'horrifying *savageness*', shattering the thin civilised crust attempting, in vain, to tame humanity.<sup>257</sup> Indeed, radically upending Le Corbusier's familiar phraseology and subverting its idealising logic, Leiris identifies the skyscraper as a manifestation not of a universal human desire for harmonious existence in alignment with geometrical order but, on the contrary, as a violent manifestation of what Freud dubbed 'the greatest obstacle to civilisation', namely, its 'drive for destruction'.<sup>258</sup>

Humanity's inherent urge for ruination, played out as an 'unending struggle between Eros and the destructive drive, the death drive', Freud writes in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, finds its origin in 'the primordial emotional ambivalence towards the father' of the Oedipus complex.<sup>259</sup> As societies expand, Freud continues, this eternal contradiction, suspended within our existence, is transposed onto other social relations. 'This conflict', he explains, 'is fanned as soon as people are faced with the task of living together':

What began in relation to the father is brought to fruition in relation to the mass. If civilization is the necessary trend of development that leads from the family to humanity as a whole, it follows that the intensification of the sense of guilt, perhaps to a degree that the individual finds hard to endure, is indissolubly linked with it, as a consequence of the innate conflict of ambivalence, of the perpetual contention between love and the death-wish.<sup>260</sup>

When turning to expose the 'psychoanalytic content of the expression 'skyscraper'', as part of his dictionary-entry on the timely topic, Leiris makes subversive use of Freud's complex characterisation of humanity:

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<sup>256</sup> Michel Leiris, 'Civilisation,' *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, 93.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> Freud, 58.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 68, 69.

the coupling (...) of these two words, the verb ‘scrape’ on the one hand and, on the other, the substantive ‘sky,’ immediately evokes an erotic image in which the building, which scrapes, is a phallus (...) and the sky which is scraped – the object of desire of the said phallus – is the incestuously desired mother, as she is in all attempts at the spoilation of the paternal virility.<sup>261</sup>

‘To that degree,’ Leiris elaborates:

skyscrapers, the grandiose ornament of North American cities and the instruments of a luxury and comfort as yet unknown in Europe, are marvellous and modern symbols – as much by their name as their form – of one of the most important human constants: that which was the cause of Laius’ murder by his son, of the final disaster of Phaeton, indeed of certain upheavals and a fair number of inventions, the *Oedipus complex* which is, without possible contradiction, one of the most powerful factors in evolution or, if one believes in it, of ‘progress,’ since it implies a desire no less for substitution than for joyful demolition.<sup>262</sup>

Exploiting the mirrorlike relationship assumed by Le Corbusier between the image of the skyscraper and that of a universal human nature, thus, *Documents’* put his well-disseminated diction to use for decidedly anti-idealist purposes, unveiling, with the help of Freud, a radically different portrayal of mankind. ‘From the very outset’, as Bataille had written in the dictionary-definition of ‘Architecture’ published in an earlier issue, ‘the human and architectural orders make common cause.’ ‘Therefore an attack on architecture’, he concluded, ‘is necessarily, as it were, an attack on man.’<sup>263</sup>

Far from what Hollier dubbed an ‘antidiscursive’ gesture working to ‘shatter the accumulation of meaning’, thus, *Documents’* negotiation of architectural themes, such as its dictionary-entry on ‘Skyscraper’, on the contrary, repurposed the accumulated significance, generated through repeated use in discourse, to dissident ends.<sup>264</sup> Highlighting and subversively re-defining a motif that encompassed fears of French fragility, be that those of the increasingly preservationist Third

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<sup>261</sup> Leiris, ‘Skyscraper’.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Bataille, ‘Architecture’.

<sup>264</sup> Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 24, 30.

Republic or those of the utopian Le Corbusier, *Documents* not only agitated anxieties concerning the future of France but repurposed its heightened stakes against the grain to force a different, decidedly deglorified, portrayal. Indeed, once re-inserted into the visual culture of interwar France, and re-interpreted through Peircean semiotics, an avant-garde strategy very different from that identified in the deconstructionist reading of the journal emerges across its pages: one that did not seek to sabotage meaning-production but to critically participate in such cultural processes; one whose criticality stemmed not from an unveiling of the ‘undecidability’ of signs but, on the contrary, from subversive re-dissemination of the charged currencies those signs carried in culture.

The journal’s subversive negotiation of the skyscraper, however, was not the only instance of *Documents*’ critical probing of topical debates concerning the build space of Paris. On the contrary, as we will see, numerous critical interceptions into the architectural edifice of France’s capital were staged, traversing sites and structures frequently discussed in interwar discourse. Indeed, across its fifteen issues, multiple attempts to construct Paris into a rational and civilised space and, thus, implicitly to *rationalise and civilise Parisians*, historical as well as contemporary, were targeted by the avant-garde journal: Third Republican statuary programmes, the *tout-à-l’égout* sewerage system, the abattoir at la Villette, and the city’s notorious *îlot insalubre n°1*, Saint-Merri. In fact, these Parisian sites put under pressure by *Documents* had, by the interwar period, begun to malfunction or appear insufficient, posing thus as particular points of French anxiety, painfully denoting the seeming struggle to attain the desired Third Republican self-image. Signifying the irrepressible excess of human existence, continuously overflowing the neat limits of modern civilisation, these areas of failure and anguish, found lurking within the image of Paris, were strategically accentuated and agitated by the dissident journal.

## The Irrepressible Excess of Base-Paris: Statues, Sewers, Slaughterhouses, and the Slums of Saint-Merri

### *Irrational Monuments: Statuomania in Third Republican Paris*

In the first issue of the journal's second year (1930), five photographs displaying Parisian statues appeared in print, (Fig. 77). The images, shot by Boiffard, illustrate a text written by Desnos under the title, 'Pygmalion et le sphinx'.<sup>265</sup> As part of its project to frame Paris as a sober and rational capital, the early Third Republic launched an extensive decorative programme, set to fill the airy Haussmannian boulevards and parks with statuary celebrating its Republican heroes: scientists, philosophers, authors, and so on.<sup>266</sup> Amongst the monuments reproduced in *Documents* were statues of the pioneering motorist Léon Serpollet completed in 1907, the Enlightenment scientist Claude Chappe posing alongside his revolutionary invention, the aerial telegraph, dating to 1893, as well as a structure featuring a hot-air balloon unveiled in 1906, honouring Léon Gambetta's famed aerial escape during the Prussian Siege of Paris.<sup>267</sup>

Despite lofty ambitions, however, the habit was soon registered as excessive. In 1911, Jean-Maurice Le Corbeiller, a right-wing politician and member of the *Commission du Vieux Paris*, announced to the *Conseil municipal*: 'Paris is cluttered with statues, for thirty years it has been the governing thought, one of the principal preoccupations of the Third Republic'.<sup>268</sup> The following

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<sup>265</sup> Robert Desnos, 'Pygmalion et le sphinx,' *Documents* (1:1930): 33-40. Some of these photos had appeared in André Breton's *Nadja* (1928). The statuary of Paris was also negotiated in Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926). The Surrealists also composed a questionnaire on the 'irrational embellishment' of Paris, published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (March 1933), 18-19. See e.g.: Raymond Spiteri, 'Surrealism and the irrational embellishment of Paris,' in *Surrealism and Architecture*, ed. Thomas Mical (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 191-208; Simon Baker, *Surrealism, History and Revolution* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), chapter 4.

<sup>266</sup> For an account of the statuary programme of the Third Republic, see e.g.: Maurice Agulhon, 'La "statuomanie" et l'histoire,' *Ethnologie française*, vol. 8, no. 2-3 (1978): 145-172; June Hardgrove, *The Statues of Paris: An Open Air Pantheon* (New York: Vendome Press, 1990); Serguisz Michelski, *Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage, 1870-1997* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998); Janice Best, *Les monuments de Paris sous la Troisième République: contestation et commémoration du passé* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010).

<sup>267</sup> On symbolism of the balloon, see e.g.: Kate Turner, 'Balloons over Bismarck: The Interplay of Fact and Fiction in Representations of the Fabulous History of the Balloon during the Siege of Paris,' in *Visions/Revisions: Essays on Nineteenth-Century French Culture*, ed. Nigel Harkness (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003).

<sup>268</sup> Le Corbeiller (1911), quoted in Lortsch, 289. 'Paris est encombré de statues ; depuis trente ans c'est la pensée du règne, une des principales préoccupations de la troisième République de décerner aux grands hommes l'hommage d'une statue sur la voie publique.'

year, Gustave Pessard diagnosed Paris with *statuomania*: ‘Why three statues of Alfred de Musset? How many Victor Hugo’s must we have?’<sup>269</sup> Indeed, within a preservationist Paris, the obsessive erection of statues was increasingly identified as yet another disruption of the capital’s traditional urban fabric, diluting the national essence felt to be lodged therein. In his 1913 call for conservation, Lortsch dedicated a whole chapter to the ‘question of statues’. ‘We are buried by this horde of celebrities’, he complained:

The statuomania has not been insignificant to the disfiguration of Paris these past years. Our streets, our squares, and our gardens have been invaded by an army of marbles and bronzes, the aesthetic merits of which are often dubious. (...) The dead have won out over the living!<sup>270</sup>

Echoing Lortsch, Guérard’s 1929 *L’Avenir de Paris* also featured a section dedicated to the longstanding issue: ‘As for commemorative monuments, Paris already suffers from the excess. It is a particularly modern sickness, one might even say ‘Republican’.’<sup>271</sup> The topic even surfaced in d’Espezel’s 1929 special issue, *Vers un Paris nouveau?*<sup>272</sup> ‘To embellish Paris’, Georges Pascal, an attaché of the Musée du Petit-Palais, declared in his contribution: ‘one would have to, I think, take away a good number of the statues that ridicule our gardens and our public places.’<sup>273</sup>

By the interwar period, thus, the statues came to signify a moment when the rational republic turned irrational. This instance of perceived incongruence was soon to be subversively capitalised upon by *Documents*. Alongside the five full-page photographs featuring specimens of the hotly debated Parisian statuary, Desnos began by sabotaging the intentions of the original Third Republican idea, bringing the lofty aim of statuary down, using both the burden of symbolism – ‘the weight of the cadaver that a statue pretends to perpetuate or the heft of rotting brains of allegory’ – as well as that of material heaviness – ‘the weight of bronze, marble, or granite’ – to announce that: ‘sculpture, so idealist in its aims, is reigned by the earthly rules of

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<sup>269</sup> Gustave Pessard, *La statuomanie Parisienne: étude critique sur l’abus des statues* (Paris: H. Daragon, 1912). The *avant-propos* was written by Le Corbeiller.

<sup>270</sup> Lortsch, 287, 291. ‘Nous sommes ensevelis par cette nuée de gens célèbres. (...) La statuomanie n’a pas été ces dernières années un des moindres chefs de l’enlaidissement de Paris. Nos voies, nos places et nos jardins son été envahis par un flot de marbres et de bronzes aux mérites esthétiques, souvent, plus que douteux. (...) Le mort prime les vivants!’

<sup>271</sup> Guérard, *L’Avenir de Paris*, 102. ‘Pour ce qui est des monuments commémoratifs, Paris souffre déjà de pléthore. C’est un mal essentiellement moderne, et nous pourrions dire ‘républicain’.

<sup>272</sup> Already in *Histoire de Paris*, d’Espezel and Dubech had deplored: ‘on a peuplé les places, les carrefours, les squares, de monuments dont le tort le plus grave n’est pas leur valeur douteuse : isolés, plantés au hasard n’importe où, sans souci d’ensemble ni de perspective, ils ont l’air littéralement oubliés sous les arbres, au bord de la chaussée.’ (184).

<sup>273</sup> ‘Réponses à notre enquête,’ 137. ‘Pour embellir Paris (...) il faudrait, je pense, supprimer bon nombre des statues qui ridiculisent nos jardins et places publiques.’

matter and the law of gravity. Nothing, in fact, is more contrary to the idea of divinity than this sham.<sup>274</sup> ‘If I was a councillor’, Desnos satirised, ‘or an *urbaniste* (don’t laugh, we all sometimes dream that we are mad), I would not put these dangerous jokers in front of the whole world.’<sup>275</sup>

Contrary to the complaints put forward by contemporary critics, deploring the *statuomanie* of the Third Republic, Desnos subsequently turned to suggest a different, more suitable decorative program for France’s capital. This was one dedicated to the real heroes of modern civilisation. ‘I would love a bébé Cadum in porphyry stepping out of a marble bath’ or ‘the young girl from chocolat Meunier in granite and bone, leaning against the wall’, he elaborated: ‘These fetishes of today, are they not as worthy as any poet, general, or scientist to finally have their shadow in the sun?’<sup>276</sup> ‘I also regret’, Desnos continued, ‘that we have not erected statues of certain everyday instruments such as the saucepan, the bottle, the wheel, the barrow, etc.’<sup>277</sup>

Highlighting a longstanding Parisian pressure point, accentuating what was increasingly perceived as a painfully counterproductive moment where the sober intentions of the Third Republic were seemingly overshot, felt to have missed the mark and were jarringly exceeding its idealist aspirations, Desnos strategically exploited the charged discursive space these monuments inhabited to critical ends.<sup>278</sup> Indeed, rather than expulsing the obsessive statuomania of the Third Republic from the image of Paris proper, Desnos instead mobilised it to, once more, expose a different, de-idealised image of humanity, rightfully reflected in its statuary. ‘What we love’, Desnos declared, ‘is life with its procession of strange manifestations, of miracles, of penetrating glances, of insults, hot embraces! It is not beauty that we love, it leaves us as cold as it is.’ ‘As for statues’, Desnos thus continues:

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<sup>274</sup> Desnos, ‘Pygmalion et le sphinx,’ 33. ‘la sculpture, si idéaliste que soient ses buts, est régie par les lois terrestres de la matière et, entre toutes, par la loi de la pesanteur. (...) Cette présence de la terre se manifeste avec plus de puissance encore dans cette branche de la sculpture qu’est la statuaire. Au poids du bronze, poids du bronze, du marbre ou du granit s’ajoute le poids du cadavre qu’une statue prétend perpétuer ou le pesant de cervelle pourrie de l’allégorie. Rien, en effet, n’est plus contraire à l’idée de divinité qu’un tel simulacre.’

<sup>275</sup> Ibid. ‘Si j’étais un édile, un urbaniste (ne riez pas, il arrive à tout le monde de rêver qu’il est fou) je ne mettrais pas ces dangereux loustics à la portée de tout le monde.’

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 36. ‘J’aimerais un bébé Cadum de porphyre sortant d’une baignoire de marbre, (...) la petite fille du chocolat Meunier (...) Ces fétiches d’aujourd’hui ne méritent-ils pas que tel poète, tel général, tel savant, d’avoir enfin leur ombre au soleil ?’

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 38. ‘Je regrette également qu’on n’ait jamais élevé de statue à certains instruments usuels tels que la casserole, la bouteille, la roue, la brouette etc.’

<sup>278</sup> For alternative accounts of these photographs, see e.g.: Dawn Ades, ‘Photography and the Surrealist Text,’ in *L’Amour Fou: Photography & Surrealism*, 153-192; Simon Baker, ‘Pygmalion and the Sphinx,’ *Papers of Surrealism* 7 (2007). Both positions emphasise the destabilising effect of the oscillation between a material heaviness of the statues and the airy and ephemeral subject matters of a car, a balloon, etc. Jennifer Wild uses Desnos’ illustrated article as an example of a rejection of avant-garde abstraction, (‘For a Concrete Aesthetic: Against Avant-Garde Film c.1930,’ *The Journal of Cinema and Media*, vol. 58, no. 1-2 (2017): 67-78).

they should only be accessories in the elucidation of life as it unfolds perpetually through swinging passages in the imagination of man. (...) For everything is to start again, to contradict, to repeat and be started again, contradicted, repeated anew. The great cycle ends and starts again. Perhaps it never existed?<sup>279</sup>

A few pages later, as part of Leiris' definition of 'Hygiene', published in the journal's 'Critical Dictionary' (1:1930), another fragility in the Third Republican construction of Paris was put under pressure by *Documents*: the *tout-à-l'égout* sewerage system.

### *Struggling Sewers: Interwar France's Battle to Install the tout-à-l'égout Sewerage System*

The instalment of an up-to-date sewerage system had, as we have seen, been a significant element of Haussmann's refurbishment of the French capital. Posing as a signifier of rational Paris, the new sewers were triumphantly documented by Nadar in 1865, (Fig. 78).<sup>280</sup> Subterranean tours were offered at the 1867 World Fair.<sup>281</sup> The scope of Haussmann's sewers was, however, limited. Only allowing for rainwater, street debris and miscellaneous refuse, human waste continued to be disposed of through the old system of cesspits.<sup>282</sup> 'The desire to separate 'clean' storm water from 'dirty' human waste', Matthew Gandy writes, 'was integral to Haussmann's conception of an orderly flow of water through urban space.'<sup>283</sup> As the visionary Prefect himself had announced to a municipal commission in 1854:

These underground galleries would be the organs of the metropolis and function like those of the human body without ever seeing the light of day.

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 36, 38. 'Ce que nous aimons c'est la vie avec son cortège de manifestations étrange, de miracles, de regards profonds, d'injures, d'étreintes chaudes ! Ce n'est pas la beauté que nous aimons, elle nous laisse aussi froids qu'elle. Ce que nous aimons c'est le frémissement d'un sein gauche à la hauteur d'un cœur, la chaleur d'un corps, un battement de paupières, la densité d'une voix. Quant aux statues elles ne doivent être que des accessoires dans l'exégèse de la vie qui se déroule perpétuellement en paragraphes cadencés dans l'imagination des hommes. (...) Car tout est à recommencer, à contredire à refaire pour être recommencé, contredit, refait à nouveau. Le grand cycle s'achève et recommence. Peut-être n'a-t-il jamais existé ?'

<sup>280</sup> Nadar donated his body of work to the Hôtel de Ville in homage to Eugène Belgrade, the engineer who had realised Haussmann's plans for underground Paris.

<sup>281</sup> See e.g.: Reid, 25-36; Pinkey, 127-150; Gandy, 23-44; David S. Barnes, *The Great Stink of Paris and the Nineteenth-Century Struggle against Filth and Germs* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). The latter writes: 'the Second Empire marked the golden age of sewer construction (...), multiplying the extent of the sewer network more than fivefold.' (52). Even d'Espezel and Dubech, generally critical of Haussmann's work, celebrated Haussmann's sewers: 'Ici, Haussmann a raison : c'est le meilleur de son œuvre' (*Histoire de Paris*, 155).

<sup>282</sup> Barnes, *The Great Stink*, 52-53.

<sup>283</sup> Gandy, 30.

Pure and fresh water, along with light and heat, would circulate like the diverse fluids whose movement and replenishment sustain life itself.<sup>284</sup>

Once the Third Republic was installed, after the collapse of the Second Empire, the safety of this system became increasingly questioned.<sup>285</sup> Witnessing a rapidly growing Parisian population, as well as a series of concerning cholera outbreaks, authorities were soon prompted to improve the system. In 1894, a new law was passed, making an integrated mains drainage – the *tout-à-l'égout* – obligatory for all Parisian households.<sup>286</sup> Seeking to place human waste disposal under unitary control, the novel system required each building to add pipes connecting toilets directly to the sewer. As such, it also required a significant increase in terms of the amount of water supplied to each building. Despite this legal mandate, however, Parisian authorities struggled to compel cost-averse landlords to connect their buildings to the unified mains drainage. On the eve of the First World War, twenty-six thousand cesspits remained in use.<sup>287</sup> Once the hostilities came to an end, further attempts to prompt immediate installation were pursued. The 1919 *loi Cornudet*, France's first town planning law, ambitiously demanded a complete program for hygienic services of all larger cities, including sewerage and water supply systems. Still, as late as 1925, almost half the houses in the French capital were not connected to a sewer.<sup>288</sup>

Reviewing the city's failures, Pierre Jossot, reporting to the Senate in March of 1929, announced that, without sufficient sanctions in place for cases of noncompliance, the 1894 law, despite having been complemented in 1926 as well as 1928, had remained nothing but 'a vow of which the realisation depend on the good will of those concerned': 'It is not surprising therefore that many landlords, who could have, without difficulty, complied with the law well before 1914, have circumvented it for thirty years.'<sup>289</sup> A few months later, senator Marius Roustan declared that around fifteen thousand buildings in Paris were still without connection to the integrated

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<sup>284</sup> Haussmann (1854), quoted in Gandy, 24.

<sup>285</sup> Barnes writes: 'Simultaneously a triumph of sanitary engineering and "the direct continuation of the sick person's intestines," the Paris sewers provoked equal measures of admiration and loathing in the late nineteenth century.' (*The Great Stink*, 52).

<sup>286</sup> For an account of the debates around the *tout-à-l'égout*, see e.g.: Gérard Jacquemet, 'Urbanisme parisien: la bataille du tout-à-l'égout à la fin du XIXe siècle,' *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, vol. 26, no. 4 (October-December 1979): 505-548; Roger-Henri Guerrand, *Les Lieux: Histoire des commodités* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1985); Patrick Zylberman, 'L'intestin de la grande ville: Les égouts et l'hygiène à Paris à la fin du XIXe siècle,' *Les tribunes de la santé*, vol. 3, no. 56 (2017): 21-28. An 1892 account emphasises the intensity and breadth of the debate in French culture: 'Yes, in the most civilized part of the world, it is impossible for two reasonable people to meet without inquiring first what they think of the *tout-à-l'égout*.' (Reid, 82).

<sup>287</sup> Barnes, *The Great Stink*, 53-55. Similarly, Zylberman blames the 'egoism of landlords' as well as the 'extraordinary timidity of politicians' ('L'intestin de la grande ville,' 28).

<sup>288</sup> Hall, 21-22.

<sup>289</sup> 'Session Ordinaire,' *Impressions : projets, propositions, rapports*, no. 196 (22 March 1929): 3. 'Mais nulle sanction n'était prévue dans le cas de non exécution des travaux de déversement. Dans ces conditions la loi devient un vœu dont la réalisation dépend de la bonne volonté des intéressés. Il n'est pas douteux que le nombre de propriétaires ont mis la loi en échec pendant trente ans, qui auraient pu, sans difficulté, bien avant 1914, se mettre en règle avec ladite loi.'

mains drainage.<sup>290</sup> In turn, a satirical journal derided: ‘The cabinets of the investigating judge, are they connected to the *tout-à-l’égout*?’<sup>291</sup>

In a 1929 article series entitled ‘À la conquête de l’hygiène’, *Le Matin* in turn announced: ‘A permanent danger threatens the city as food waste, household refuse, and used water constitutes within it a nest of infection.’ ‘Real progress has without a doubt been made, especially in the big cities’, they continued, ‘but how many of them really have a complete and rational *tout-à-l’égout* system?’<sup>292</sup> A year later, *Le Matin* reiterated: ‘We must act immediately, if we, a country of weak birth rates, want to preserve at least our living in a condition equal to our neighbours.’ ‘The means are simple’, the newspaper explained: ‘A municipality that provides its constituents with clean drinking water and the *tout-à-l’égout* does a great service to the nation as a whole as well as to the race.’<sup>293</sup> In the end, despite lobbying efforts, some areas would have to wait until the mid-twentieth century before the instalment was completed.<sup>294</sup>

Writing amidst these repeated Third Republican attempts to connect Paris to a unified public sewerage system, the desperation around which only seemed to augment in tandem with the incapacity to complete the instalment, Leiris strategically repurposed this troubling motif against the grain, using it to subversively ridicule France’s obsession with what he calls ‘sacrosanct hygiene’:

On the scale of metaphysical values, matter is situated lower than mind, solely because it is dirtier. And this disgust at dirtiness can be explained in no other way than by the antique and magical notion of impurity. Evil odours attract evil spirits.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> ‘Session Ordinaire,’ *Impressions : projets, propositions, rapports*, no. 340 (18 June 1929): 5. ‘à l’heure actuelle, pour un total d’environ 15.000 immeubles dans lesquels le tout à l’égout n’est pas installé...’

<sup>291</sup> ‘Une petite curieuse,’ *L’Oréal humoristique* (15 January 1929): 9. ‘Les cabinets du juge d’instruction, est-ce qu’ils ont le tout-à-l’égout?’

<sup>292</sup> Paul Marchand, ‘À la conquête de l’hygiène’, *Le Matin* (25 December 1929): 2. ‘Un danger permanent menace la cité tant que les détruits alimentaires, les ordures ménagères, les eaux usées, y constituent des foyers d’infection (...). Sans doute des progrès réels ont été faits, surtout dans les grandes villes : mais combien d’entre elles ont vraiment un système complet et rationnel de tout-à-l’égout?’

<sup>293</sup> ‘Assainissons nos communes,’ *Le Matin* (29 December 1930): 2. ‘Il faut agir d’urgence, si nous voulons, nous, pays de faible natalité, conserver au moins nos vivants dans les mêmes conditions que nos voisins. Le moyen est simple : il consiste à évacuer les matières usées par des conduits étanches ; c’est le système du tout-à-l’égout (...). Une municipalité qui dote ses administrés d’eau potable et du tout-à-l’égout, rend un grand service au pays tout entier et à la race.’

<sup>294</sup> Zylberman, ‘L’intestin de la grande ville,’ 27.

<sup>295</sup> Leiris, ‘Hygiène’.

In this ‘century of reason’, Leiris ironised, ‘everybody will soon be moral, thanks to Cadum soap’, ‘everyone will soon be powerful and strong because their ancestors of genius have invented antiseptics, medicinal mint-spirit and *le tout-à-l’égout*...’<sup>296</sup> Putting his ethnographic gaze to subversive use, turning it around towards the civilised self, Leiris’ thus severed the supposed ties between hygiene and sober science or positivist progress, unveiling its ambitions, such as those fuelling the urge to install the integrated mains drainage, as having ‘no *raison d’être*’, as being ‘no more than a rite of purification, a wholly moral purification, addressing itself exclusively to mystical forces.’<sup>297</sup>

In an earlier issue, another attempt to cleanse and rationalise the cityscape of Paris that by the interwar period had, contrary to lofty intentions, begun to morph into a troubling sign of alarming incongruence, felt to be forcing the image of the rational Third Republic to crack, was highlighted by *Documents*: the abattoir at la Villette.

### *La Villette in the Interwar Period: ‘a challenge to progress and to civilisation’*

In the sixth issue of the journal’s first year (1929), three photographs depicting the Parisian abattoir at la Villette appeared in print, (Fig. 4, 79).<sup>298</sup> The images, shot by Eli Lotar, illustrated the journal’s dictionary-definition of ‘Slaughterhouse’, penned by Bataille.<sup>299</sup> Constructed in an uninhabited area in the north of the city during the last years of Napoleon III’s reign, the abattoir at La Villette poses as another stellar manifestation of Haussmann’s urge to rationalise and civilise Paris, to cleanse it from the irrational and lowly experience of death and decay. What had previously been the largely unmonitored enterprise of artisanal abattage – taking place in alleys and courtyards all throughout Paris – was now isolated within a single location, far away from the airy boulevards and civilised Parisians.<sup>300</sup> Indeed, as Paula Young Lee writes: ‘Slaughterhouses were invented to eliminate the mundane horror of encountering hand-slaughter in the streets by

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid. The term ‘*tout-à-l’égout*’ (‘mains drainage’) has been returned to its French original to emphasise the direct connection to the surrounding discourse.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Eli Lotar’s photographs of the Parisian abattoir also appeared in *VU*. (Carlo Rim, ‘La Villette Rouge,’ *VU*, no. 166 (20 May 1931), 698-700.) For an account of Lotar’s oeuvre, see e.g.: Damarice Amao, Clément Chéroux, and Pia Viewing (eds.), *Eli Lotar* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2017). The literature on Lotar’s slaughterhouse images is vast, see e.g.: Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe*, 70-79; Bois and Krauss, 43-51; Walker, 126-138; Neil Cox, ‘Sacrifice’, in *Undercover Surrealism*, 106-117; Natalya Lustry, ‘Eli Lotar’s Para-urban Visions,’ in *Photography and Ontology: Unsettling Images*, edited by Donna West and Natalya Lustry (New York and London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>299</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘Slaughterhouse,’ *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, 72-73.

<sup>300</sup> Kyri Clafin, ‘La Villette: City of Blood (1867-1914),’ in *Meat, Modernity, and the Rise of the Slaughterhouse*, ed. Paula Young Lee (Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2008), 27-32.

displacing it to the urban outskirts'.<sup>301</sup> And, as such, she continues, they were 'the palpating support enabling humanity to sustain its idealism.'<sup>302</sup>

By the turn of the century, however, the abattoir at La Villette appeared increasingly outmoded. After an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in 1906, the city of Paris voted for its urgent reconstruction. 'Everything is old and archaic', announced the municipal report: 'Villette has become *the laughingstock of Europe*'.<sup>303</sup> The following year, *Le Matin* described the slaughterhouse as 'the filthiest place on earth, the shame of Paris.'<sup>304</sup> Plagued by a lack of resources and political inertia, however, the felt need to modernise, sanitise, and rationalise the abattoir soon became yet another item on the Third Republican to-do list, subject to perpetual postponement. When the municipal council finally announced a competition in 1911, for which the winning bid was settled on in 1914, the war broke out, indefinitely shelving all planned action.<sup>305</sup>

The question resurfaced in March of 1920, as M. Godin declared to the newly elected *Conseil municipal*: 'the situation, in fact, is as it was in 1914, which is to say that we must pick up the matter anew and that the necessity to *reconstruct* the slaughterhouse is more urgent than ever.'<sup>306</sup> Although a new design competition was announced the following year, plans moved slowly. Deploring the sluggishness in April of 1924, the politician Jean Beaumont railed to the Senate: 'To the disgrace of our capital, which, for the most part, is at the extreme point of progress, we have the duty to report that the abattoirs at la Villette remain are still under the reign of this regime.'<sup>307</sup> The Parisian slaughterhouse, he continued, is 'a challenge to progress and to civilisation': 'It is an ignoble, repugnant spectacle of filth and blood that should not be tolerated any longer within the City of Light.'<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Paula Young Lee, 'Introduction,' in *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>302</sup> Paula Young Lee, 'Siting the Slaughterhouse: From Shed to Factory,' in *ibid.*, 51.

<sup>303</sup> 'Reconstruction des abattoirs de la Villette: Rapport,' Conseil municipal de Paris (1928): 3. Bibliothèque nationale de France. 'Aux abattoirs de la Villette tout est vieux et archaïque. Les échaudoirs les cellules d'abatage, les bouveries, etc., sont mal compris et mal agencés. Tout est vieux et désuet. (...) On cherche en vain à établir les attributions de chacun dans cette Villette *devenue la risée de l'Europe*.'

<sup>304</sup> Urbain Gohier, 'L'infection des Abattoirs: à travers les horreurs de la Villette,' *Le Matin* (30 October 1907): 1. 'l'endroit le plus sale de la terre, la honte de Paris.'

<sup>305</sup> 'Reconstruction des abattoirs de la Villette: Rapport,' 4.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.* 'en fait, la situation est ce qu'elle était en 1914, c'est-à-dire que nous sommes obligés de reprendre l'affaire, et que la nécessité de *reconstruire* l'abattoir est plus que jamais urgente.'

<sup>307</sup> 'Session Ordinaire,' *Impressions : projets, propositions, rapports*, no. 417 (10 April 1924): 14. 'À la honte de notre capital, qui pour presque tout, est à l'extrême point du progrès, nous avons le devoir de signaler que les abattoirs de la Villette sont encore soumis à cette régime.'

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.* 'les abattoirs de la Villette sont un défi au progrès et à la civilisation. (...) C'est un spectacle ignoble, répugnant de saleté et de sang, qui ne saurait être toléré plus longtemps au sien de la Ville Lumière.'

Whilst a bid was selected in June of 1924, plans were soon once more postponed. ‘The instability of the financial situation’, explained the Prefect of Seine in May of 1926, as the rapidly depreciating franc reached an all-time low, ‘made all plans illusory and strictly prohibited the costs of a project stretching over multiple years’.<sup>309</sup> ‘Since this date’, *L’Homme libre* deplored two years later, ‘all projects have been successively rejected’ – ‘and we have done nothing about it.’<sup>310</sup> At the same time, *Cahiers d’art* published a long piece, introduced by Christian Zervos himself and decorated with no less than thirteen photographs, on the newly unveiled abattoir in Lyon, designed by Tony Garnier.<sup>311</sup> Posing as a marvel of modern architecture, the light and airy constructions in glass and steel were installed with the latest technology. Eulogising Garnier as ‘the master of modern architecture in France’ and championing his Lyon abattoir as a structure corresponding to ‘the most recent knowledge in economy as well as hygiene’, Zervos went on to suggest that the structure should serve as a ‘model for similar constructions’ in France.<sup>312</sup> The following year, as Lotar’s images and Bataille’s text appeared in *Documents*, a French newspaper announced: ‘since 1921, we have been talking about reconstructing the slaughterhouses of la Villette. We are entering 1929 and we are still in the same position.’<sup>313</sup>

In interwar France, the incongruent reality of La Villette, thus, was repeatedly identified as something that had to be expelled, not belonging to the official identity of the rational Third Republican self. In his definition of the slaughterhouse, Bataille inverts this relationship, turns it upside down and presents the blood-smeared chaos of La Villette as an irrepressible feature of human existence that civilisation, fraudulently and in vain, seeks to contain and cover up in the name of reason:

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<sup>309</sup> ‘Reconstruction des abattoirs de la Villette: Rapport,’ 5. ‘L’instabilité de la situation monétaire : la baisse continue du franc rendait illusoire toute prévision et interdisait absolument de chiffrer un projet s’étalant sur plusieurs années ; (...) Le désir de tous nos collègues de ne pas engager de lourdes dépenses et l’espoir qu’une somme relativement peu élevée permettrait de prolonger un certain temps les abattoirs actuels, en attendant des années plus prospères.’

<sup>310</sup> Pierre Delafuye, ‘Les abattoirs de la Villette continueront-ils longtemps de défier l’hygiène publique et le progrès social ?’, *L’Homme libre* (26 June 1928): 3. ‘Depuis cette date, tous les projets ont été successivement rejetés ; tous les voyages ont été entrepris – et l’on a rien fait d’autre.’

<sup>311</sup> Le Corbusier described Garnier’s unrealised 1917 plan, *Cité Industrielle*, as a site where ‘order reigns’ (Le Corbusier, ‘Trois rappels à MM. les architectes: III, le plan,’ *L’Esprit Nouveau* (4: 1921): 463).

<sup>312</sup> Christian Zervos, ‘Marché aux bestiaux et abattoirs de la Mouche à Lyon,’ *Cahiers d’art*, no. 8 (1928): 343. ‘Nous sommes très heureux de publier ces deux constructions de l’architecte que toute notre génération considère comme le maître de l’architecture moderne en France. (...) Le Marché aux bestiaux et les Abattoirs qu’on vient d’inaugurer à Lyon sont pour la France, des édifices modèles. (...) Dans l’ensemble ces édifices correspondent absolument à leur destination et remplissent leur rôle selon les données les plus récentes au point de vue de l’économie et de l’hygiène. (...) Pour faire connaître par le détail à nos amis architectes ces édifices qui serviront, à n’en pas douter, de modèles pour des constructions similaires, nous publions une explication détaillée du marché aux bestiaux et des abattoirs.’

<sup>313</sup> H. Régner, ‘Il faut reconstruire à la Villette des abattoirs ‘modernes’,’ *Rustica* (17 February 1929): 175. ‘depuis 1921, on parle de reconstruire les abattoirs de la Villette. Nous allons atteindre 1929 et nous sommes toujours au même point.’

In our time, nevertheless, the slaughterhouse is cursed and quarantined like a plague-ridden ship. Now, the victims of this curse are neither butchers nor beasts, but those same good folk who countenance, by now, only their own unseemliness, an unseemliness commensurate with an unhealthy need of cleanliness, with irascible meanness, and boredom. The curse (terrifying only to those who utter it) leads them to vegetate as far as possible from the slaughterhouse, to exile themselves, out of propriety, to a flabby world in which nothing fearful remains and in which, subject to the ineradicable obsession of shame, they are reduced to eating cheese.<sup>314</sup>

Eli Lotar's gory photographs, in turn, completes the anti-idealist programme by forcing civilised Parisians to confront the unadulterated image of their debased reality, full of death and decay, which Haussmann, and subsequently the Third Republic, had tried so hard to drive out, (Fig. 4, 79).

Two issues prior, in fact, humanity had, reciprocally, been defined by the slaughterhouse. While '*not one* of the millions of animals man massacres every year is necessary for his nourishment', *Documents* wrote in the fifth issue of the journal's first year, as part of its second dictionary-entry on 'Man', it is nonetheless a practise that helps 'to define the *red and hideous bloodstain* on the face of man': 'A calculation based on very modest figures shows the quantity of blood shed each year in the slaughterhouses of Chicago is more than sufficient to float five transatlantic liners...'<sup>315</sup> The entry was illustrated by a photograph depicting an elegant woman, dressed in a fur coat and high heels, seated amidst half-skinned silver foxes at the 1928 Fur Exhibition in Berlin, (Fig. 80).

The same issue of *Documents* holds another critical intervention into the urban fabric of the French capital. This gesture, staged in Desnos' article 'Le Mystère d'Abraham Juif' (5:1929), is illustrated by a photograph of Place des Innocents, the caption of which states: 'The square and fountain of the Innocents, near the food market, formerly the Innocents' cemetery (or charnel-house)', (Fig. 81).<sup>316</sup> Discussing Nicholas Flamel, whose drawings had decorated one of the walls

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<sup>314</sup> Georges Bataille, 'Slaughterhouse'.

<sup>315</sup> Georges Bataille, 'Man,' *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, 57-58. Chicago's slaughterhouses were a frequent topic in French anti-Americanist literature. Duhamel tells of his terrifying experience visiting a Chicago abattoir, the stench of which, he described, followed him back to his hotel. The chapter, entitled 'The Kingdom of Death', ends on a note of anguish: 'How long would it be before I should be cured of Chicago?' (93-112.)

<sup>316</sup> Robert Desnos, 'Le Mystère d'Abraham Juif,' *Documents* (5:1929): 233-237. 'Place et fontaine des Innocents, près des halles, autrefois cimetière (ou charnier) des Innocents.' Having been in operation for over five hundred years, the *cimetière des Innocents* had long been a symbol of civic identity, largely owing to, Vanessa Harding writes, the 'sense of generations of Parisians buried there, visibly present in the bones piles high in the attics of the surrounding *charniers*.' (*The Dead and the Living in Paris and London*,

of the *cimetière des Innocents*, Desnos' essay starts off as a text about of alchemy, a trendy topic amongst the avant-garde and Surrealist circles in Paris.<sup>317</sup> But it ends up elsewhere: as a treatment of the eternally troublesome and oft-debated quarter located next to the former cemetery, Saint-Merri, also known as the infamous *îlot insalubre n°1*, where Desnos himself had grown up.<sup>318</sup> The text amounts to a love letter, celebrating the rich, messy life of the neighbourhood by anachronistically superimposing disparate events and experiences tied to the area into a sprawling image of a '*paysage magique*', haunted by ghosts and stained by blood, odours, and dirt:

You need to have lived in this neighbourhood of Paris to recognise the sulphurous odour of magic spells that rises from these streets and their murky gutters. For ten years, from early childhood to adolescence, I lived on the corner of rue Saint-Martin and des Lombards.<sup>319</sup>

Indeed, in the interwar period, Saint-Merri was a charged site. Being the longstanding target of both preservation campaigns and calls for sanitation, as well as the stage for Le Corbusier's radical re-imagining of the Parisian cityscape, the neighbourhood loomed as a linchpin for the jarring urges and anxieties treated in this chapter. As such, the troubled site – located at the very heart of Paris, across the third and fourth arrondissement – also merged the topical Third Republican concerns traversed across this thesis at large: hygienicism, Americanisation, and the fragile edifice of the French capital.

### *Saint-Merri: Vieux-Paris, Le Corbusier's Skyscraper City, and Desnos' 'paysage magique'*

Consisting of a series of blocks dating back to the medieval period, the maze-like neighbourhood of Saint-Merri soon became congested. In his famous late-eighteenth century portrayal of the

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1500-1670 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85) By the end of the eighteenth century, this identity no longer suited Paris. Regarded as an outdated burial practice, dangerous to public health and contrary to reason, it was decided in 1780, by royal decree, that the cemetery had to be removed. Ten generations of human remains were dug up and moved underground to the city's subterranean catacombs, safely out of sight for civilized Parisians. For an account of these processes, see e.g.: Erin-Marie Legacey, *Making Space for the Dead: Catacombs, Cemeteries, and the Reimagining of Paris, 1780-1830* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019).

<sup>317</sup> For an account of the role of alchemy in Surrealism, see e.g.: Tessel Baudin, *Surrealism and the Occult: Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

<sup>318</sup> For an account of Desnos early life, see: Marie-Claire Dumas, *Robert Desnos ou l'exploration des limites* (Paris: Librairie Klincksieck, 1980), 17-35. See also: Marie-Claire Dumas, '1929 – Lieux de rencontres à propos du 'Mystère d'Abraham Juif' de Robert Desnos,' in Dominique Lecoq and Jean-Luc Lory (eds.), *Écrits d'ailleurs: Georges Bataille et les ethnologues* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences et de l'homme, 1987). Desnos wrote multiple texts about Saint-Merri, incl. the 1936 poem 'Quartier Saint-Merri' and the essay 'Confessions d'un enfant du siècle', published in *La révolution surréaliste*, no. 6 (1 March 1926): 18-20.

<sup>319</sup> Robert Desnos, 'Le Mystère d'Abraham Juif,' 236. 'Il faut avoir vécu dans ce quartier de Paris pour éprouver l'odeur sulfureuse de sortilège qui monte de ses rues et de ses ruisseaux fangeux. J'ai vécu dans dix ans, de l'extrême enfance à l'adolescence, dans la maison qui fait coin des rues Saint-Martin et des Lombards.'

French capital, *Tableau de Paris*, Louis-Sébastien Mercier described the district as particularly problematic: ‘Saint-Merri is a very populated neighbourhood, perhaps the filthiest of Paris and at least the most lugubrious.’<sup>320</sup> As existing slums experienced an influx of inhabitants in the aftermath of Napoleon III’s renovation of the city, the state of Saint-Merri – left largely untouched by Haussmann’s plans – further dilapidated as the Third Republic was installed. ‘The whole neighbourhood is miserable’, wrote Joris-Karl Huysmans at the turn of the century.<sup>321</sup> Its ‘narrow alleys’, he continued, are ‘delicious and despicable.’<sup>322</sup>

Overcrowded and disease-ridden, Saint-Merri presented a primary source of Third Republican anxiety. The neighbourhood, Chloé Maurel writes, emerged as a ‘focal point for hygienists.’<sup>323</sup> Reporting on the correlation between bad housing and tuberculosis in 1905, Paul Juillerat and Louis Bonnier explained that Saint-Merri ‘represents a block of houses where, for eleven years, tuberculosis has wreaked frightening havoc’.<sup>324</sup> Amongst its population of close to ten thousand people, inhabiting 281 buildings across twelve streets, they continued: ‘only thirty households have not had to register deaths from tuberculosis.’<sup>325</sup> Whilst we ‘cannot fathom the demolition of all buildings’, Juillerat and Bonnier admitted, certain buildings ‘are incurable’. ‘For those,’ they continued, ‘we must use heroic measures: expropriation and demolition’.<sup>326</sup>

At the same time, however, due to its old age, Saint-Merri posed as a favourite subject of the emerging body of increasingly vocal preservationists and *Vieux Paris*-chroniclers. Already in 1909, campaigners calling for the conservation of historic Paris protested the proposed demolition.<sup>327</sup> In 1912, as part of *Le Vieux Paris: souvenirs et vieilles demeures*, a treatise on the apse of Saint-Merri appeared. The book, published in three volumes under the editorship of Georges

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<sup>320</sup> Mercier (1781), quoted in Chloé Maurel, ‘Au voisinage des Halles. Images et représentations du quartier de Saint-Merri dans l’entre-deux-guerres,’ in *Les Halles : Images d’un quartier*, ed. Jean-Louis Robert and Myriam Tsikounas (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2004).

<sup>321</sup> Huysmans quoted in *ibid.* n.p. ‘Tout le quartier est misérable’.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p. ‘ces ruelles délicieuses et infâmes’.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p. ‘Le quartier, classé dès 1906 « îlot d’insalubrité n°1 » par les services de la Préfecture, devient le point de mire des préoccupations des hygiénistes.’

<sup>324</sup> Juillerat and Bonnier, *La Tuberculose et l’habitation*, 6. ‘plan n°1 (...) représente un îlot de maisons dans lesquelles depuis onze ans la tuberculose fait d’effroyables ravages, puisque le taux annuel de la mortalité pour cette maladie y est de 12,47 pour 1000 habitants.’

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.* ‘Cet îlot comprend 12 rues, desservant 281 maisons, comptant 9715 habitants. Sur ce nombre, 30 seulement n’ont pas eu à enregistrer de décès tuberculeux.’

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 14. ‘On ne peut songer à démolir toutes les maisons des villes et à les reconstruire sur des plans nouveaux. (...) un grand nombre de ces maisons sont sans doute curable. (...) D’autres, au contraire, sont incurables (...) Pour celles-là il faudra employer des moyens héroïques : l’expropriation et la démolition.’

<sup>327</sup> Robert Hénard, ‘Paris qui s’en va,’ *L’Illustration* (5 April 1930). Bibliothèque nationale de France, 4-LC2-1549. ‘En 1909, la Ville de Paris s’était déjà préoccupée de ce dégagement du quartier Saint-Merri. Un défenseur du Vieux-Paris avait alors déploré la démolition de ces rues pittoresque et de vieilles maisons dont la plupart ont leurs fondations et une partie de leurs bâtiments datant des quatorzième et quinzième siècles.’ The article was richly illustrated with drawing of Vieux-Paris streets, including one of rue Saint-Martin, where Desnos had grown up.

Lenôtre, *nom de plume* of Théodore Gosselin, historian and member of the *Commission du Vieux Paris*, featured essays on various historical landmarks penned by well-known preservationists. It aimed to illuminate, Lenôtre wrote, the few remaining vestiges of *Vieux-Paris* still standing in spite of numerous plans having sought to ‘pierce arteries, plant avenues, tear apart entire districts, design squares, level, aerate, enlarge, align, build, rectify, and most of all demolish – oh! demolish with passion!’<sup>328</sup>

The essay on Saint-Merri, written by Edmond Beurepaire and published in the second volume, began by tracing history of the church back to the Middle Ages but culminated in a fervent condemnation of current demolition plans in the neighborhood. The ‘whiteness’ of newbuilds set to rise in lieu of the ‘picturesque buildings’, Beurepaire deplored, ‘henceforth humiliates the old church’.<sup>329</sup> In the final and third volume, the secretary of the *Commission du Vieux-Paris*, Lucien Lambeau, concluded: ‘Paris is the city of the future, wrote Victor Hugo, because it is the city of the past! With a certain anxiety, we must ask ourselves if Paris, when it is no longer the city of the past, will still be the city of the future?’<sup>330</sup>

In spite of preservationist impresarios, when the *Commission d’extension de Paris* published its report on the planning of the city in 1913, Saint-Merri was once more framed as a particularly troublesome district full of ‘narrow and entangled buildings’.<sup>331</sup> ‘Picturesqueness evidently reigns there, but at the price of what miseries and of what physical decay for a population deprived of air and sun!’ they declared: ‘Demolish the wretched blocks’.<sup>332</sup> ‘Anguished artists and archaeologists will, no doubt, fear to see the disappearance of the inestimable joy of architecture in the massacre of historic mansions and gracious constructions’, the report added: ‘But is it

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<sup>328</sup> G. Lenôtre (ed.), *Le Vieux Paris: souvenirs et vieilles demeures, première série* (Paris: Éditeur Ch. Eggenmann, 1912), 1. Bibliothèque nationale de France, FOL-LK7-37695. ‘percer des artères, planter des avenues, éventrer des arrondissements entiers, dessiner des squares, niveler, aérer, élargir, aligner, bâtir, rectifier, démolir surtout – oh ! démolir avec fureur !’

<sup>329</sup> Edmond Beurepaire, ‘L’abside de Saint-Merri,’ in *Le Vieux Paris: souvenirs et vieilles demeures, deuxième série*, 53. ‘On l’a démolie au commencement de 1911, ainsi que toutes les vieilles maisons formant le côté droit de la rue Brisemiche, entre les rues Saint-Merri et du Cloître, et ces démolitions ont entraîné la disparation de la rue Taillepain ; on élève aujourd’hui sur cet emplacement, où se pressaient des bâtisses pittoresques, mais sordides, un magnifique groupe scolaire, dont la blancheur humilie désormais la vieille église.’

<sup>330</sup> Lucien Lambeau, ‘Autour de L’Église Saint-Séverin,’ in *Le Vieux Paris: souvenirs et vieilles demeures, troisième série*, 35. ‘Paris est la Ville de l’avenir, a dit quelque part Victor Hugo, parce qu’il est la Ville du passé ! Avec une certaine anxiété, il est permis de se demander si Paris, quand il se sera plus la Ville du passé, sera encore la Ville de l’avenir ?’

<sup>331</sup> Préfecture du département de la Seine, *Commission d’extension de Paris*, 82. ‘immeubles étroits, enchevêtrés, des quartiers Saint-Merri’.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid. ‘Le pittoresque y gagne évidemment, mais au prix de quelles misères, de quelle déchéance physique pour toute une population privée d’air et de soleil ! (...) Démolir des quartiers sordides’.

really impossible to reconcile aesthetics and hygiene, to save within the shacks of old Paris beautiful abodes to be preserved?<sup>333</sup>

The outbreak of war, once more, disrupted all planned works. When returning to the matter after the hostilities, things had taken a turn for the worse. In 1924, the tuberculosis mortality in Saint-Merri was more than double that of the Parisian average.<sup>334</sup> When the *Ligue nationale contre le taudis* published the inaugural issue of their bulletin in 1925, a photograph of a snug ally in Saint-Merri was used to illustrate ‘one of the ‘bad’ streets in Paris’.<sup>335</sup> The same year, at the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*, Le Corbusier presented his Purist-remedy to a Paris ‘profoundly *out of gear*’: to raze the historical centre to the ground, including the notorious Saint-Merri, and erect in its place an ensemble of geometrically ordered skyscrapers, (Fig. 69, 75).<sup>336</sup> Writing in *Urbanisme*, alongside an aerial photograph depicting the congested heart of *Vieux Paris*, (Fig. 71), the modernist architect railed:

*Is this a picture of the seventh circle of Dante’s Inferno? Alas, no! It shows the terrible conditions under which hundreds of thousands of people have to live. (...) tuberculosis, demoralization, misery and shame are doing the devil’s work among them. As for the ‘Committee of Old Paris,’ it is busy collecting antiques.*<sup>337</sup>

As for readers who remained unconvinced of his radical plan, Le Corbusier announced that a walk through the ‘terrible quarters’ to be ‘covered by the ‘Voisin’ plan’ should help sway any lingering sceptics.<sup>338</sup>

The projection of Parisian skyscrapers, as we have seen, in turn spurred preservationist camp further, to whom the American building style not only posed as an incoherent and un-French intrusion into the traditional urban fabric of Paris, but – moreover – marked an agonising acknowledgment of U.S. domination in the aftermath of the First World War. Writing in *Le Rappel*, a newspaper launched by Victor Hugo in 1869, Marthe Maladier reacted to the 1925 display: ‘Where are our small houses nestled in the herd, our normal gardens, our old churches,

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<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 83. ‘Sans doute, les artistes, les archéologues inquiets vont craindre de voir disparaître dans ces hécatombes des hôtels historiques, de gracieuses constructions, d’inestimables joyeux d’architecture. Mais est-il impossible vraiment de concilier l’esthétique et l’hygiène, d’épargner entre les mesures du vieux Paris les belles demeures d’être conservées?’

<sup>334</sup> Jeanne Le Floch, *De la destruction des ‘îlots insalubres’* (Paris : Éditeurs Vigot Frères, 1939), 17. Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-TH PARIS-15110.

<sup>335</sup> *Bulletin mensuel de la Ligue nationale contre le taudis* (July 1925). ‘Une des ‘mauvaises’ rues de Paris : La Rue de la Reynie’.

<sup>336</sup> Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 8.

<sup>337</sup> Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow*, 286.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 281.

and our dreary Seine dawdling in-between its old banks?<sup>339</sup> The article, entitled ‘If Paris is Americanised: The Dream of the Esprit Nouveau at the Arts décoratifs’, (Fig. 82), concluded: ‘we will keep our Paris, too old-fashioned and too traditional perhaps, but who charms us as it is.’<sup>340</sup>

Meanwhile, the state of Saint-Merri only continued to decline. When demolition plans surfaced again, therefore, the deplorable condition of the neighborhood meant that not even the *Commission du Vieux Paris* protested. ‘It is now almost thirty years’, they reported in December of 1927, ‘since the city of Paris envisaged the destruction of *îlot insalubre n°1*, situated across the fourth and third arrondissements.’<sup>341</sup> ‘Despite normally being very eager to preserve the vestiges of old Paris’, they continued, ‘we must nevertheless concede since it is a matter of protecting the public health’: ‘While recognising the age and picturesqueness of these old streets, it is necessary to consider that they have become a nest of illness which urgently have to be destroyed.’<sup>342</sup>

Although demolition plans had been reported in all major newspapers, the *îlot insalubre n°1* was still intact in the autumn of 1928, when a portrayal of the notorious neighbourhood was published in *Paris-Midi*. ‘At the heart of Paris, the most medieval slum still lingers’, the newspaper wrote: ‘it is the neighbourhood of Saint-Merri.’<sup>343</sup> Along ‘rue de Venise, rue des Etuves-Saint-Martin, and rue Brise-Miche’, deplored *Paris-Midi*, ‘the facades are dressed in rags’, the ‘interior courts never receive the smallest ray of sun’, and ‘myriads of flies swirl around the waste scattered on the sidewalk.’<sup>344</sup> ‘For the hundredth time, we announce the deconstruction of these blocks’, they continued: ‘Demolish, demolish, that is easy! But rebuild? That is the trouble! (...) How will the city of Paris reconcile such opposing interests?’<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Marthe Maladier, ‘Si Paris s’américanisait : le rêve de l’Esprit-Nouveau aux Arts décoratifs,’ *Le Rappel* (14 September 1925): 1. ‘Ou sont nos petites maisons blotties en troupeau, nos jardins normaux, nos vieilles églises, et notre Seine glauque musant entre ses vieux quais ?’ Le Corbusier also reproduced this article in his 1925 *Almanach d’architecture moderne*.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid. ‘nous garderions notre Paris, trop vieillot, trop étroit, trop traditionnel peut-être, mais qui nous charme tel qu’il est.’

<sup>341</sup> ‘Rapport présenté par M. G. Hartmann, au nom de la 1<sup>re</sup> Sous-commission, sur les transformations du quartier Saint-Merri devant résulter de la démolition de l’îlot insalubre n°1,’ Procès-verbaux, Commission municipale du Vieux Paris (17 December 1927): 167. ‘Il y a maintenant près de trente ans qu’à la suite d’études statistiques et de travaux (...) la Ville de Paris envisage la destruction de l’îlot insalubre n°1 situé sur les IV<sup>e</sup> et III<sup>e</sup> arrondissements.’

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 168. ‘Très soucieux habituellement de conserver les vestiges du vieux Paris, nous devons cependant nous incliner lorsqu’il s’agit de protéger la santé publique. Tout en reconnaissant l’ancienneté et le pittoresque de ces vieilles rues, il faut bien considérer qu’elles sont devenues un foyer de maladies qu’il est urgent de détruire.’

<sup>343</sup> ‘Taudis parisiens : une visite à l’îlot Saint-Merri,’ *Paris-Midi* (2 September 1928): 2. ‘Au cœur de Paris subsiste encore la plus moyenâgeuse cour de Miracles : c’est l’îlot Saint-Merri.’

<sup>344</sup> Ibid. ‘Rue Saint-Merri et rue de Venise, rue des Etuves-Saint-Martin et rue Brise-Miche, les façades sont pavoisées de haillons. Les cours intérieures ne reçoivent jamais le moindre rayon de soleil et de myriades de mouches tourbillonnent autour de détritits semés sur les pavés.’

<sup>345</sup> Ibid. ‘Pour la centième fois, on annonce la destruction de ces immeubles (...). Démolir, démolir, c’est facile ! Mais reconstruire ? Voilà le hic ! (...) Comment la Ville de Paris conciliera-t-elle tant d’intérêts contraires ?’

When d'Espezel's special issue, *Vers un Paris Nouveau?*, was published in 1929, Saint-Merri naturally featured at the centre of the debate. Frantz Jourdain, modernist architect and president of the Salon d'Automne, devoted his contribution to the seemingly eternal problem of the notorious neighbourhood. The stubbornness of the preservationists was particularly targeted as Jourdain derided 'the imbecilic fetichism for a past without interest and without beauty.'<sup>346</sup> 'With troglodytes such as the members of the Commission du Vieux-Paris', he continued, 'there is nothing more to do, nothing more to try': 'Demolish the stinking streets like rue de Nesles, rue de Venise, and other nests of tuberculosis, anaemia, syphilis and chlorosis.'<sup>347</sup> We should not, Jourdain concluded, 'dishonour our past with the cult of ruin, of grime, of dust, of saltpetre, of filth, and of this unique stench that certain aesthetes find picturesque.'<sup>348</sup> Le Corbusier also devoted his contribution for d'Espezel's special issue to the cramped centre of Paris, asking his readers to take an imaginary tour of 'this new city' where the formless chaos of Saint-Merri had been replaced by geometrically ordered skyscrapers.<sup>349</sup> The special issue closed with a number of illustrations, one of which was an aerial shot of the congested area, (Fig. 83), captioned: 'The 'poorly housed' (Saint-Merri)'.

1929 also marked the year that Desnos published a portrait of his childhood neighbourhood in *Documents*. The future of Saint-Merri, as we have seen, was a frequently debated topic in Third Republican France. Desnos' portrayal of the district, however, stood out. Defying both the urge to preserve the district as a token of a romanticised image of France's national identity as well as the impulse to cleanse and rationalise a disease-ridden slum, Desnos instead composed a *base-materialist* portrait of the neighbourhood, enthusiastically sullied with revolutionary blood, odour, mysticism, murder, and spectres: 'And it pleases us to imagine the odd ghost roaming through this leprous and strangled stream, amongst these hordes of hovels, these memories of insurrection.'<sup>350</sup> 'Yes', Desnos assured his readers, 'ghosts are real.'<sup>351</sup>

Collapsing material traces, personal memories, literary accounts, and historical events, Desnos framed a transhistorical tableau of his childhood stomping ground, located, he wrote, 'on top of

<sup>346</sup> 'Réponses à notre enquête,' 129. 'le fétichisme imbécile pour un passé sans intérêt et sans beauté.'

<sup>347</sup> Ibid. 'Avec des troglodytes comme les membres de la Commission du Vieux-Paris (...) il n'y a rien à faire, ni même à tenter. (...) Démolissez les voies puantes comme la rue de Nesles, de Venise et autres foyers de tuberculose, d'anémie, de syphilis et de chlorose.'

<sup>348</sup> Ibid. 'Mais qu'on ne déshonore pas notre époque par le culte de la ruine, de la crasse, de la poussière, du salpêtre, des immondices et de cette puanteur spéciale que certains esthètes trouvent pittoresque.'

<sup>349</sup> Le Corbusier, 'On demande un Colbert,' 84. 'cette ville neuve.'

<sup>350</sup> Desnos, 'Le Mystère d'Abraham Juif,' 236. 'Et il nous plaît d'imaginer, errant à travers ce défile lépreux et étranglé, entre ces cohortes de masures, ces souvenirs d'insurrection, des fantômes singuliers.' On Desnos and ghostliness, see: Katharine Conley, 'Rose Sélavy's Ghosts: Life, Death, and Desnos,' *The French Review*, vol. 83, no. 5 (April 2010): 964-975.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., 237. 'Oui, les fantômes existent.'

the rich soil of the old cemetery'.<sup>352</sup> The essay traverses Flamel's medieval occultism as well as the June Rebellion of 1832 as recounted by Victor Hugo, with the help of whose *Les Misérables*, Desnos narrated, 'I learned to read'.<sup>353</sup> It takes its readers from the death of the romanticist writer, Gérard de Nerval, who hung himself in 1855 on rue de la Vieille Lanterne, a spot that, Desnos wrote, 'approximately corresponds with the prompter's box of the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt', to more modern Saint-Merri experiences such as that of Jean-Jacques Liabeuf – a shoemaker who in 1910, after being wrongly convicted of involvement in prostitution, sought vengeance and ended up killing one policeman, and injuring several, before being arrested.<sup>354</sup> Liabeuf, sentenced to death shortly after the incident, became an immediate hero for the anarchist left. 'I passed rue Aubry-le-Boucher the same day as Liabeuf engraved his name in the memory of men with red, capital letters', Desnos recalled.<sup>355</sup> The street, traversing the heart of the *îlot insalubre n°1*, Desnos explained, 'is haunted by the bloody shadow of Liabeuf'.<sup>356</sup>

Desnos' tour of the '*paysage magique*' of his childhood neighbourhood ends on a melancholic note, provoking a sense of loss in the face of its imminent demolition.<sup>357</sup> 'Is the charnel house of Innocents forever lost and its walls knocked down?' wrote Desnos: 'The alchemic dragon sun and its female moon, will they never be able to give back to the ghosts of my childhood the sacred places of their dreams, their work, their discoveries, their illuminations...'<sup>358</sup> Only months after Desnos' article appeared in print, a first partial expropriation of Saint-Merri was successfully commenced after a 100-million-franc credit was floated by the *Conseil municipal de Paris*.<sup>359</sup> Demolition began in 1932. By 1936, the entirety of the *îlot insalubre n°1* had been razed to the ground.<sup>360</sup> In 1942, when large sections of the old Saint-Merri had been turned into a carpark, Desnos wrote: 'Je n'aime plus la rue Saint-Martin'.<sup>361</sup>

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., 236. 'au-dessus la terre grasse de l'ancien cimetière'.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 237. 'Quand j'apprenais à lire dans les *Misérables*, c'est le quartier lui-même que je déchiffrais et je cherchais, encore aux murs des rues du Cloître Saint-Merry et des Juges-Consuls, les traces de la fameuse émeute.'

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 236. 'il mourut, pendu dans l'espace à un point qui correspond sensiblement à la boîte du souffleur du Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt.'

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 237. 'J'ai passé rue Aubry-le-Boucher le jour même où Liabeuf inscrivit son nom en capitales rouges dans le souvenir des hommes'

<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 236. 'La rue Aubry-le-Boucher est hantée par l'ombre sanglante de Liabeuf.'

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 237. 'Le charnier des Innocents est-il à jamais dispersé et ses murailles renversées ? (...) L'alchimique dragon solaire et sa femelle lunaire ne pourront-ils jamais rendre aux fantômes de mon enfance les lieux sacrés de leurs rêves, de leurs travaux, de leurs découvertes, de leurs illuminations...'

<sup>359</sup> See e.g.: Paul Allard, 'En plein cœur de Paris on entreprendra bientôt une opération de voirie de très grande envergure qui coutera 100 millions et l'on procédera enfin à la démolition de l'îlot insalubre n°1 : 118 vieux immeubles vont disparaître,' *Excelsior* (24 February 1930): 1. The municipal council reported that the process had been completed in May of 1930 and that the remaining segments would be expropriated in 1931. ('M. René Faillot, conseiller municipal du quartier Saint-Merri, a l'honneur de demander à M. le Préfet de la Seine l'état actuel de la procédure d'expropriation de l'îlot insalubre n°1,' *Bulletin municipal officiel* (19 November 1930): 4818). These developments were widely reported on in the press.

<sup>360</sup> Hubert Gouleret and Gilles Cohen, *Beaubourg* (Paris : Édition de Nesle, 1980), 50.

<sup>361</sup> Robert Desnos, 'Couplets de la rue Saint-Martin,' in *État de veille* (Paris: Robert J. Godet, 1943).

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The urge to critically intervene in the built space of the French capital was, as is well known, shared by Breton and his fellow Surrealists.<sup>362</sup> Indeed, as Walter Benjamin famously announced in his 1929 essay on the movement, the city of Paris itself was ‘the most dreamed-of of their objects’.<sup>363</sup> However, whilst the Surrealists dreamt of a pre-rationalised Paris as a privileged playground for marvellous encounters with subconscious desires that would trigger a revolutionary synthesis and, thus, an alchemical elevation of human existence, the critical machinery of *Documents* pushed the architecture of the French capital into a different direction, unveiling an image of Paris that would bring humanity *down*.

Traversing prevailing, planned, or projected sites and structures that sought to rationalise the Parisian cityscape, and, in turn, its *citoyens* – be they Le Corbusier’s Purist skyscrapers, Third Republican statuary programmes, the *tout-à-l’égout* sewerage system, the abattoir at la Villette, and the notoriously stubborn slum of Saint-Merri – *Documents* accentuated their failures, flaws, and incongruences. Highlighting signs and motifs inhabiting areas lurking within the architectural edifice of the capital where the irrepressible excess of humanity made itself known, where the lowly reality of existence transgressed and overflowed the ordered ideals of modern civilisation, the dissident avant-garde journal uncompromisingly laid bare a different image altogether: a base-Paris, inhabited by base-Parisians.

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<sup>362</sup> For accounts of Surrealism and architecture, see e.g.: Mical; Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illuminations: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Nadir Lahiji and D.S. Friedman, ‘At the Sink: Architecture in Abjection,’ in Nadir Lahiji and D.S. Friedman (eds.), *Plumbing: Sounding Modern Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997); David Pinder, *Visions of the City: Utopianism, Power and Politics in Twentieth-Century Urbanism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005). See also *Architectural Review*’s special issue on Surrealism (1978), in particular Roger Cardinal’s essay, ‘Soluble City: The Surrealist Perception of Paris,’ 143-149).

<sup>363</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,’ *New Left Review*, no. 108 (March 1978): 51.

# Conclusion: Heterology Situated

During the *Documents*-years, Georges Bataille was developing an idea that would become a core theme in his critical philosophy: heterology. The concept is explored in several published and unpublished texts dating from this period.<sup>1</sup> ‘Heterology’, Bataille explained, ‘is the science of the *heterogenous*, that is to say, the science of the *excluded part* (or at least the mode of exclusion that creates such a part).’<sup>2</sup> Loosely mirroring and re-working Durkheim’s classic categorisation of sacred and profane realms of social life, Bataille announced that ‘the elements of human life can be divided into two classes.’<sup>3</sup> Our existence, thus, is profoundly paradoxical, conditioned by irresolvable, irrecuperable contradiction. There is the profane and homogenous realm of scientific rationality, utility, work, progress, futurity, accumulation, and calculation.<sup>4</sup> And then there is the heterogenous world of the sacred: of that which is unintelligible; of that which exceeds and falls outside of rational comprehension and logic, making it thus irreducible to scientific knowledge; of that which cannot be incorporated into the homogenous realm without simultaneously being subjected to a ‘hypocritical cancellation of their excremental character’.<sup>5</sup> Bataille provides a few examples of what such heterogenous matters might be: religious ecstasy, eroticism, delirious drunkenness, laughter, and *death*.<sup>6</sup>

Secular modernity, however, spellbound by the ideals of scientific rationality and progress, tends to privilege the homogenous, profane realm, and to ignore the domain of the heterogenous. Modern civilisation, Bataille elaborated, seeks to present humanity as a ‘moment of a homogenous process’: to annihilate ‘mythological phantasms’, to discard ‘the delirious parts of the old religious constructions’.<sup>7</sup> ‘Left to itself’, Bataille warns, ‘nothing could keep science from blindly emptying the universe of its human content.’<sup>8</sup> Throughout his career, Bataille would

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g.: Marcus Coelen, ‘Heterology,’ in *Georges Bataille: Key Concepts*, 88-98. See also the special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* on ‘Bataille and Heterology’, vol. 35, issue 4-5 (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘Definition of Heterology,’ trans. Roy Boyne and Couze Venn, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 35, issue 4-5 (2018): 29-40.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. On Bataille and Durkheim, see e.g.: Michèle Richman, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the College of Sociology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Alexander Riley, ‘Renegade Durkheimianism’ and the transgressive left sacred,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades),’ *Visions of Excess*, 91-102.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘The Pineal Eye,’ *Visions of Excess*, 79-90.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 81.

explore various ways to reintroduce the heterogenous into human experience, to break open the radically constricting and fraudulently imposed grid of homogeneity, and to expose in its place an incongruous image of reality.

In *Documents*, the urge toward a heterogenous redefinition of things, to expose the jarringly irrecoverable at the heart of human existence, was materialised and theorised on multiple occasions.<sup>9</sup> In the third issue of the journal's second year, for example, Bataille subversively reframed the sun – symbolising, in his own words, ‘mathematical sincerity and spiritual elevation’ – by reminding his readers of the ‘the horror emanating from a brilliant arc lamp’: ‘blinding’ and ‘decomposing’.<sup>10</sup> Toppled from its lofty position as a symbol of illumination, reason, comprehension, and vitality, Bataille unveils the impossible image of a rotten sun. An identical strategy is found in ‘The Language of Flowers’, published in the third issue of the journal's first year.<sup>11</sup> This time it is the flower – representing, Bataille writes, ‘the human *ideal*’ – that is singled out for anti-idealist dethronement:

even the most beautiful flowers are spoiled in their centres by hairy sexual organs. Thus the interior of a rose does not at all correspond to its exterior beauty; if one tears off all of the corolla's petals, all that remains is a rather sordid tuft. (...) But even more than by the filth of its organs, the flower is betrayed by the fragility of its corolla: thus, far from answering the demands of human ideas, it is the sign of their failure. (...) And in order to destroy this favourable impression, nothing less is necessary than the impossible and fantastic vision of roots swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin. Roots, in fact, represent the perfect counterpart to the visible parts of a plant. While the visible parts are nobly elevated, the ignoble and sticky roots wallow in the ground, loving rotteness just as leaves love light.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Even in the oeuvre of Carl Einstein – the ‘titular editor’ of *Documents* who Bataille claimed to have edited ‘against’ (see n9p17) – one finds a fundamental urge to call into question the self-evidence of the present order; an urge to recalibrate reality. Sebastian Ziedler writes: ‘In his terminology, the real is not a reality that should be either inhabited or critiqued; it is rather a reality that needs to be actively produced.’ (Ziedler, 18). For Einstein, the platform for this process of re-writing and of critical re-definition is *visual art*. As Charles W. Hauxthausen writes, Einstein ‘passionately believed that a change in artistic form had the potential to change human visuality, and by changing human visuality to change human subjectivity and our construction of reality.’ In Einstein's view, Hauxthausen continues: ‘It lay within art's power to redefine the real, to create a compelling alternate version of the world, and this was its ultimate function and justification.’ (Hauxthausen, 2).

<sup>10</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘Rotten Sun,’ *Visions of Excess*, 57-58. The theme is explored in Bataille's ‘Solar Anus’ too.

<sup>11</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘The Language of Flowers,’ *Visions of Excess*, 10-14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 13.

The recurring ‘Critical Dictionary’, as we have seen, was a particularly fruitful platform for such critical recalibration of reality. It sought, as Bataille himself announced, to ‘bring things down in the world’.<sup>13</sup> After *Documents*, Bataille would expand his philosophy of heterology in various directions: political activism, mediation, secret societies, poetry, eroticism, and much more. In *La Part maudite*, his three-volume magnum opus on political economy first published in 1949, which uses as its base the concept of the gift, developed by French ethnographer Marcel Mauss, Bataille announced that the essence of existence is never accumulation and progress, but always excess and expenditure.<sup>14</sup> The Bataillean man is not a producer but a waster.

A correspondingly anti-idealist and anti-fetishist approach to human existence and culture can be found in the ethnographic discourse, solidifying in Paris in the 1920s and intimately influencing the work of *Documents*. Taking shape in opposition to the long-standing discourse of physical anthropology, a discipline tending to frame humanity as a teleological process, this French brand of ethnography actively turned its back on such selective images of mankind.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as Marcel Griaule, who at this point was training to become an ethnographer at the *Institut d’Ethnologie*, announced in *Documents*: ethnography is a ‘self-doubting discipline’. Far from seeking to present a pristine image of humanity, he explained: ‘*Ethnography* is interested in both *beauty* and *ugliness*.’<sup>16</sup> Similarly, as Leiris, who was enrolled at the ethnographic institute alongside Griaule, wrote in the fifth issue of *Documents*’ second year (1930): ‘almost all vices, in fact, are only ways to feel more human’.<sup>17</sup> When Michel Foucault summarised unifying features within the generation of critical thinkers that included Bataille, he aptly explained their efforts as having had:

exploded the inherent obviousness of the subject and triggered forms of experience within which the explosion of the subject, its annihilation, the encounter of its limits, its tipping out over these limits clearly demonstrated that it does not possess this inherent form and self-sufficiency which philosophy traditionally assumes.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bataille, ‘Formless’.

<sup>14</sup> Georges Bataille, *La Part maudite : essai d’économie générale* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1949). Part two and three were first published in 1976, as part of volume eight of Bataille’s *Œuvres complètes*.

<sup>15</sup> Conklin, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Marcel Griaule, ‘Gunshot,’ *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, 98. Similarly, Jean Jamin has dubbed ethnography an ‘anxious science’, (‘Anxious Science: Ethnography as a Devil’s Dictionary,’ *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 7, no. 1 (March, 1991): 84-91.)

<sup>17</sup> Leiris, ‘L’homme et son Intérieur,’ 264.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954-1988: Tome III, 1976-1979* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 590. ‘éclater cette évidence originaire du sujet et ont fait surgir des formes d’expérience dans laquelle l’éclatement du sujet, son anéantissement, la rencontre de ses limites, son basculement hors de ses limites montraient bien qu’il n’avait pas cette forme originaire et autosuffisance que la philosophie classiquement lui supposait.’ Hand places Leiris in this group of thinkers too. It ‘is certainly clear’, he writes, ‘that Leiris represents one of those key French writers of the time’. (202).

The deconstructionist interpretation of Bataille's critical oeuvre tends to transpose his critical philosophy of heterology to purely linguistic domain, thus limiting its critical force to that of semiotic destabilisation. Abstracted from the materiality of lived experience, Bataillean transgression, Derrida wrote in 1967, amounts to a 'transgression of meaning'. Performing 'an endless and baseless substitution', Bataille's writing, Derrida explained, enacts 'a kind of potlatch of signs that burns, consumes, and wastes words'. It 'relates its objects to the destruction, without reserve, of meaning.'<sup>19</sup> Morphed into Derridean *écriture*, Bataillan *excess* amounts to 'a reduction of meaning.'<sup>20</sup>

Whilst Derrida's 1967 framing has been subject revision within recent Bataille scholarship, the deconstructionist interpretation of *Documents* has, as this thesis has demonstrated, had a long-lasting legacy within the art historical discourse. Helped by the remarkable afterlife enjoyed by the term 'formless', initially cultivated by Rosalind Krauss, the journal has been singled out as an avant-garde text that was critical in the Derridean sense of the word. Indeed, Krauss' 'formless' is akin to Derrida's 'différance'. Operating counter to processes of signification, Krauss elaborated, its 'task is to declassify', to enact a 'collapse of difference' by 'puncturing the limits around the term': '*informe* was the category that would allow all categories to be unthought.'<sup>21</sup> Reframing the phraseology from Derrida's 1967 essay, Krauss announced: '*Informe* denotes what alteration produces, the reduction of meaning.'<sup>22</sup>

In Georges Didi-Huberman's *La Ressemblance informe* (1995), the journal was once more interpreted as a deconstructive operation, albeit through a slightly different route. Across its pages, Didi-Huberman identified a 'play of cruel resemblances': misleading, destabilising juxtapositions that put the very notion of mimesis under pressure – a 'phenomenon' labelled 'entirely heterogenous to signification.'<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as forms de-form and resemblances rupture, Didi-Huberman explains, a 'paradoxical "semiotics"' emerges, where 'that which is signified

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<sup>19</sup> Derrida, 'From Restricted to General Economy,' 339, 347, 342, 339.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 339. See also: Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard, and Lyotard* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 63-64; Krauss, 'Corpus Delicti,' 64.

<sup>22</sup> Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Didi-Huberman, 336, 307.

remains *unknown*,’ being ‘at once a sign of laceration and the laceration of the sign.’<sup>24</sup> The destabilising operation of *Documents*, he concludes, worked to ‘*exceed iconographical thought*’.<sup>25</sup>

In 2006, the exhibition catalogue of *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents* drew on both Krauss and Didi-Huberman to again identify the journal as ‘an active force’ that ‘undermined categories and the search for meaning’, working to ‘deny the symbolic function of aesthetic objects’.<sup>26</sup> Then in 2017, *Documents*’ criticality was once more defined in Derridean terms, this time as part of Linda Steer’s analysis of appropriated photographs in Surrealist periodicals. Identifying ‘redeployment of photographs’ as an operation that ‘highlights the instability and mutability of photographic meaning’ by exposing ‘the gap, to use Derridean terms, in photographic signification’, Steer singles out *Documents* – ‘a kind of photographic montage that brought together disparate images’ – as a text working ‘to disrupt the system of photographic representation’, unveiling the ‘undecidability’ of the sign.<sup>27</sup>

Repeatedly called upon as a deconstructionist tool, mobilised to re-interpret, retrospectively, the criticality of the avant-garde in deconstructionist terms, *Documents*, thus, has occupied a peculiar role in art historical discourse. The constrictions limiting these interpretations are the same as those restricting Derrida’s project at large, as identified by a number of noteworthy scholars: decontextualisation and dehistorisation. Working ‘from a conception of the text as existing within a hermetic, Alexandrian textual universe, having no connection with actuality’, Edward Said notes, ‘Derrida has chosen the lucidity of the undecidability in a text, so to speak, over the identifiable power of the text.’<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Frank Lentricchia writes: ‘deconstruction can show that representations are not and cannot be adequate to the task of representation, but has nothing to say about the social work that representation can and does do.’<sup>29</sup>

Correspondingly, being preoccupied with isolating the criticality of *Documents* within a textual terrain, delimiting its subversive work to an ability to sabotage stable signification, the deconstructive interpretation of the journal leaves unexamined critical effect of *unstable* but nonetheless *experienced* socio-cultural currencies the various signs reproduced in the journal carried in culture. The ‘social work’ of the sign is ignored, ‘the lucidity of the undecidability in a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 417.

<sup>26</sup> Ades and Bradley, 15, 14; Baker, ‘Doctrines,’ 39.

<sup>27</sup> Steer, 8, 1, 106, 51, 53.

<sup>28</sup> Said, 39-40, 214.

<sup>29</sup> Lentricchia, 50.

text' is prioritised over 'the identifiable power of the text'.<sup>30</sup> Once reinterpreted through a different theoretical and methodical framework, however, one that privileges a historicised understanding of the journal's avant-garde gestures, a different subversive strategy emerges across its pages. This is a critical heterogeneity played out not in an 'Alexandrian, textual universe, having no connection with actuality' but within and against the rich and messy complexities of culture, defined by Stuart Hall 'as a process, a set of practices (...) concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings (...) between the members of a society or group'.<sup>31</sup>

Peircean semiotics locates the process of semiosis in the social use of signs. Indeed, where the Saussurean model of the sign, which Derrida made it part of his critical task to destabilise, relies on a dualistic relation between signifier/signified, Peircean theory mobilises a different model altogether, adding a third element – *interpretation* – as a necessary condition for signification to take place. Peirce therefore envisions an infinite semiosis: a socio-historically embedded chain of interpretation and re-interpretation, a never-ending process of 'translation' where the use of signs adds to and alters their meaning, an operation that 'incorporates new elements and throws off old ones'.<sup>32</sup> The instability of meaning is thus relocated to the unfixed nature of use and interpretation: always changeable and questionable but nonetheless situated in a cultural context. To Peirce, then, historical context is not a source of unwarranted presence but the very terrain that keeps meaning-production malleable yet meaningful. For this reason, the art-historian-turned-visual-culture-theorist, Keith Moxey, has in his 1994 *The Practice of Theory* – exploring the fate of art historical interpretation in the aftermath of poststructuralism – hailed Peircean semiotics as being particularly well suited for 'historical interpretations that seek to understand the working of the sign within the entire spectrum of its cultural and social complexity'.<sup>33</sup>

Within the framework of visual culture studies, this spectrum is assumed to be an all-encompassing, inherently interdisciplinary *visuality*, inhabiting cultural processes and practices taken to be intrinsically bound up with meaning-production and discourses of power. Exceeding traditional categorisations, labels, and hierarchies, thus, the frame of visual culture forces all kinds of visual experiences to cohabit and intermingle – highbrow or lowbrow, exclusive or popular: advertisement, fine art, body ideals, architecture, moving images, political propaganda,

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<sup>30</sup> Said, 214; Lentricchia, 50.

<sup>31</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 2.222.

<sup>33</sup> Moxey, *The Practice of Theory*, 32.

medical imagery, etc. The Peircean model, applied within such understanding of *visuality*, therefore, has allowed for a focus on the aspects of representation left unexamined by the deconstructionist reading: namely, an analysis of how the various signs mobilised in *Documents* were *used* in the visual culture of interwar France and how the signification generated from such discursive usage helped to position the journal as an avant-garde text.

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The Third Republic, installed in the aftermath of the humiliating defeat against Prussia in 1871, was riddled with anxieties concerning the health, orderliness, and progress of the nation and its *citoyens*. The First World War, despite French victory in 1918, fundamentally exacerbated Third Republican fears. As a result, the interwar period witnessed a variety of attempts to exalt the nation and to trigger an aggrandising elevation of its self-image. These endeavours were orchestrated not only by the official establishment or by the numerous *ligues* and organisations cropping up, but by utopian modernist and avant-gardist movements too. Across the fifteen issues of *Documents* published between 1929-1931, a plethora of signs lodged within these long-standing anxieties, circulated widely in the visual culture of interwar France, were re-disseminated by the journal to critical effect. Radically repurposing charged motifs, fuelled by their repeated use in discourse, *Documents* strategically highlighted points of French fragility, critically negotiating a number of issues inhabiting anguished terrain in the interwar period: hygiene and the health of the nation; American dominance and the influx of Hollywood films; and the architectural stature of the capital, from the possible erection of skyscrapers to the seemingly deplorable state of built Paris.

As the first chapter of this thesis has demonstrated, the feeble health of the nation was a central concern of the Third Republic. Tuberculosis, the deadliest of illnesses, soon became an ‘obsessive’ question for the French establishment. Ground-breaking discoveries in bacteriology, led by France’s own Louis Pasteur, opened new paths of action, felt to be illuminated by seemingly irrefutable positivist promise. Indeed, once the primary vehicles of contagion were identified, anti-tuberculosis campaigns, meticulously disseminating pamphlets, posters, films, and brochures across the nation, firmly and repetitively framed the microbial enemies of the Third Republican organism: spittle, dust, and flies.

France's low birth rates amplified fears of a weakened nation. Emerging as the 'master pathology' of *dégénérescence*, the rising pronatalist movement grew popular and politically strong. At the heart of this discourse figured Adolphe Pinard whose *puériculture*, the science of rearing children, merged pronatalist maxims with eugenicist thought, proliferating in Europe across the first decades of the twentieth century. Significantly, France's first explicitly eugenic legislation, proposed in 1926 by Pinard, sought to impose mandatory premarital medical certificate to eliminate the births of 'monstruous' infants. In the visual culture of interwar France, thus, the motif of the *healthy child* became synonymous with glorified visions of a future France, regenerated and rigorously populated.

In *Documents*, anxieties around the frail health and strength of France were agitated. The microbial enemies of Third Republic – spittle, dust, and flies – were re-disseminated against the grain. The contagious threat they carried in culture, generated through repeated use in discourse, popular as well as political, was redirected, turned into a dissident weapon charged directly at the idealised, neatly pasteurised self-image of France. The Third Republic's pronatalist maxims too were subverted. In *Documents*, the well-disseminated motif of a healthy French child, signalling hopes of a soon-to-be recuperated, repopulated France, was swapped for a gloomier prognosis of the nation's future: a 'monstruous' one. Moreover, the French brand of eugenics – amalgamating pronatalist dictum with the aim to genetically improve the human species – was particularly targeted. Indeed, alongside the teratological illustrations of 'monstruous' infants reproduced in *Documents*, a scathing take-down of the eugenic rational appeared in print. The only thing that Francis Galton's theories had managed to demonstrate with certainty, Bataille explained, is that each of us, uniformly unable to meet the ultra-utopian ideals of eugenics, are, 'to a certain degree, a monster.'<sup>34</sup>

After the First World War, as the second chapter of thesis has illustrated, the power of America emerged as a new threat on the Third Republican radar. Despite victory in 1918, France had suffered more casualties than their allies. The material and financial blow of the hostilities severely reinvigorated fears of a weak France. In the interwar period, therefore, American ascendancy on the world stage was perceived to be inherently intertwined with French fragility. Hollywood, whose productions had begun to swamp French cinemas in the aftermath of the war despite repeated efforts to impede the influx, soon emerged as a pivotal signifier of increasing

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<sup>34</sup> Bataille, 'The Deviations of Nature'.

U.S. dominance. When talkies arrived from America towards the end of the twenties, therefore, the French reaction was far from faint.

To the Third Republican establishment, the novel sound technology elevated the threat posed by Hollywood. Without working translation methods in sight, English-speaking films, inundating Parisian cinemas, were framed as menacing mode of imperialism, invading France and diluting the dominance of its language and thought. The prevailing cinematic avant-garde was also provoked by the new format. With the genre-blurring inclusion of speech, a feature normally housed in the category of theatre, talking film was felt to threaten the artistic essence of cinema. Transgressing its medium-specific domain, the extra-cinematic excess of the talkie denoted a destabilisation of the long-fought-for avant-garde construction of cinema as an autonomous artform. Entering the French interwar debate on Hollywood talkies, *Documents* capitalised on the heightened currencies embedded in the motif. Subverting the well-promoted rationales of both the official Third Republic and the prevailing cinematic avant-garde, the dissident journal embraced the novel sound technology and the disruptive effects it enacted, identifying the talkie as a necessarily noisy antidote against a ‘narrow-minded’ modernity plagued by ‘seriousness, nobility, morality’.<sup>35</sup>

As indicated by the third chapter of this thesis, another motif denoting American ascendancy in the interwar period was the skyscraper. As the first tall towers begun to rise on the European continent, the French reception of skyscrapers, and accompanying debates around their possible construction in Paris, became increasingly infected, encompassing fears of a weakened national identity at a moment of particular French frailty. Indeed, to the politically powerful preservationist movement, excessive height was perceived as an incoherent incursion into the traditional urban fabric of *Vieux Paris* and therefore as a threat to the image and idea of the nation’s capital. At the same time, however, the French discourse on skyscrapers also inhabited modernist campaigners, promoting the urgent necessity of a skyscraper-clad capital. The primary interwar promoter of the Parisian skyscraper was Le Corbusier, whose 1925 Plan Voisin sought to raze the historic centre to the ground and erect in its place eighteen towers, each sixty stories high. Although, to Le Corbusier, the skyscraper always amounted to more than a pragmatic solution. Embedded within his Plan Voisin, lay a metaphysical statement, highly idealist in tone. Indeed, superimposing his Purist rhetoric, peddled since 1918, into the fabric of interwar Paris, Le Corbusier’s skyscraper-plan sought to create nothing less than a rational and geometrically

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<sup>35</sup> Leiris, ‘Talkie’; Leiris, ‘Fox Movietone Follies of 1929’.

ordered capital, that would produce, in turn, rational and geometrically ordered citizens dutifully obeying ‘the constant conditions of nature’.<sup>36</sup> In the interwar period, thus, the future of France was felt to hinge on the Parisian skyscraper: to some on its strict prohibition, to others on its immediate instalment.

When *Documents* turned to define the ‘Skyscraper’ in the ‘Critical Dictionary’, the discursive currencies looming within the motif were redeployed against the grain of both preservationist impresarios and Le Corbusier’s well-disseminated Purist dictate. Whilst embracing the skyscraper as a ‘modern and marvelous symbols’ embodying ‘one of the most important human constants’, thus countering conservationist campaigners, the journal’s dictionary entry subsequently turned to sabotage any lofty attempts at self-aggrandisement.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, exploiting the intimate relation that Le Corbusier assumed between the structure of the skyscraper and that of a perennial human nature, *Documents* repurposed the former’s Purist formula to decidedly anti-Purist ends: to expose a universal humanity marked not by rationality and geometric order but by inherent incoherence and violent urges towards ‘joyful demolition’.<sup>38</sup> The radical redefinition of the skyscraper was not the only critical incision into the fabric of interwar Paris enacted by *Documents*. On the contrary, roaming across a number of contested sites in the French capital – many of which encompassed official endeavours to rationalise Paris that, by the interwar period, had begun to malfunction or appear insufficient – the dissident journal foregrounded points of Parisian incongruence: irrational statuary, struggling sewers, outdated slaughterhouses, and seemingly indestructible slums of Saint-Merri.

These subversive gestures, staged *within* the visual culture of interwar France by the dissident journal *Documents*, thus not only sabotaged and disturbed attempts to heal or protect, glorify or idealise, elevate, exalt, or aggrandise – be that those of the official establishment or utopian modernists and avant-gardists. Accentuating moments of irreconcilable excess and contradiction lurking within the Third Republic – instances where the irrepressible reality of dirt, death, and destruction transgressed the neat boundaries of desired identities; painful junctures, that is, where the inherent incoherence, insufficiency, and irrationality of existence spilled over and breached the constricting categories of homogeneity – *Documents* exposed a counter-portrayal, radically heterogenous in nature.

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<sup>36</sup> Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, ‘Sur la Plastique,’ 48.

<sup>37</sup> Leiris, ‘Skyscraper’.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Once reinserted into the visual culture of interwar France and reinterpreted through Peircean semiotics, thus, a critical strategy very different from that identified by the deconstructionist interpretation of *Documents* has emerged. This is a strategy that did not sabotage meaning-production but one that subversively participated in such cultural processes. This is a strategy whose criticality stemmed not from an unveiling of the ‘undecidability’ of signs or a ‘reduction of meaning’ but, on the contrary, from radical re-dissemination of the heightened meaning those signs carried in culture. Diffusing motifs that troubled topical Third Republican anxieties – tuberculosis microbes, monstrous children, Hollywood talkies, and American skyscrapers; defunct sewage systems, slaughterhouses, statutory programmes, and Parisian slums – *Documents* prodded French wounds as part of a critical recalibration of reality. The transgressive heterogeneity championed across the pages of the journal, thus, played out not on the level of language, as Derrida and his followers have argued, but on the level of experience, *within the fabric of life*. Signs, wrapped up in and charged by their use in such anguished discourses, were strategically redeployed to expose a decidedly deglorified and incongruously heterogenous self-image: depasteurised and monstrous, excessive and Americanised, incoherent and inherently destructive; a base-reality, a base-France, inhabited by base-*citoyens*.

A further effect of this reinterpretation, of historicising the critical gesture of *Documents* by returning it to the messy lifeworld of interwar France, is the emergence, therefore, of an altered, less heroic image of the avant-garde gesture. Whilst the modernist narratives that Derrida’s intervention, and Krauss’ ‘formless’, effectively ruptured were unequivocally *heroic*, predicated on logocentric illusions of essence, authenticity, originality, the deconstructionist modelling of *criticality* was, to a certain extent, equally competent and complete in its gesture. Indeed, in art historical discourse, the deconstructionist image of the avant-garde that emerged in place of the outdated, modernist formulation portrayed an avant-garde capable of extreme things, capable of enacting – in the words of Bois and Krauss – a ‘splitting apart of meaning’ and a ‘wreckage of representation’.<sup>39</sup> The modernist heroic was displaced by a different kind of *postmodernist* heroic. This was one predicated not on logocentric narratives of presence, but on a ghostly ability to deal only in absences, to enact gestures that never participates or produces but only wrecks, never reconstructs but only deconstructs. By doing, it was un-doing. As Said notes, this ability is predicated on a form of deconstructionist displacement: ‘a conception of the text as existing within a hermetic, Alexandrian textual universe, having no connection with actuality’.<sup>40</sup> Through

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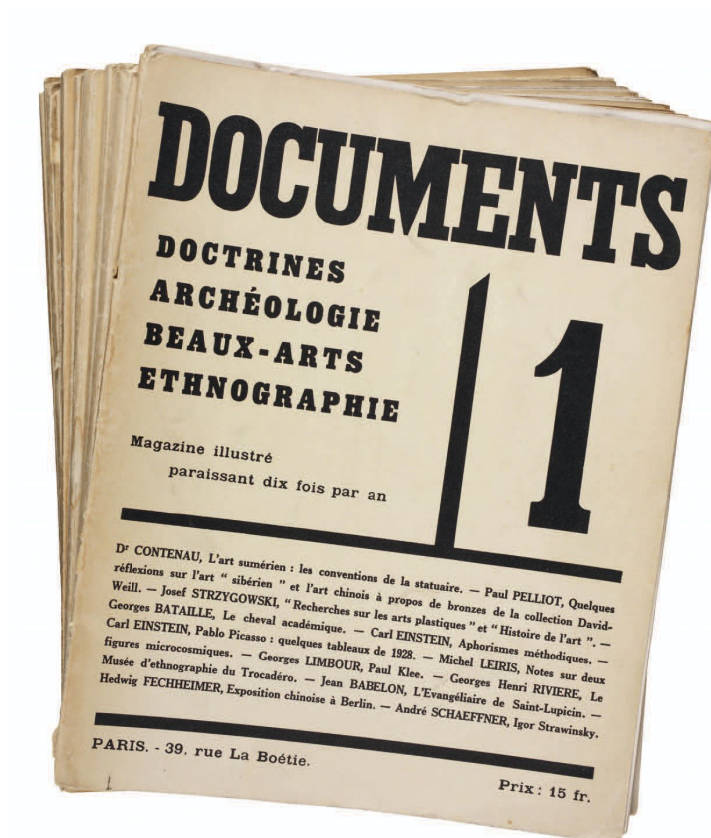
<sup>39</sup> Bois and Krauss, 245, 146.

<sup>40</sup> Said, 39-40.

a historicising grasp, however, the criticality of the avant-garde gesture is never complete, stainless, or fault-free. On the contrary, it is always porous and *in*complete, inevitably interwoven with and rubbing up against the socio-political discourses that surrounds it, shaped by and thus complicit with the cultural terrain within which it exists and takes form. Here, it is impossible to un-do without also doing.

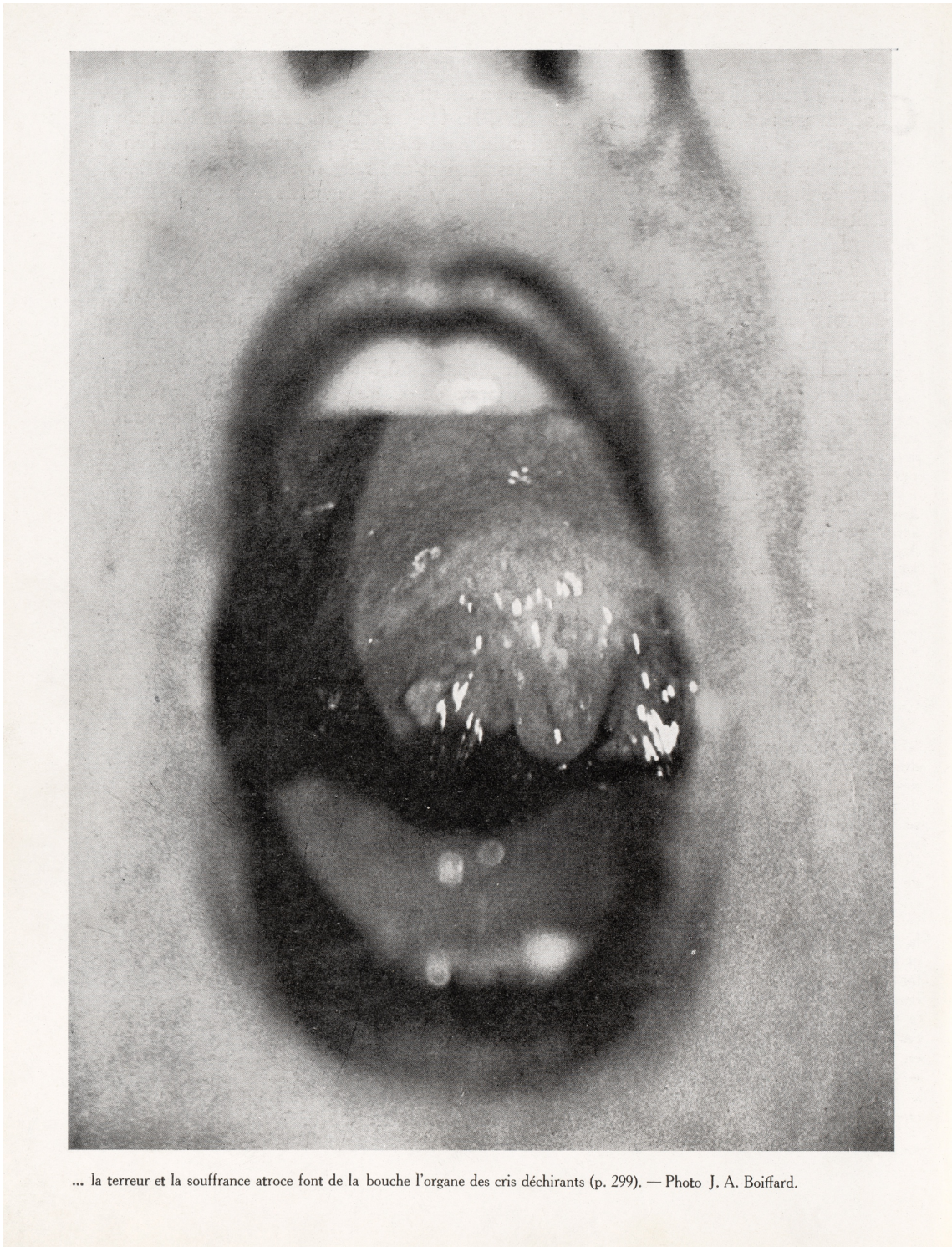
# Appendix: Figures

Figure 1



*Documents* (Paris, 1929–1931). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

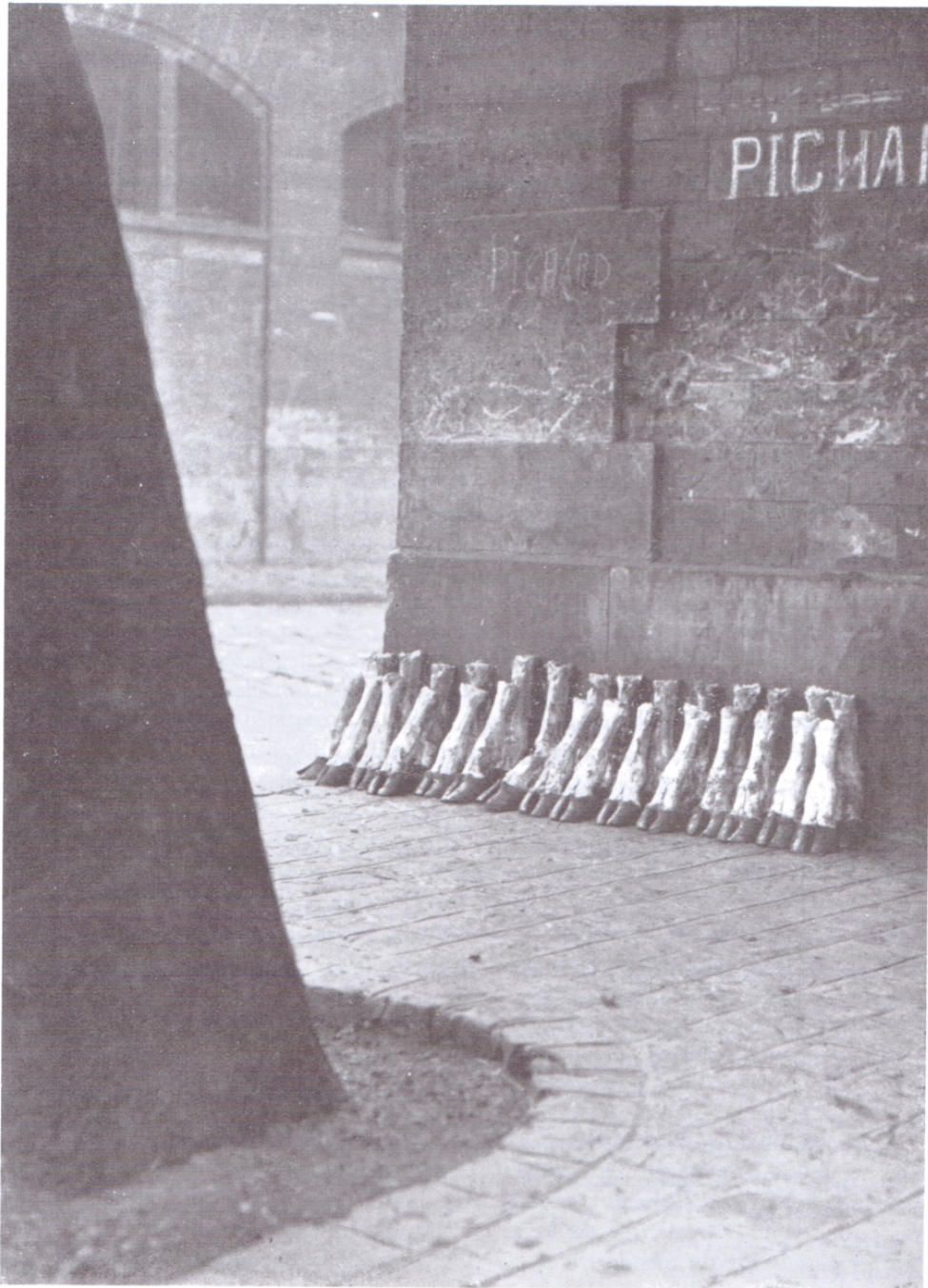
Figure 2



... la terreur et la souffrance atroce font de la bouche l'organe des cris déchirants (p. 299). — Photo J. A. Boiffard.

Jacques-André Boiffard. ... *la terreur et la souffrance atroce font de la bouche l'organe des cris déchirants*. Photograph illustrating Georges Bataille's dictionary-entry 'Bouche,' *Documents* (5:1930). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 3



Aux abattoirs de La Villette. — Photo. Eli Lotar.

Eli Lotar. *Aux abattoirs de la Villette*. Photograph illustrating Bataille's dictionary-entry 'Abattoir,' *Documents* (6:1929).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 4

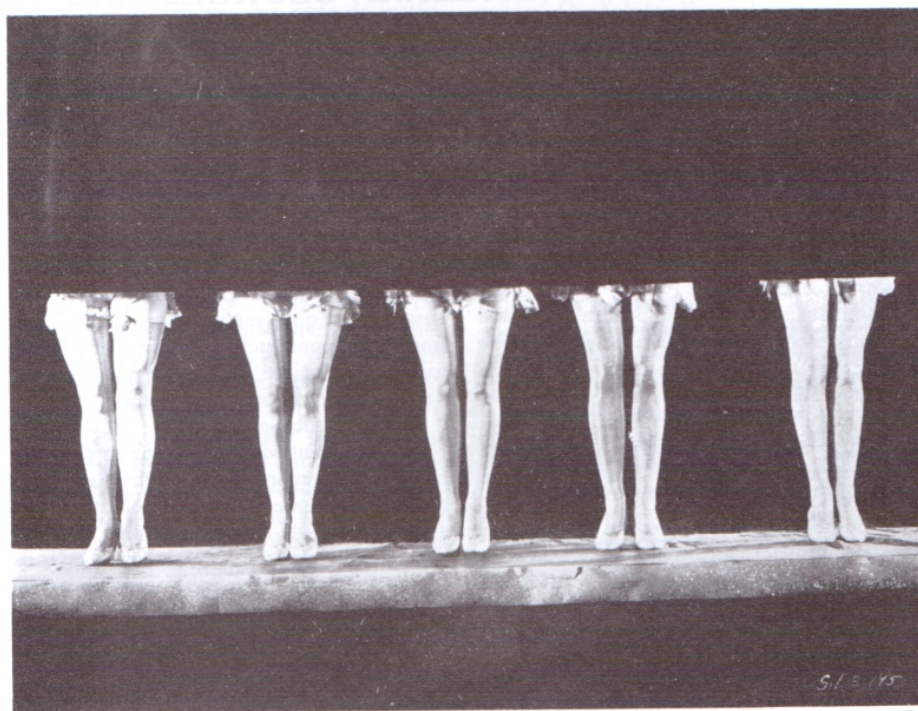


Photo Fox-Film

*FOX FOLLIES* : le nouveau film parlant qui passera prochainement au Moulin Rouge et dont nous donnerons un compte rendu dans le numéro suivant.

*'FOX FOLLIES : le nouveau film parlant qui passera prochainement au Moulin Rouge et dont nous donnerons un compte rendu dans le numéro suivant.'* Still from *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929*. *Documents* (6:1929). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 5



Enfants de l'École de Bacouya, Bourail.  
(Albums de photographies de E. Robin, 1869-1871. — Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro.)

Ernest Robin. Photograph. *Documents* (4:1929). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 6

*Figure 6 has been removed due to Copyright restrictions.*

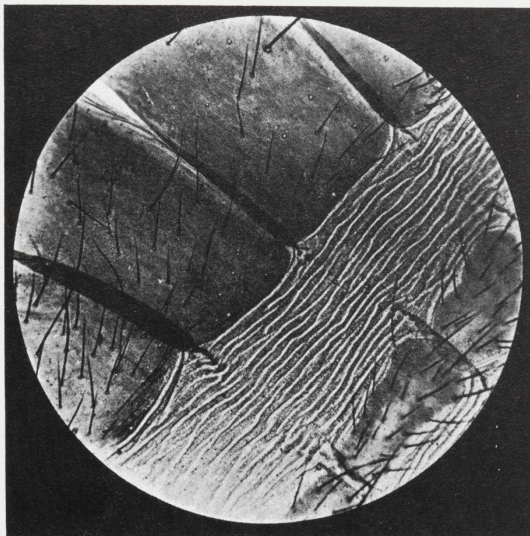
Pablo Picasso. *The Scallop Shell: 'Notre L'Avenir est dans l'Air'*. 1912. Enamel and oil on canvas.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 7



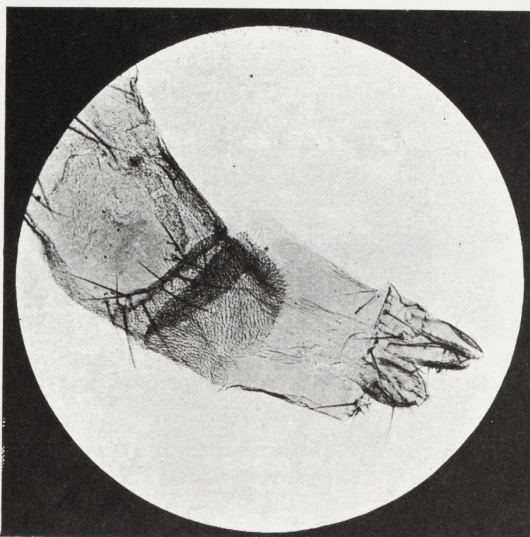
Jacques-André Boiffard. *Papier collant et mouches*. Photograph illustrating Georges Bataille's article 'L'Esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions,' *Documents* (8:1930). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 8



fétichiste aime une chaussure. Je ne crois pas introduire ici d'absurdes raffinements : je pense avec tout ce qu'il y a jamais eu jusqu'ici d'hommes écœurés d'une fuite assez veule, assez commune, devant les horreurs multiples qui composent le tableau de l'existence, que c'est seulement dans une obscurité complète qu'il est possible de rencontrer ce qu'on a toujours cherché.

C'est la volonté soudaine, intervenant comme un coup de vent nocturne qui ouvre une fenêtre, de vivre, même seulement une ou deux petites minutes, en soulevant tout à coup les tentures qui cachent ce qu'il faudrait à tout prix ne pas voir, c'est une volonté d'homme qui perd la tête, qui peut seule permettre d'affronter brusquement ce que tous les autres fuient. *L'esprit moderne n'a*



MOUCHE-DÉTAILS (GROSSISSEMENTS : 27 (EN HAUT) ET 47 (EN BAS) DIAMÈTRES). — PHOTOS DE L'INSTITUT DE MICROGRAPHIE.

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L'Institut de Micrographie. *Mouche-détails* (grossissements : 27 (en haut) et 47 (en bas) diamètres). Micrographs illustrating Georges Bataille's article 'L'Esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions,' *Documents* (8:1930). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 9



Regnault, *Les écarts de la nature*, 1775. — Cabinet des Estampes.

Nicolas-François and Geneviève Regnault. *Les Écarts de la nature*. 1775.  
Illustrating Bataille's essay 'Les écarts de la nature,' *Documents* (2:1930).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 10



Regnault, *Les écarts de la nature*, 1775. — Cabinet des Estampes.

Nicolas-Francois and Geneviève Regnault. *Les Écarts de la nature*. 1775. Illustrating Bataille's essay 'Les écarts de la nature,' *Documents* (2:1930). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 11



Regnault, *Les écarts de la nature*, 1775. — Cabinet des Estampes. (Reproduction d'une cire du Cabinet Pinson, aujourd'hui au Muséum d'histoire naturelle).

Nicolas-François and Geneviève Regnault. *Les Écarts de la nature*. 1775. Illustrating Bataille's essay 'Les écarts de la nature,' *Documents* (2:1930). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 12



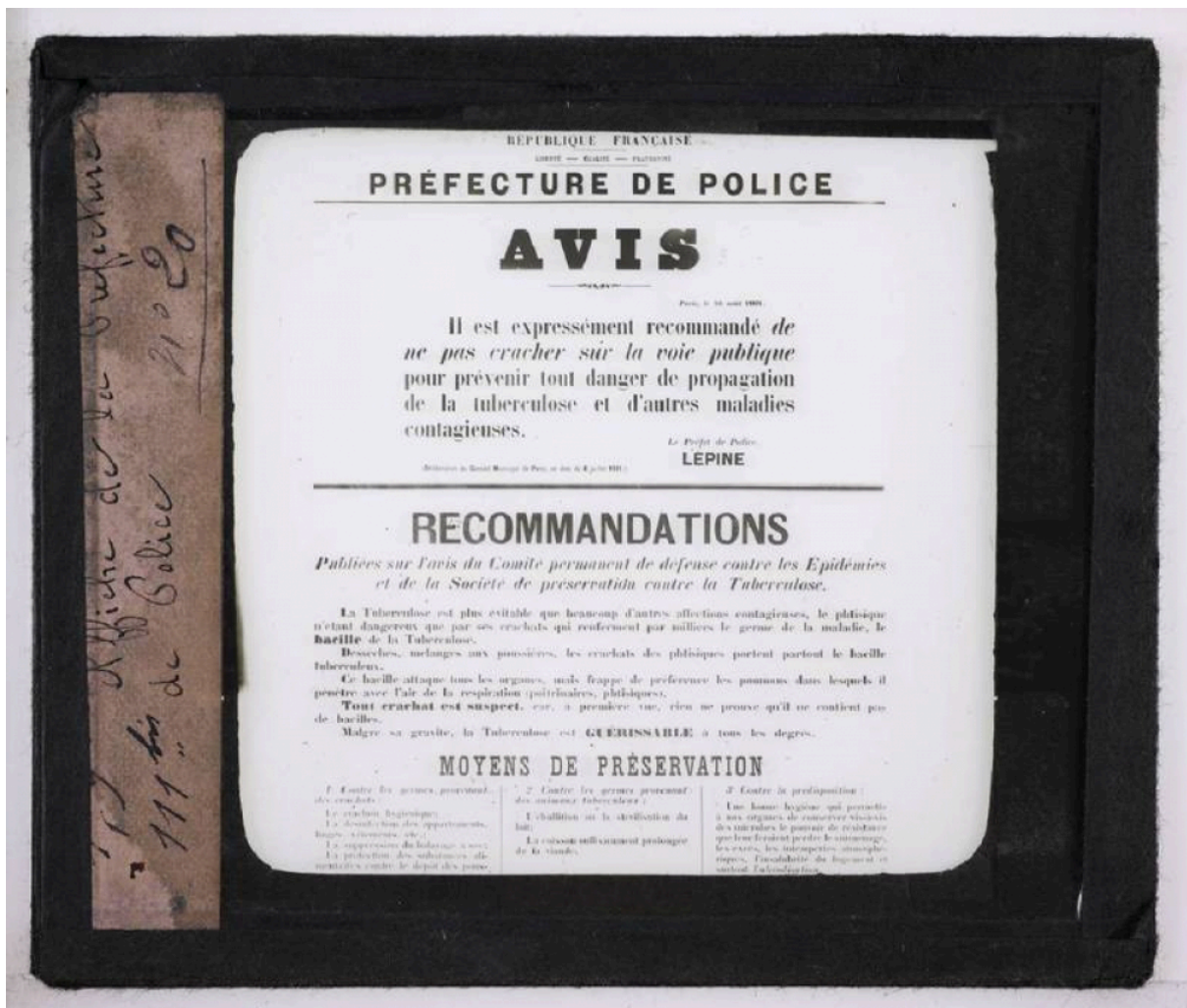
F. Galais. *Un Grand Fléau*. *LA TUBERCULOSE*. 1918. Poster. Commission américaine de préservation contre la tuberculose en France. Bibliothèque municipale de Rouen.

Figure 13



*Lait stérilisé de la Ferme des Aigles*. 1894. Poster. Imprimerie Chaix (Ateliers Chéret), Paris.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 14



La Tuberculose. Affiche de la préfecture. 1903. Le Musée National de l'Éducation.

Figure 15



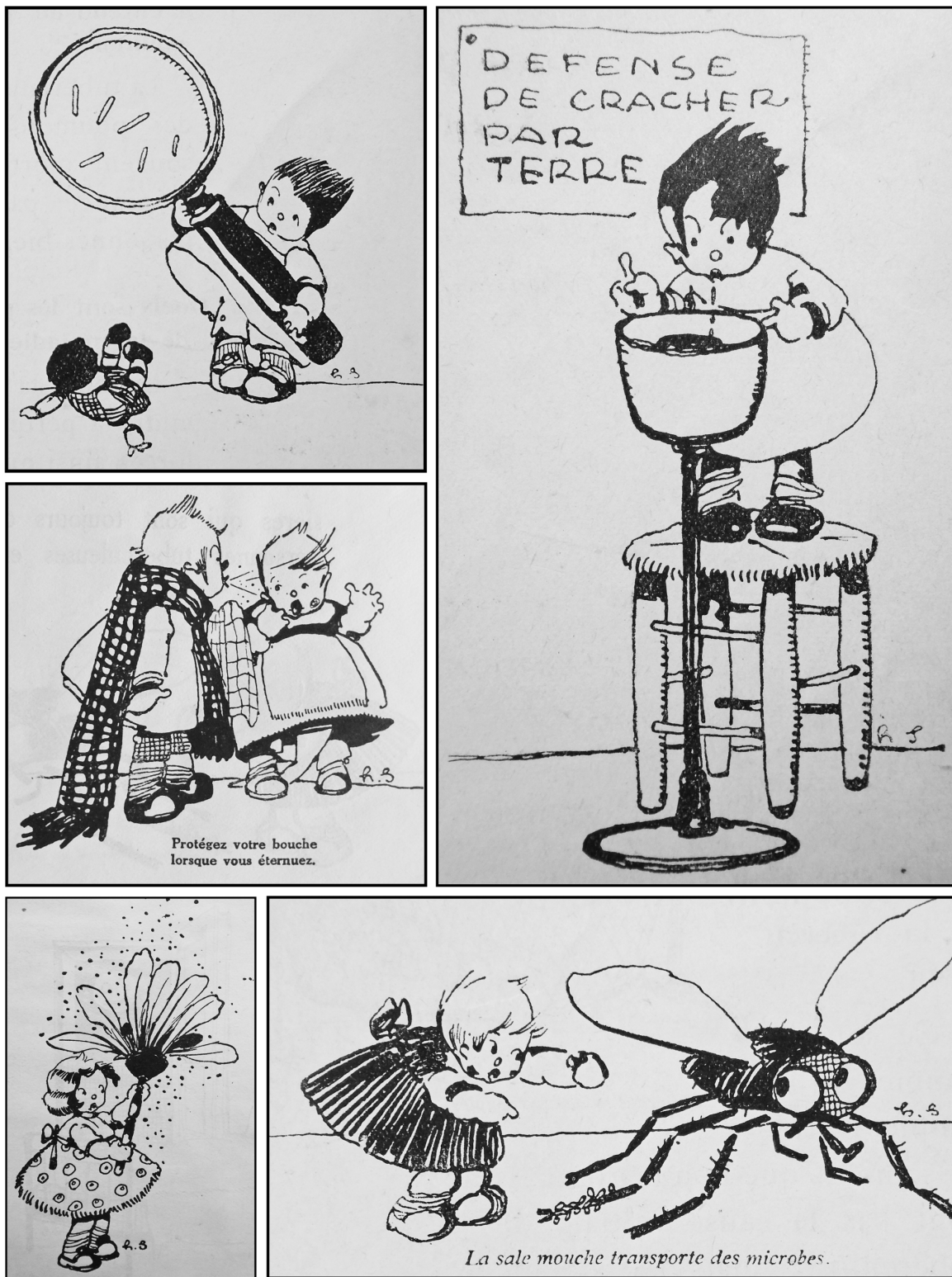
'Ne crachez jamais ailleurs que dans un crachoir'. Postcard.  
Société de Préservation contre la Tuberculose par l'Éducation Populaire. 1903.  
Collection Guy et Marie-José Pallardy, Biu Santé, Paris.

Figure 16



Georges Capon. 2 Fléaux: *Le Boche, La Tuberculose*. 1917. Poster. Commission américaine de préservation contre la tuberculose en France. Bibliothèque municipale de Rouen.

Figure 17



Didactic drawings warning against the tuberculosis microbe and its primary modes of transmission: spittle, dust, and flies (details). Illustrations by H. Stéphany. *Aux enfants de France*. 1918. Pamphlet. Commission américaine de préservation contre la tuberculose en France. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 18



Armand Rapeño. *LA SALE MOUCHE EST L'UN DES PLUS GRANDS ENNEMIS DES BÉBÉS*. 1917-1920.  
Poster. Bureau des Enfants, Croix-Rouge Américaine. Bibliothèque municipale de Rouen.

Figure 19

# COMBATTEZ LA TUBERCULOSE

## COMMENT ELLE SE PROPAGE



Crachats et postillons



Poussières respirées ou avalées



Objets portés à la bouche

### LES ALLIÉS DE LA TUBERCULOSE



Intemperance.



Sarmentage.



Fenêtres fermées.



Locaux sales et poussiéreux

### LES RAVAGES DE LA TUBERCULOSE COMPARÉS A CEUX DES AUTRES MALADIES



**VOUS POUVEZ & DEVEZ  
ÉVITER LA TUBERCULOSE**

*UN décès sur HUIT est dû à la Tuberculose.*  
*La Tuberculose est un péril national*  
*La Combattre est un devoir patriotique.*  
*La Tuberculose peut et doit être vaincue.*  
*les Pouvoirs publics et les initiatives privées*  
*ont engagé la lutte contre ce mal.*  
*Soutenez-les; Aidez-les.*

### LES ENNEMIS DE LA TUBERCULOSE



Le Medecin.



Soleil et Grand air.



Repos.



Nourriture saine.

## PRÉCAUTIONS QU'UN TUBERCULEUX DOIT PRENDRE



Recueillir et détruire ses crachats.



Protéger sa bouche en toussant ou éternuant.



Couverts et ustensiles à soi.



Dormir seul.

# COMBATTEZ LA TUBERCULOSE

DEVAMBEZ IMP. PARIS      COMMISSION AMÉRICAINE DE PRÉSERVATION CONTRE LA TUBERCULOSE EN FRANCE      BUREAU DE LA TUBERCULOSE, CROIX-ROUGE AMÉRICAINE.      VISA N° 10468.

Combatez la tuberculose, comment elle se propage. c. 1918. Poster. Commission Américaine de Préservation contre la Tuberculose en France. Bibliothèques spécialisées de la Ville de Paris.

Figure 20



*Une leçon anti-tuberculeuse aux adultes : faut pas cracher par terre c'est défendu par .... La Vie Saine (March-April, 1923).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.*

Figure 21



*Le danger des mouches. La Vie Saine* (August 1926). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 22



**PROTÉGEZ LES NOURRISSONS  
CONTRE LES CHALEURS  
ET LES MOUCHES**

Pour les nourrissons, et particulièrement pour ceux qui ne sont pas allaités au sein, les chaleurs sont redoutables. Durant les chaleurs, les affections du tube digestif subissent une recrudescence marquée. Or, c'est à des affections du tube digestif que succombe plus du tiers des nourrissons.

**POUR METTRE LES ENFANTS A L'ABRI DES AFFECTIONS DU TUBE DIGESTIF DURANT LES CHALEURS :**

- 1° On doit éviter de sevrer complètement les enfants nourris au sein
- 2° Si l'allaitement artificiel s'impose, il faut faire bouillir le lait aussitôt que possible après la traite ou avoir recours aux divers laits stérilisés après avis du médecin.
- 3° Tous les objets utilisés pour l'allaitement; biberons, tétines, casseroles, marmites, verres, cuillers, doivent être nettoyés à l'eau froide d'abord puis stérilisés à l'eau bouillante. Tous les objets ne doivent être maniés qu'avec des mains très propres.

Les mouches transportent parfois des microbes dangereux, il faut donc les détruire et en tous cas empêcher qu'elles contaminent le lait ou approchent de l'enfant. Dès qu'un enfant présente des troubles digestifs il faut sans délai appeler le médecin, et en attendant son arrivée, on ne lui donnera que de l'eau bouillie pure.

Affiche éditée par le Ministère du Travail, de l'Hygiène, de l'Assistance et de la Prévoyance sociales  
Office National d'Hygiène sociale, à Paris, 26, B<sup>o</sup> de Vaugirard  
Comité National de l'Enfance, à Paris, 37, Avenue Victor Emmanuel III

*Protégez les nourrissons contre les chaleurs et les mouches. La Vie Saine (October 1928).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.*

Figure 23

7<sup>e</sup> Année. — N° 68 Paraissant tous les mois Mars 1929

La Tuberculose atteint le riche et le pauvre. Tous, selon nos moyens contribuons à la combattre

# La Vie Saine

ORGANE POPULAIRE  
DU COMITÉ NATIONAL DE DÉFENSE CONTRE LA TUBERCULOSE  
*Reconnu d'Utilité Publique*

Aidez-nous à vous préserver, vous et vos enfants contre la Tuberculose !

— — 69-04 Com. **PARIS, 66 bis, Rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, PARIS (6<sup>e</sup>)** Compte Chèques Postaux : 511 - 39

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Luclen VIBOREL.

**Membres :**  
M<sup>me</sup> la Comtesse de SAINTE-ALDEGONDE, M<sup>me</sup> BOAS DE JOUVENEL, M<sup>me</sup> PAUL DUPUY, M<sup>me</sup> MAUPOLL, MM. le Professeur A. CALMETTE, GEORGES-RIEGER, le Professeur LÉON BERNARD, le Docteur O. ARNAUD, L. ARMBRUSTER, LOUIS BRÉQUET, le Docteur A. BRUNO, le Docteur CAVAILLON, le Docteur DEQUIRE.

---



Balayer à sec et cracher à terre, c'est propager la Tuberculose

*Balayer à sec et cracher à terre, c'est propager la Tuberculose. La Vie Saine (March 1929).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.*

Figure 24

## Une Maladie meurtrière



C'est toujours pénible d'être malade. Rester au lit, avoir la fièvre, prendre des médicaments, renoncer aux jeux, manquer l'école, inquiéter ses parents, tout cela est dur; et il y a encore quelque chose de plus pénible, c'est de voir souffrir ceux qu'on aime.

Le Microbe, voilà l'ennemi !

Heureusement, beaucoup de maladies ne sont pas très graves et les médecins savent les soigner et nous en guérir; beaucoup n'atteignent pas à la fois un grand nombre de personnes.


Mais la maladie dont nous voulons parler est terrible, elle est meurtrière, elle est contagieuse, c'est un véritable fléau. Vous connaissez son nom: c'est la **tuberculose**, qui enlève à notre beau et cher pays plus de **100.000 Français** tous les ans.

— 3 —



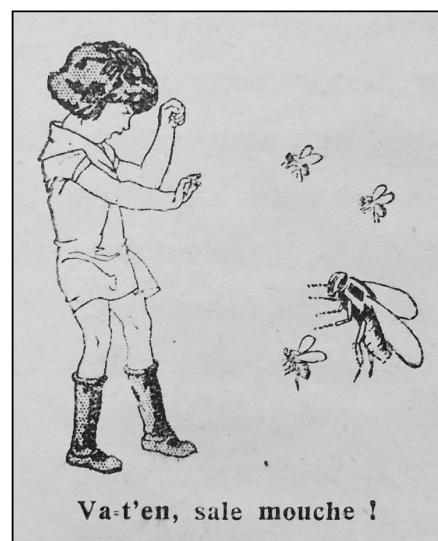
## L'Ennemi invisible

La Tuberculose est le plus souvent une maladie des poumons. On ne parlait guère autrefois que des poitrinaires; mais la tuberculose peut attaquer les os, les articulations, les ganglions, le cerveau et ses méninges. Pendant bien longtemps, on a ignoré sa cause; on essayait de soulager et de soigner les malades, on ne réussissait pas à les guérir. On voyait ces pauvres



Mettez votre mouchoir devant votre bouche, lorsque vous toussiez ou éternuez.

— 4 —



Didactic drawings warning against the tuberculosis microbe and its primary modes of transmission: spittle, dust, and flies (details). Illustrations by P. Marin. *Préservez notre santé*. 1930. Pamphlet. Comité national de défense contre la tuberculose. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 25



Un “ Démonstrateur parisien ” vend le Timbre antituberculeux dans la journée du 14 décembre 1930.

*Un ‘Démonstrateur parisien’ vend le Timbre antituberculeux dans la journée du 14 décembre 1930. Photograph. La 3<sup>e</sup> campagne nationale du timbre antituberculeux (Paris: Le comité national de défense contre la tuberculose, 1930). Bibliothèque nationale de France.*

Figure 26

**Les Campagnes du Timbre Antituberculeux  
EN FRANCE**

Pour la 4<sup>e</sup> fois, le Comité National de Défense contre la Tuberculose va vendre le Timbre antituberculeux sur tout le territoire français.

Il y eut d'abord deux essais :

En 1925, on vendit le Timbre "L'Infirmière" en Meurthe-et-Moselle, il produisit : 265.775 fr. 70.

En 1926, on vendit le Timbre "Laënnec" dans 9 départements, il produisit : 2.250.502 fr. 20.

En 1927, première Campagne Nationale dans 88 départements, le "Baiser au Soleil" donne 13.620.457 fr.

En 1928, deuxième Campagne Nationale dans 92 départements, le Timbre "Vivre" donne 18.286.140 fr. 90.

En 1929, troisième Campagne Nationale dans 93 départements, le Timbre "Lumière" a donné 21.904.237 fr. 40.

**AU TOTAL 52 MILLIONS DE FRANCS**

En Décembre 1930, on vendra le Timbre "Propreté" Vous savez comment l'on procède :

Dans chaque département se forme un Comité Central en principe sous l'égide de l'Association d'Hygiène Sociale, affiliée au Comité National de Défense contre la Tuberculose.

Le Comité Central organise la vente en créant des Comités locaux autant que possible 1 par commune. C'est du nombre de Comités locaux que dépend le succès de la vente. Après celle-ci, le Comité Central réunit toutes les sommes recueillies ; il en déduit les frais et partage les bénéfices : 95 % restent dans le département, 5 % vont au Comité National.

Organisez-vous, faites en Novembre la propagande la plus active, et, en Décembre, vendez partout le Timbre antituberculeux.

*Que tous achètent la vignette de salut !*

---

La Tuberculose n'est pas héréditaire mais contagieuse et contractée ordinairement dès l'enfance.

La Tuberculose n'est pas contagieuse par un seul contact, mais par des contacts répétés, donc la Tuberculose peut être évitée.

DÉPARTEMENT DE

Vignette de salut, ce n'est pas trop dire ; car ce petit Timbre de Deux sous va partout rappelant des millions de fois

**les Moyens de lutter contre la Tuberculose**

Il dit entre autres choses :

Le crachat et la salive contiennent les germes de la maladie et cracher partout propage la Tuberculose !

**GUERRE AU CRACHAT !**

Veillez à ce que les enfants ne se servent pas d'objets sur lesquels il peut y avoir de la salive des autres.

La poussière, la malpropreté, les logements obscurs et mal aérés propagent les maladies et surtout la tuberculose.

Le Grand Air et le Soleil, le repos gradué, une alimentation bien comprise vous guériront plus sûrement que les drogues.

La propreté du corps est nécessaire à la santé.

**Connaître sa maladie c'est déjà la combattre.**

Il conseille aussi d'aller au Dispensaire dont l'adresse est donnée dans toutes les Mairies.

**QUEL EST LE ROLE DU DISPENSAIRE ?**

Il examine les malades afin de s'assurer s'ils sont tuberculeux ou non :

Il enseigne les mesures à prendre pour que le malade ne transmette pas sa maladie à sa famille.

Il fait visiter le malade, à domicile, par l'infirmière-visiteuse qui fait appliquer les conseils du médecin, améliore l'hygiène du foyer et protège les enfants de la contagion ;

Il enseigne et surveille la cure à domicile pour ceux qui ne peuvent aller au sanatorium ou à l'hôpital.

Le Timbre Antituberculeux vous rappelle tout cela. Achetez-le, faites-le acheter autour de vous et vous donnerez à tous la santé et le bonheur.

**La Tuberculose est guérissable ; plus le mal est pris au début plus les chances de guérison sont grandes.**

La 4<sup>e</sup> Campagne nationale du timbre antituberculeux: 1930-1931. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 27

20 NOVEMBRE 1926 L'ILLUSTRATION



Théo. ROGER

*Il vaut mieux prévenir que guérir*

et, pour cela, il importe de vivre dans un milieu sain.

L'Aspirateur LUX est indispensable pour le nettoyage des appartements, car il supprime les poussières et les microbes qu'elles propagent. Son tampon-filtre arrête et stérilise 99 % des bactéries contenues dans l'air. (Certificat du Laboratoire d'Hygiène de la Ville de Paris.) Il purifie et parfume l'atmosphère. (Nombreuses références Médicales et privées.)

Démonstration à domicile en France et en Algérie et Catalogue sur demande

# Electro-Lux

Société Anonyme au Capital de 5.000.000 de fr.

24, rue du Mont-Thabor - PARIS

USINE A COURBEVOIE (Seine)

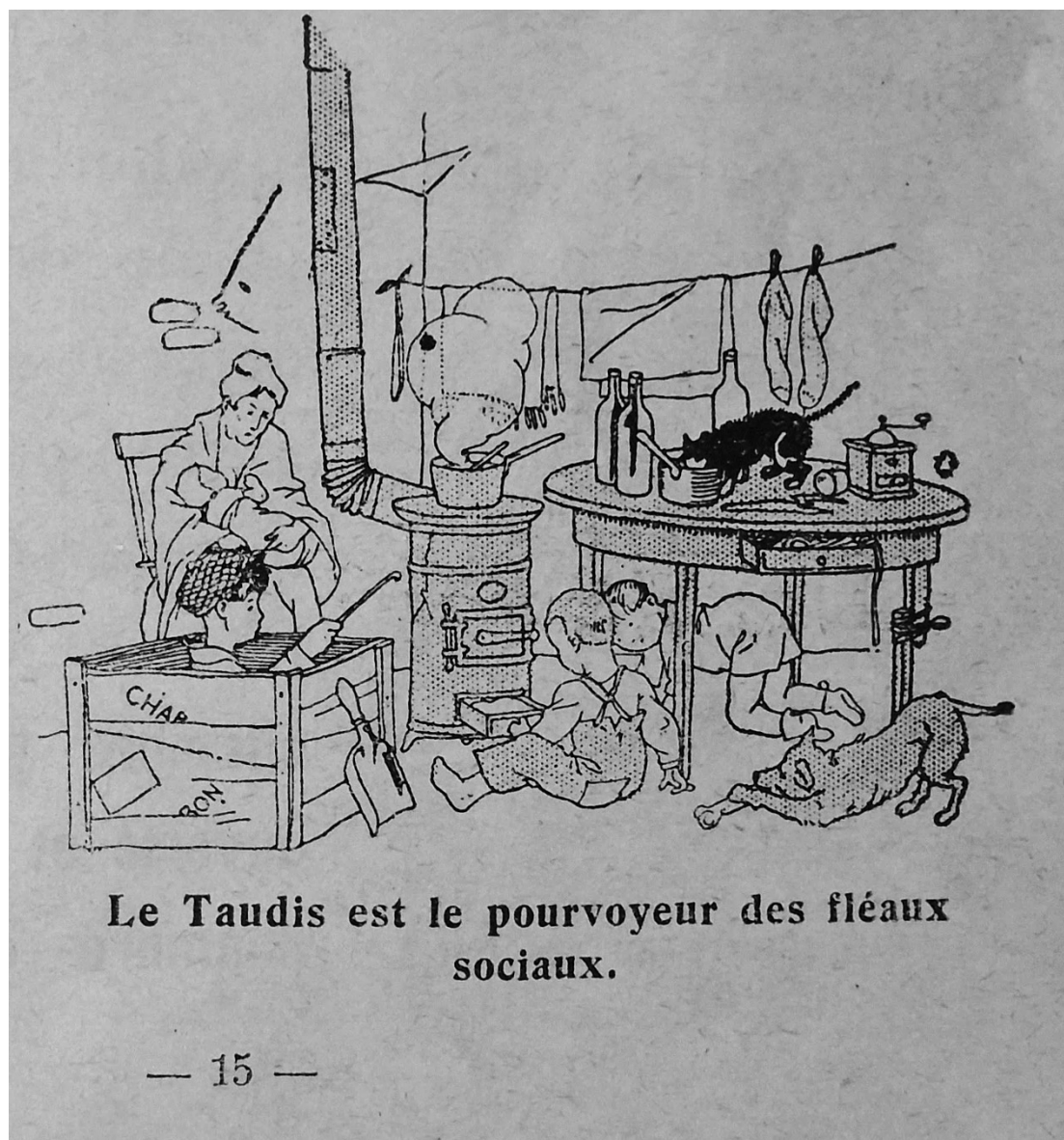


ALGER — AMIENS — ANGERS — ANNECY — BORDEAUX — DIJON  
BOURG. — BRESSE — CHALON-SUR-SAONE — CLERMONT-FERRAND  
GRENOBLE — LE HAVRE — LILLE — LYON

MARSEILLE — METZ — MONTPELLIER — NANTES — NEVERS — NICE  
ORLÉANS — PERPIGNAN — RENNES — ROUEN — SAINT-ÉTIENNE  
STRASBOURG — TOURS — VALENCE

Advertisement for Electro-Lux vacuum cleaner. *L'Illustration* (20 November 1926).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 28



*Le Taudis est le pourvoyeur des fléaux sociaux.* Illustrations by P. Marin. *Préservons notre santé.* 1930. Pamphlet. Comité national de défense contre la tuberculose. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 29

22 JUNE 1929

L'ILLUSTRATION

ANNONCES — XIX

**TUE** mouches  
moustiques  
mites  
puces  
fourmis  
punaises  
et cafards

*Le Protecteur!*

Les mouches et moustiques, déjà incommodants par leur bourdonnement obsédant et leur piqûre irritante sont dangereux par les microbes qu'ils transportent et propagent. Choisissez un protecteur sûr : le Flit. Flit tue tous les insectes malpropres et dangereux. Il détruit leurs œufs en fouillant les fentes qui les abritent. Inoffensif pour l'homme. Ne tache pas. En usage dans le monde entier.

*Vaporisez*

**FLIT**

**Ralliez-vous à la légion Flit!**

**FLIT**

DÉTRUIT  
Mouches  
Moustiques  
Mites  
Fourmis, Punaises  
Cafards  
Pucès  
leurs larves e

*Bidon jaune  
bande noire*

on les aura...

... on les a!

Advertisement for fly-deterrent, FLIT. *L'Illustration* (22 June 1929).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 30

**halte à la  
sale mouche!**

porteuse  
de  
germes  
dangereux

**LE  
FLY-TOX**  
*nuage destructeur infallible*  
de mouches, moustiques,  
mites, punaises, puces,  
poux, fourmis, cafards,  
guêpes, etc.

*est un combattant scientifique*

*Pulvérisé en fin brouillard, il se volatilise  
et va porter lui-même au loin, dans les  
recoins les plus inaccessibles, l'action  
puissante et purificatrice de son gaz subtil*

**sans danger  
pour l'homme  
et les animaux**

Litté en façon 1/4 de litre environ avec pulvérisateur à bouche  
et en bâton de 2 litres environ.  
Nous vendons également et recommandons notre pulvérisateur  
à main qui, plus puissant, économise le produit et décuple son  
efficacité.

Le FLY-TOX } 22, rue de Marignan, PARIS  
163, rue Jourdan, BRUXELLES  
6, rue Monge, ALGER  
9, via Lambrate, MILAN  
164, bd de la Gare, CASABLANCA  
68, bd Charner à SAIGON

fabrication française

35

Advertisement for fly-deterrent, FLY-TOX. *L'illustration* (11 June 1927).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 31



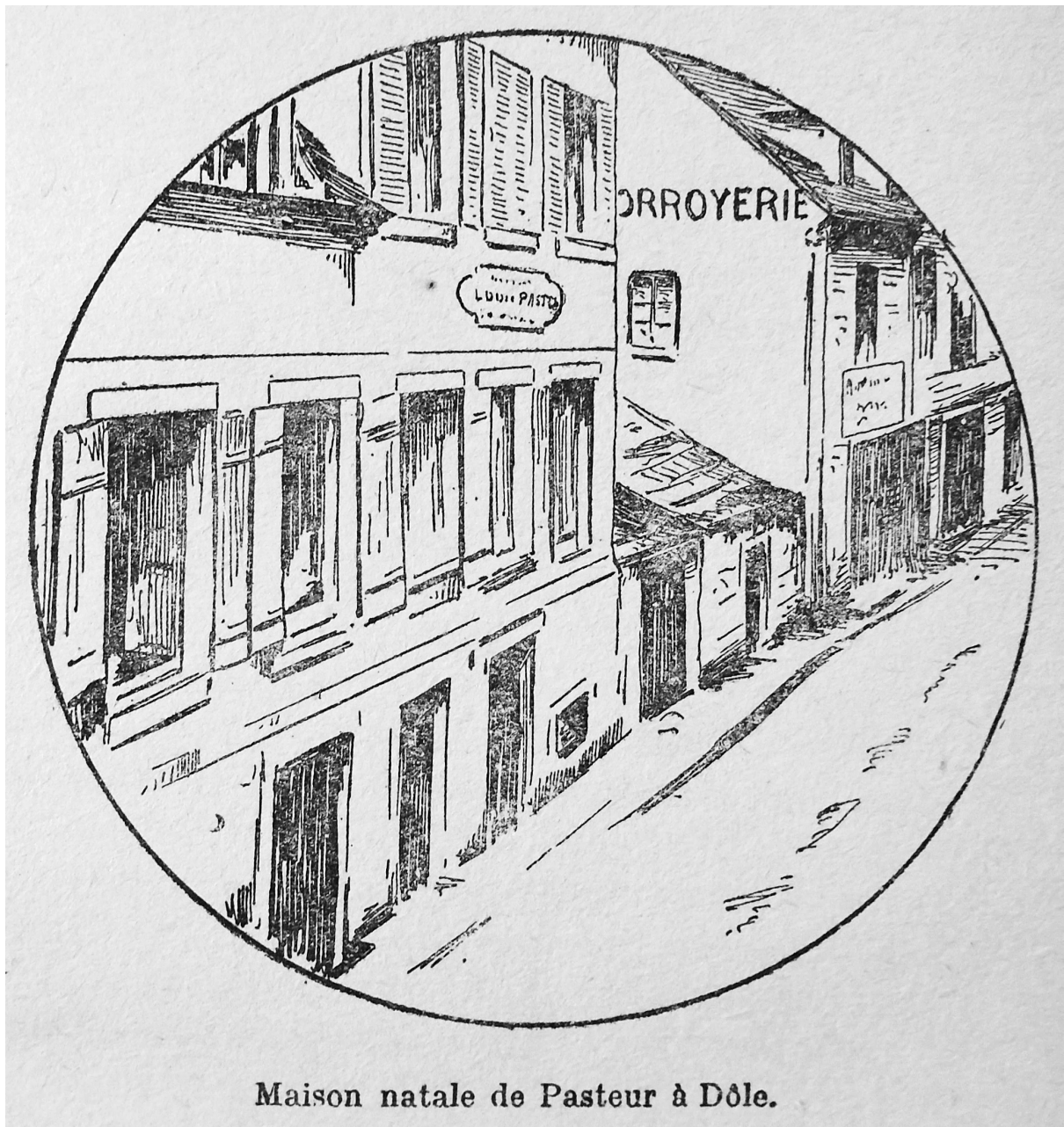
Advertisement for fly-deterrent, FLY-TOX. *L'Illustration* (27 July 1929).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 32



*Gardez ce teint de Jeune Fille.* c.1930. Advertisement for Palmolive.  
Bibliothèques spécialisées de la Ville de Paris.

Figure 33



*Maison natale de Pasteur à Dôle.* A. Lomont. *Pasteur : Sa vie, son oeuvre, ses continuateurs* (Paris: Libr. Gedalge, 1926).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 34



Leonetto Cappiello. *Ecrasez la tuberculose et sauvez l'enfance*. 1917. Poster.  
Commission Américaine de Préservation contre la Tuberculose en France. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 35



*Graine de Poilu*. c.1914–1918. Postcard.  
Bibliothèques spécialisées de la Ville de Paris.

Figure 36



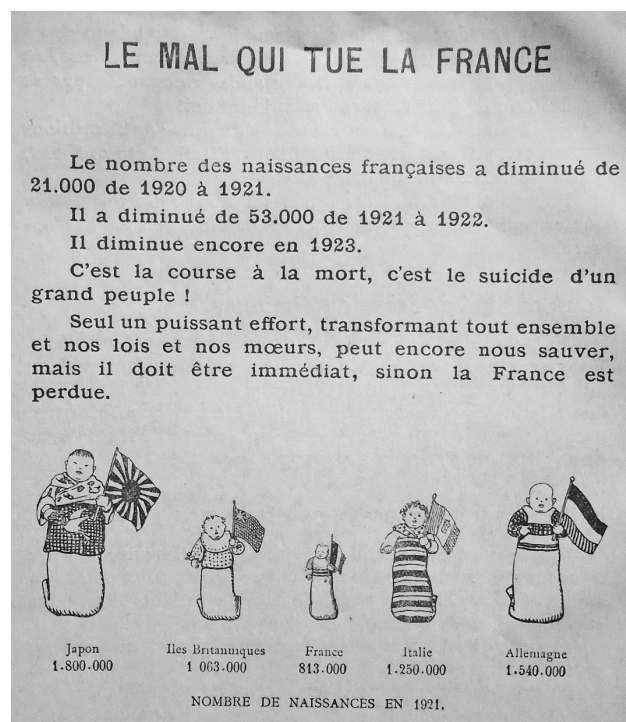
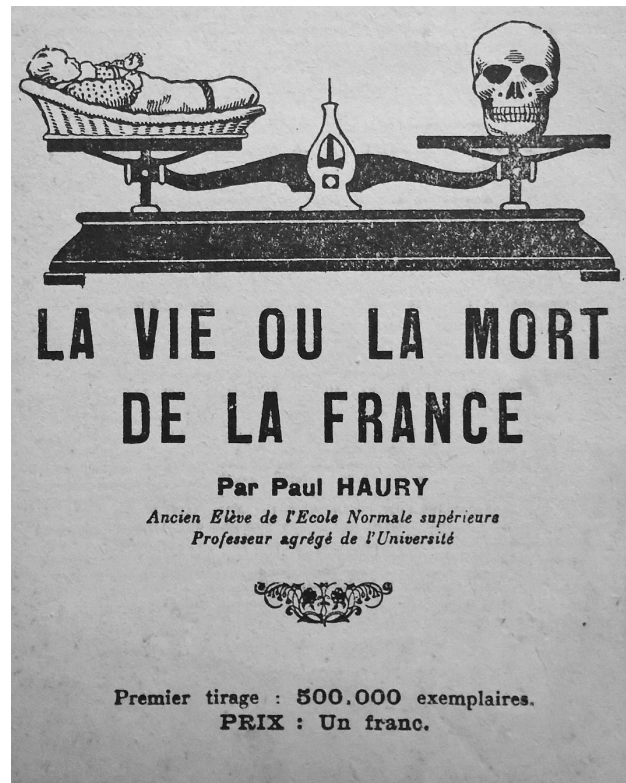
*Hélas ! J'arrive trop tard – Classe 1935. c.1915. Postcard. Musée national de l'Éducation.*

Figure 37



*Sans Enfants Aujourd'hui, Plus de France Demain!* 1920. Poster.  
Alliance Nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française.  
Bibliothèques spécialisées de la Ville de Paris.

Figure 38



Paul Haury. *La Vie ou La Mort de la France*.  
(Paris: Alliance Nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française, 1923).

Figure 39

**LA DÉPOPULATION**  
**C'EST LA RUINE DU PAYS,**  
L'ARRÊT DE LA PRODUCTION, L'AUGMENTATION DES IMPÔTS,  
LA VIE ENCORE PLUS CHÈRE.



**IL EST NÉ EN 1922 : 760.000 FRANÇAIS, 1.450.000 ALLEMANDS**  
1.160.000 Italiens, 1.990.000 Japonais. Nous avons 274.000 naissances de moins qu'en 1868.  
*Les Allemands clament chaque jour qu'ils prendront leur revanche quand notre dépopulation nous aura assez affaiblis.*

POUR ARRÊTER L'EFFONDREMENT DE LA FÉCONDITÉ FRANÇAISE :

**NOUS VOULONS UNE LÉGISLATION QUI ENCOURAGE LA NATALITÉ,**  
qui protège la famille nombreuse, notamment en relevant les allocations nationales à 360 francs au moins par enfant et par an, en généralisant les primes départementales à la natalité.

**NOUS VOULONS PAR DESSUS TOUT LE VOTE FAMILIAL, MESURE DE JUSTICE.**

**ÉLECTEURS :** Avant de voter jugez votre candidat non sur ses paroles, mais d'après sa vie familiale et d'après ses actes. Ne votez que pour celui qui s'engagera formellement à défendre les droits de la famille.

Il faut que tout Français puisse avoir des enfants, puisse les nourrir et les loger sans s'appauvrir; alors seulement seront assurées en France

**LA PAIX ET LA PROSPÉRITÉ**

Ne pas afficher sans autorisation de N° 10

PARIS, IMP. HENON.

**ALLIANCE NATIONALE**  
pour l'Accroissement de la Population française,  
10, Rue Vivienne, PARIS (2<sup>e</sup>)

*La dépopulation, c'est la ruine du pays.* c.1923. Alliance Nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française. Bibliothèques spécialisées de la Ville de Paris.

Figure 40



Didactic illustrations. Adolphe Pinard. *La Puériculture du premier âge*, 18<sup>th</sup> edition (Paris: A. Colin, 1934).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 41

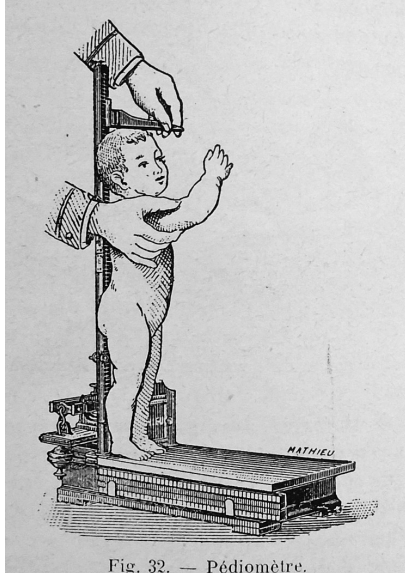


Fig. 32. — Pédiomètre.



Fig. 25. — Une famille d'enfants rachitiques. Ils ont reçu prématurément de la panade à l'eau. Tous ces enfants ont les os des jambes incurvés. Ils ont reçu de la panade tous les jours depuis l'âge de 3 mois. La seule qui ait les jambes droites (2<sup>e</sup> à gauche) a été élevée à la campagne par une nourrice qui lui donnait du bon lait de vache.

Gaston Variot, *La Puériculture pratique, ou l'Art d'élever les enfants du premier âge*, 5th edition (Paris: Octave Doin, 1930).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 42

14 MAI 1927 L'ILLUSTRATION XXIII



**Qualité** Le Savon Cadum est garanti rigoureusement pur. Préparé scientifiquement avec des produits de première qualité, il est adoucissant et n'irrite pas l'épiderme, tout excès de sels alcalins ayant été soigneusement éliminé.

**Économie** Le Savon Cadum est garanti parfaitement sec. Conservé plusieurs mois avant d'être mis en vente, il est exempt de toute humidité et dure deux fois plus longtemps que d'autres savons qui fondent rapidement. Il ne coûte que 2 frs

**Sécurité** Il est garanti que depuis quinze ans, le Savon Cadum n'a jamais varié dans sa fabrication. Achetez un Savon Cadum, appréciez-le, rachetez un pain plus tard, vous pouvez être sûr d'obtenir un savon identique au premier.

**Voilà pourquoi 40.000.000 de Savons Cadum sont vendus chaque année.**

Advertisement for Cadum Soap. *L'Illustration* (14 May 1927).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 43



Cliché publicitaire du film muet  
"Les nouvelles vierges" (p. 278)



Betty Compson dans le film parlant  
"Weary River" (p. 278)

*'Cliché publicitaire du film muet 'Les Nouvelles vierges'' and 'Betty Compson dans le film parlant 'Weary River''.  
Illustrating Leiris' dictionary-entry "Talkie," Documents (5:1929). Bibliothèque nationale de France.*

Figure 44



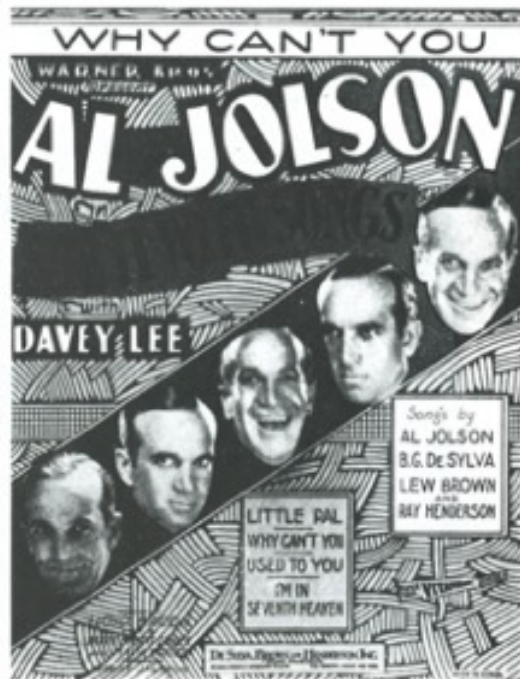
Adrien Barrère. 'À la Conquête du monde, 1894-19...'. c.1907. Advertisement for Pathé.

Figure 45



Promotional material for the French release of Fox' *Movietone Follies of 1929*.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 46



*Nouvelle film d'Al Jolson 'Say it with songs'*. Poster. *Documents* (4:1929). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 47



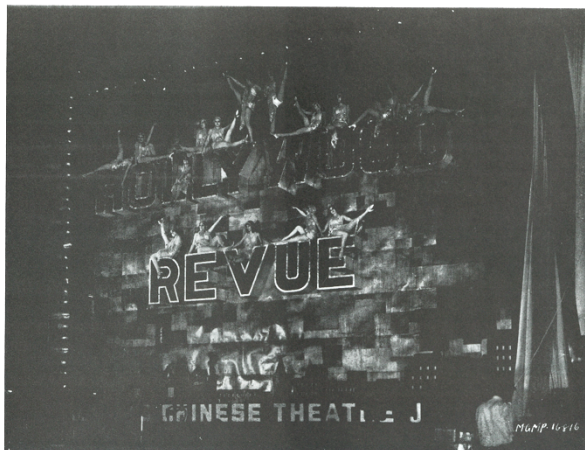
Bessie Love dans le film parlant "Broadway Melody"  
qui passera incessamment au Madeleine-Cinéma.



Enfants de l'École de Bacouya, Bourail.  
(Albums de photographies de E. Robin, 1869-1871. — Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro.)

Still from *Broadway Melody* and a late-nineteenth century photograph by Ernest Robin in the French colony of Nouvelle Calédonie. *Documents* (4:1929). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 48



Ouverture du film parlant et sonore "Hollywood revue", paraphasant les splendeurs de Hollywood.

#### LIEUX DE PÈLERINAGE : HOLLYWOOD

On se demande parfois, absolument déprimé, au sortir d'une occupation qui n'avait rien d'agréable (par exemple, sans parler de travailler, se raser, ranger ses affaires, se couper les ongles), quel est le prix d'efforts minuscules, dont on ose à peine parler, de peur d'être regardé avec dédain ainsi qu'une fourmi. Et alors on s'aperçoit que le seul prix est probablement de pouvoir constater, sans aucune erreur, que la partie (qu'on n'a d'ailleurs commencé que malgré soi) est perdue à l'avance, car même si l'on devait s'emparer du pouvoir de tout détruire et de tout construire à nouveau, on préférerait parfois tomber malade. En sorte que le prix, en fin de compte, doit être cette terrible maladie qui est probablement déjà réelle, au cours de laquelle les moindres hochets procurent autant de distractions. Car nous en sommes

encore au point, cela ne fait pas le moindre doute, où une activité quelconque n'a aucun autre but que de procurer quelque relâche, quelque répit au malheureux imbécile. Mais cela ne s'écrit plus par mépris, simplement par détresse, et parce que la faillite totale de l'activité humaine peut encore passer, aux yeux d'esprits sans police, sans plus pour une distraction.

Tout ceci pourrait bien faire comprendre pourquoi, actuellement, Hollywood est le nombril de la Terre, étant le seul endroit où l'on ne songe qu'à amuser le reste du monde, à fabriquer les vessies qui sont nos lanternes! Hollywood, en somme la ville pour vous faire sangloter ou rire aux larmes, la marchande de coups de revolvers, d'empoisonnements et de pillage de banque et, en général, de tout

280



Un des tableaux de "Hollywood revue".

Photo: Métro-Goldwyn

*'Ouverture du film parlant et sonore 'Hollywood revue', paraphasant les splendeurs de Hollywood'.*  
Stills from *Hollywood-Revue* illustrating Bataille's essay 'Lieux de pèlerinage : Hollywood,' *Documents* (5:1929).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 49



Promotional material for the French release of Fox' *Moulin Rouge* of 1929. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 50



Charlie Chaplin on the cover of *Le Film* (23 February 1919). La Cinémathèque française.

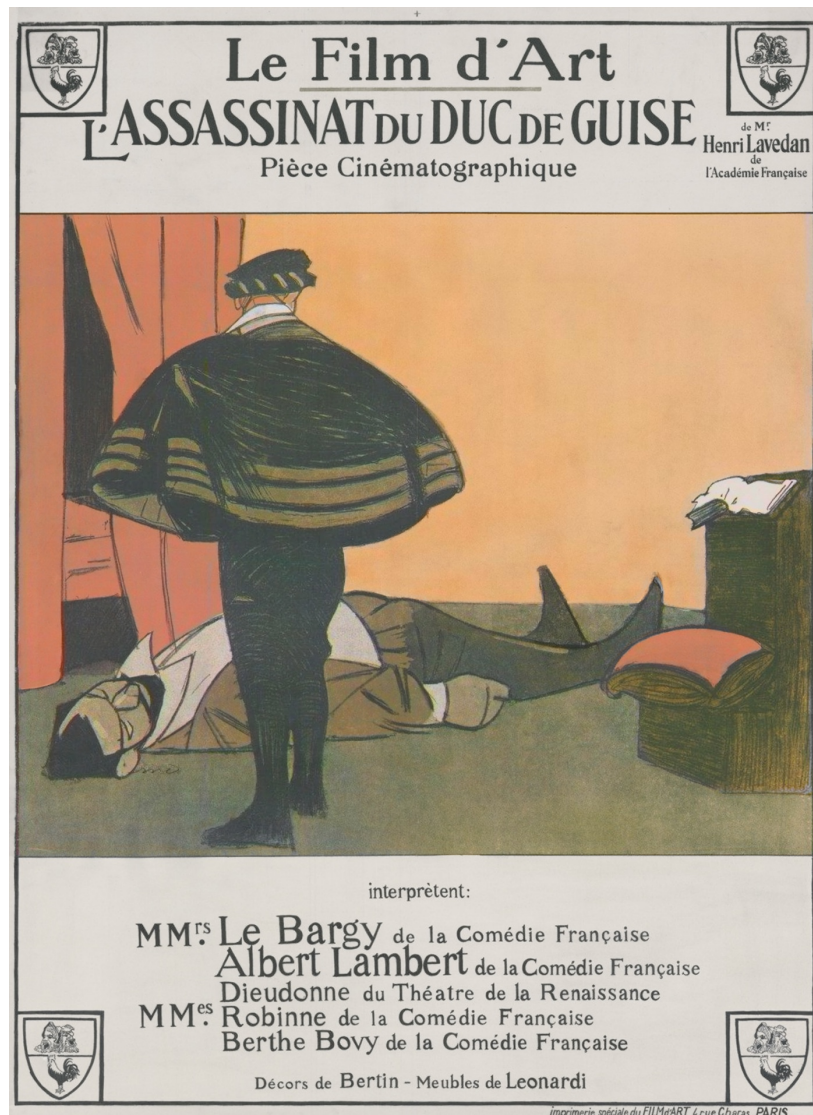
Figure 51



'Charlot présente le Ballet mécanique'. Still from *Ballet mécanique*. Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy. 1924. UCLA Film & Television Archive.



Figure 53



*L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise*. Poster and still. (Film d'Art, 1908).

Figure 54



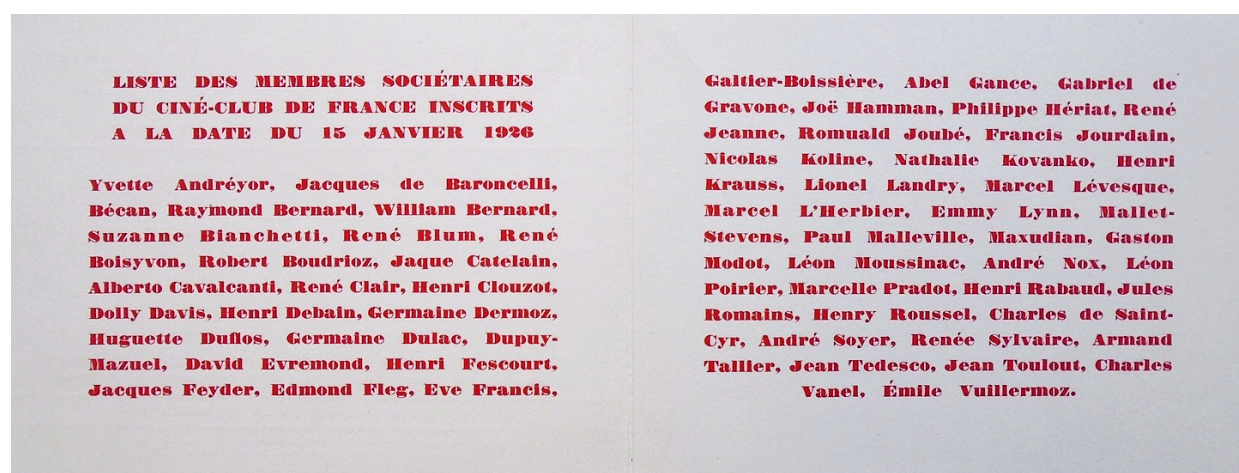
Invitation to *Club des amis du septième art*-event featuring M. Canudo, Léon Moussinac and Marcel L'Herbier. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 55



Letterhead. *Gazette des sept arts*. (1922-1924). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 56



Le Ciné-Club de France vous prie d'honorer de votre présence : Le Cuirassé 'Potemkine'. Invitation card. 13 November 1926. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 57

# HALLELUJAH

A METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER  
ALL TALKING SINGING DANCING DRAMA

Aucun  
directeur  
de salle  
n'est ici  
ASSEZ  
**RICHE**  
pour



nous faire  
**VOIR**  
et **ENTENDRE**  
'HALLELUJAH'  
le plus beau  
film  
du  
**MONDE**

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer  
presents

## HALLELUJAH

EMBASSY THEATRE  
BROADWAY AND 46TH STREET

A KING VIDOR Production

With Songs by IRVING BERLIN

Scenario by WANDA TUCHOCK  
Treatment by RICHARD SCHAYER  
Dialogue by RANSOM RIDEOUT

A Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer All Talking Picture  
with Singing and Dancing

Story and Direction  
by  
KING VIDOR

*Cast*

Zeke . . . . . Daniel L. Haynes  
Chick . . . . . Nina Mae McKinney  
Hot Shot . . . . . William Fountaine  
Parson . . . . . Harry Gray  
Mammy . . . . . Fannie Belle DeKnight  
Spunk . . . . . Everett McGarrity  
Missy Rose . . . . . Victoria Spivey  
Johnson Kids { . . . Milton Dickerson  
                          . . . Robert Couch  
                          . . . Walter Tait

AND DIXIE JUBILEE SINGERS

Director: KING VIDOR  
Scenario: WANDA TUCHOCK  
Treatment: RICHARD SCHAYER  
Dialogue: RANSOM RIDEOUT  
Photographer: GORDON AVIL  
Film Editor: HUOH WYNN

'HALLELUJAH – Aucun directeur de salle n'est ici ASSEZ RICHE pour nous faire VOIR et ENTENDRE 'HALLELUJAH' le plus beau film du MONDE'. *Documents* (5:1930). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

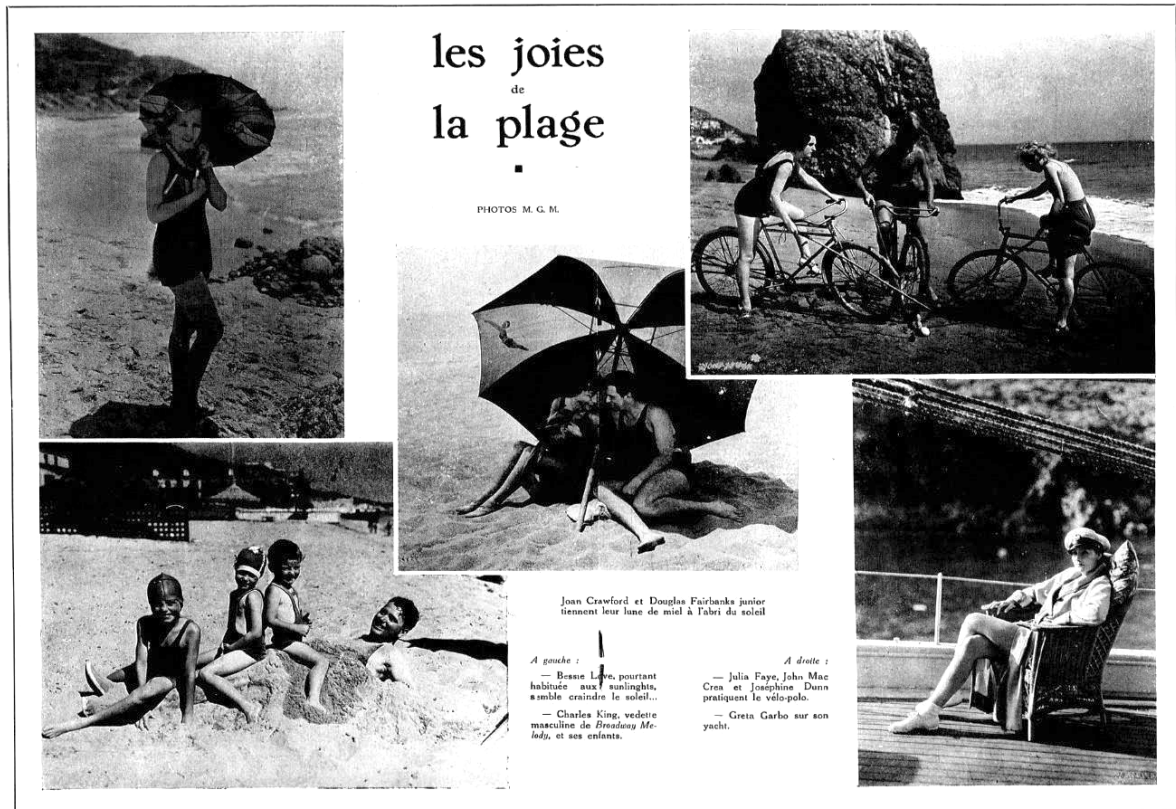
Figure 58



1213. PARIS - Monument du Triomphe  
de la République par Dalou  
et crocodiles ornant le bassin  
Place de la Nation J. H.

Jules Dalou. *Le Triomphe de la République*. Bronze. 1899. Place de la Nation, Paris. Postcard, c.1910.

Figure 59



'les joies de la plage'. Spread published in *Cinéa* (15 September 1929), featuring Bessie Love, Joan Crawford, et al. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 60



Portraits illustrating Bataille's essay 'Figure Humaine,' *Documents* (4:1929). Mounet-Sully features at the centre of the arrangement. Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure 62



Édouard Herriot unveiling honorary plaque of Mounet-Sully. Photograph. 3 March 1927.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 63



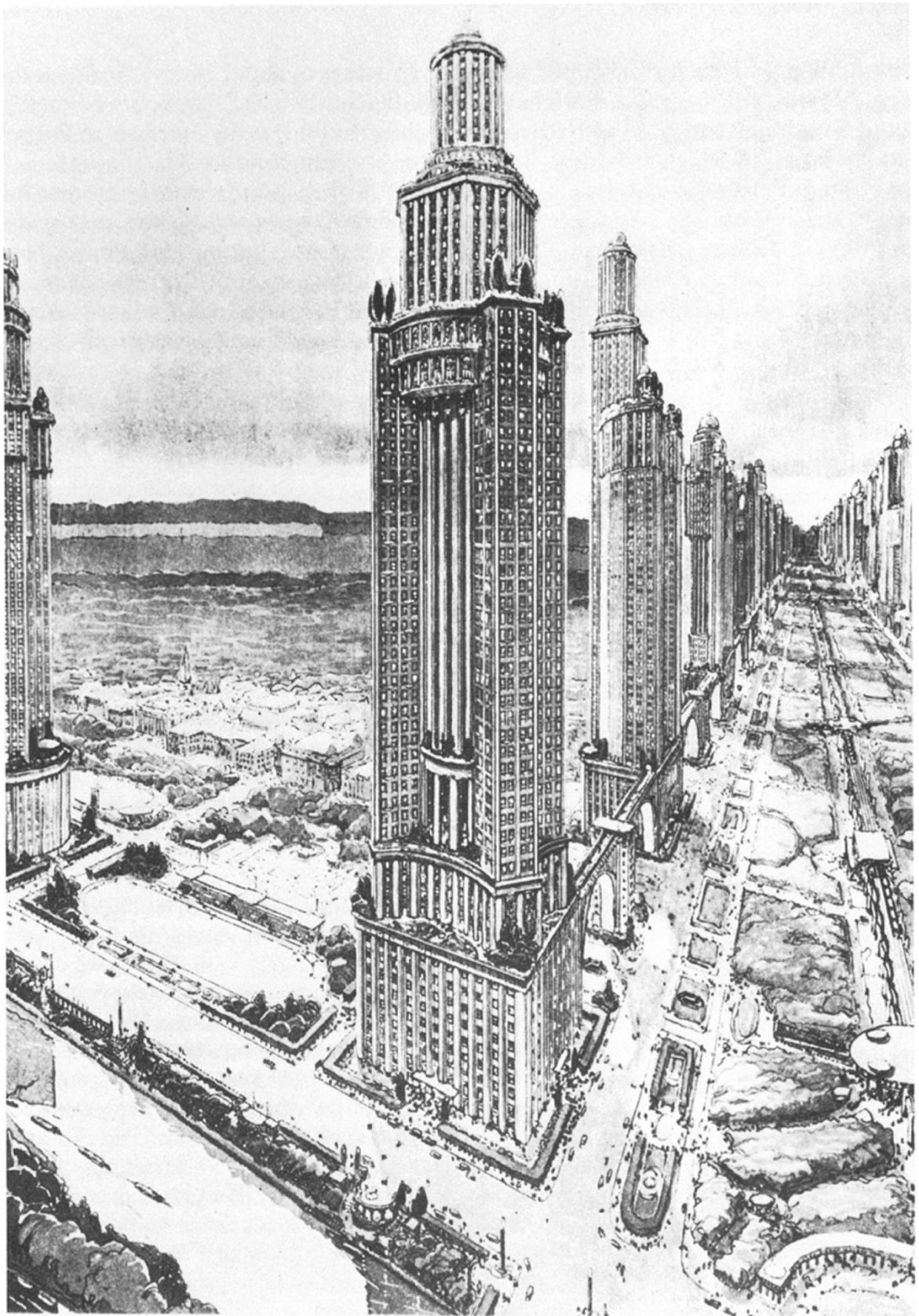
NEW YORK. — L'AMPHITHEATRE ACTUELLEMENT EN CONSTRUCTION, C'EST TOUJOURS LA FIN DU RUE AVENUE S'ENTRE LA 32 ET LA 33 RUE, S'ÉLEVANT PAR HAUTEUR DE QUATRE ÉTAGES.



NEW YORK. — AU DÉBUT DE LA CONSTRUCTION DE LA 32 ET LA 33 RUE, EN HAUTEUR DE QUATRE ÉTAGES, C'EST TOUJOURS LA FIN DU RUE AVENUE S'ENTRE LA 32 ET LA 33 RUE, S'ÉLEVANT PAR HAUTEUR DE QUATRE ÉTAGES.

Photographs illustrating Leiris' dictionary-entry 'Skyscraper,' *Documents* (7:1930).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 64



Jacques Lambert. Skyscrapers for Paris, inspired by Auguste Perret. *L'Illustration*. 12 August 1922.

Figure 65

# DOIT-ON EXCOMMUNIER LES GRATTE-CIEL PARIS 1940?!

par MM. Pierre LYAUTEY, VAN DONGEN, LE CORBUSIER, Louis DAUSSET, André de FELS, NENOT, DOUMERQ et Bernard GRASSET.

Maquettes de A. LAPRADE, Architecte du Gouvernement.

**O**n parle d'outillage national. M. Tardieu vient de prononcer un discours à Nancy. Mais n'est-ce pas ce flux de paroles, pensés à l'outilage de Paris?

Souvenez-vous de répondre au secret désir de ses lecteurs, Vu a fait son enquête.

Pierre Lyautey, rétro d'Amérique, nous a présenté les gratte-ciel sous un jour nouveau. Quatre questions, pour cette enquête, nous ont été posées par l'auteur du « Voyage de Paris ».

1° Comment concilier-vous l'urbanisme du Paris du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle

2° Comment peut-on marier les chefs-d'œuvre de notre histoire et les monuments de l'architecture moderne?

3° Les réalisations fictives de l'architecte Laprade ne vous semblent-elles pas répondre à nos exigences de la tradition et à celles de la Cité Moderne?



4° S'il est vrai que Paris doit devenir la Capitale d'une Europe moderne ou des Etats-Unis d'Europe, ne vous semble-t-il pas qu'il conviendrait d'avoir des conceptions en harmonie avec ce splendide dessin?

Vu y a répondu en demandant à Albert Laprade, grand architecte et célèbre urbaniste, de réviser ses anticipations d'architectures sur le Paris de demain. Ces anticipations par l'image et par le film ont été soumises aux personnalités les plus diverses et qualifiées pour répondre à ces questions: MM. Van Dongen, Le Corbusier, Dausset, André de Fels, Nenot, Doumerq.

Notre grand confrère Le Journal Publie en ce moment les conclusions du Congrès de Paris, nous en a organisé, sur l'initiative de quelques sociétaires. Parmi ceux-ci, nous avons tenu à consulter particulièrement notre ami Bernard Coussot, et à lui demander d'exposer à nos lecteurs les origines et la but de ce Congrès. Avec son habituelle sagacité et son énergie d'indépendance, il nous a envoyé la plus spirituelle des réponses, dont nous sommes heureux de donner ici la première.

**USE** nuit bruyante drapé la cité. Amateurs de nuits de Venise ou de Florence, de Marrakech ou du Haut-Liban, amateurs de belles nuits, attendez-vous un soir à Chicago.

Descendez l'avenue qui suit la rive du Michigan. Pénétrons ensemble dans la cité des gratte-ciel. Laissons à nos capitales et à leurs boulevards les taux variés des publicités, les voyants qui défilent comme au 14 juillet, les taxis qui tournent... Mais contemplant dans le ciel les tours qui s'élevaient hors de l'ombre, comme des îles de lumière. Au-dessus des demeures silencieuses et sombres, là-haut, parmi les étoiles, voici le Pure Oil Building, qui envoie un éclair brillant comme un bouquet de feu d'artifice. Le New United Masonic Temple est plus franc et dégage près de la Grande-Ourse une cathédrale. Du Strauss Building surgit là-haut, dans les hauteurs, une villa Renaissance.

Mais la splendeur est près du Pavé Tournaillien: ici, deux gratte-ciel s'envoient, passés au blanc nacré, irradiés par des projecteurs qui simulent la teinte de la lune et rappellent les bords du Nil et l'éclat du Sphinx. Et là-bas le Chicago Tribune front dans une cathédrale gothique du bruit des rotatives. Le tout est très simple. Cette Beauté est parce que de la Force est née une grandeur.

Vérité en deçà, erreur au delà de l'Atlantique. L'Occident excommunique le gratte-ciel. C'est que le gratte-ciel a en la lert de ne pas naître au cours de la Révolution. Si Robespierre l'avait vu...

Nulle démocratie n'a plus de rites que la française. Or, le Passé n'est lui-même qu'une notion fort fragmentaire et spéculaire. Le Passé? Quelqu'un parmi tant de passés? Cette cristallisation facile n'est souvent que la facile excuse de paresse plus faciles encore.

Un grand procès va être jugé bientôt par l'opinion, celui des gratte-ciel. Le verdict paraît incertain.

Et d'abord, qu'est-ce qu'un gratte-ciel? Une horreur, qui défigure un paysage. Mais un paysage ne se défigure-t-il qu'en raison directe de la laideur de l'édifice moderne? Les édifices anciens ont été bâtis par un autre esprit que celui qui a bâti les gratte-ciel. Les édifices anciens ont été bâtis par un autre esprit que celui qui a bâti les gratte-ciel. Les édifices anciens ont été bâtis par un autre esprit que celui qui a bâti les gratte-ciel.

**UNE** ceinture de gratte-ciel "au pied" de la Tour Eiffel.

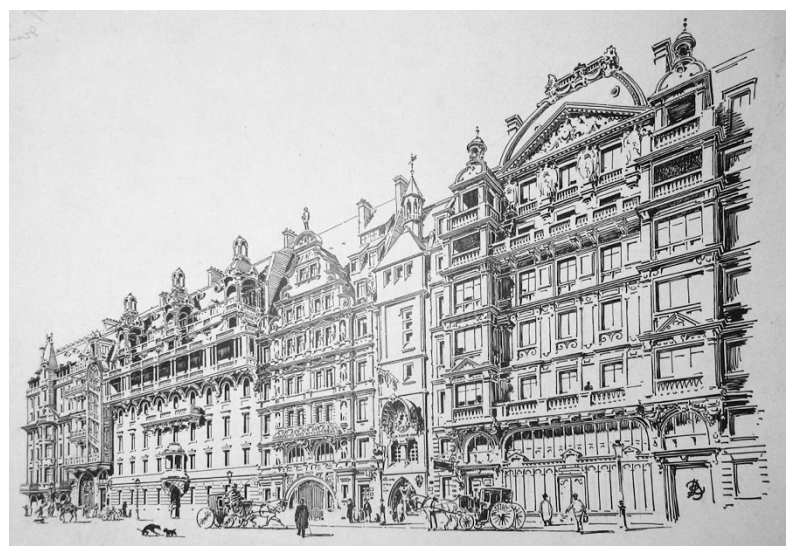
Le nouvel aspect des Champs-Élysées. Une série de tours gratte-ciel très espacées.



N° 119 P. 615

'Doit-on excommunier les gratte-ciel: Paris 1940?'. VU. No. 119. 1930.

Figure 66



Sketches envisioning the architectural possibilities of the Bonnier's proposed regulation. Centre d'archives d'architecture contemporaine.

Figure 67



'Commemoration du 25e anniversaire de la Commission du vieux-Paris, 27 janvier 1923'. Programme. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 68

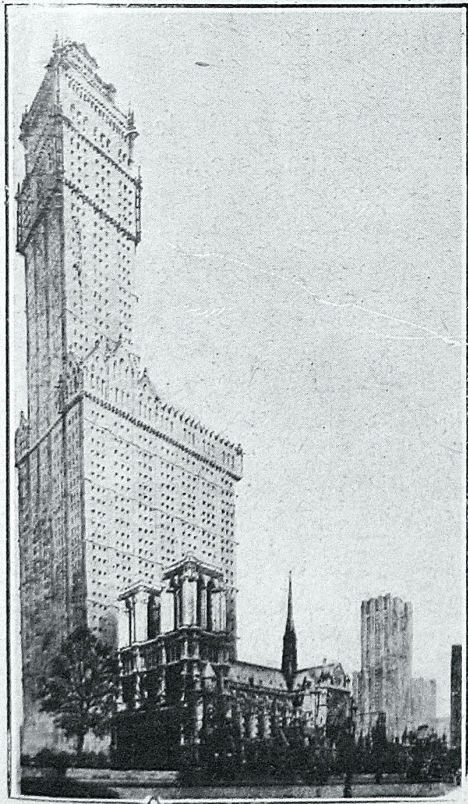


Fig. 21. — Notre-Dame  
et le Woolworth Building.

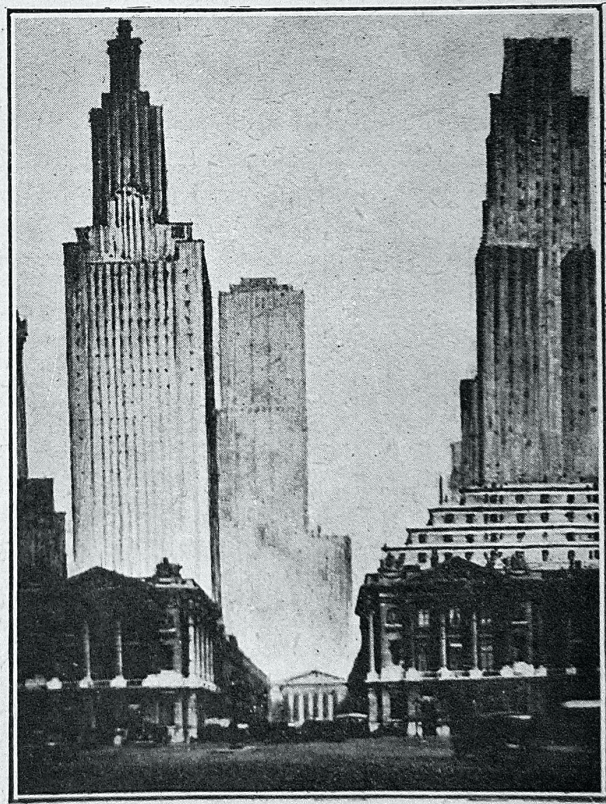
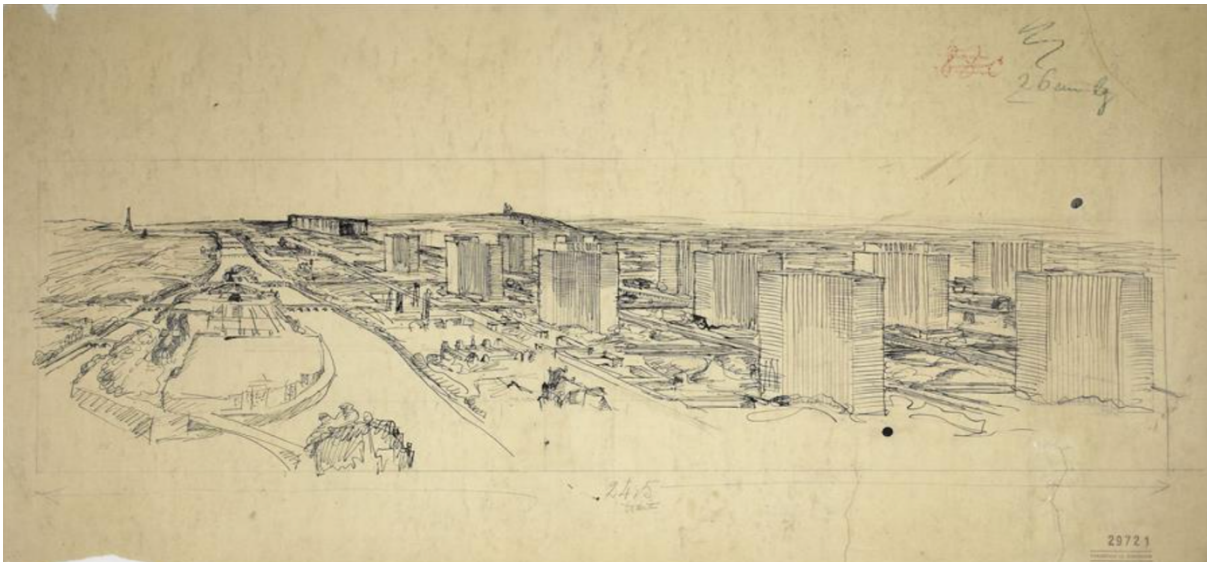


Fig. 22. — La Concorde et les Sky-Scrapers.

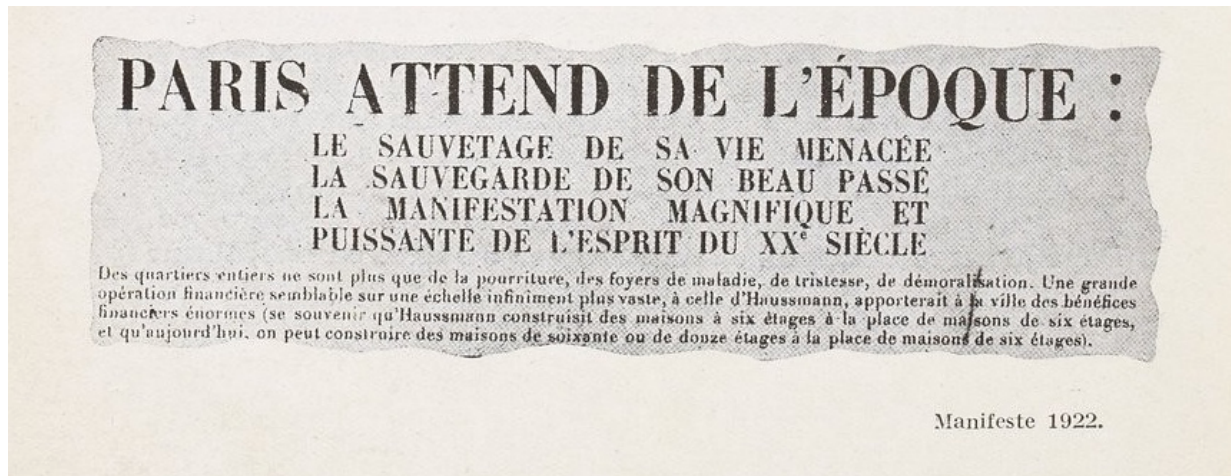
Louis Bonnier, 'Les transformations et l'avenir de Paris,' *La Construction moderne* (supplément). 1930.  
Centre d'archives d'architecture contemporaine.

Figure 69



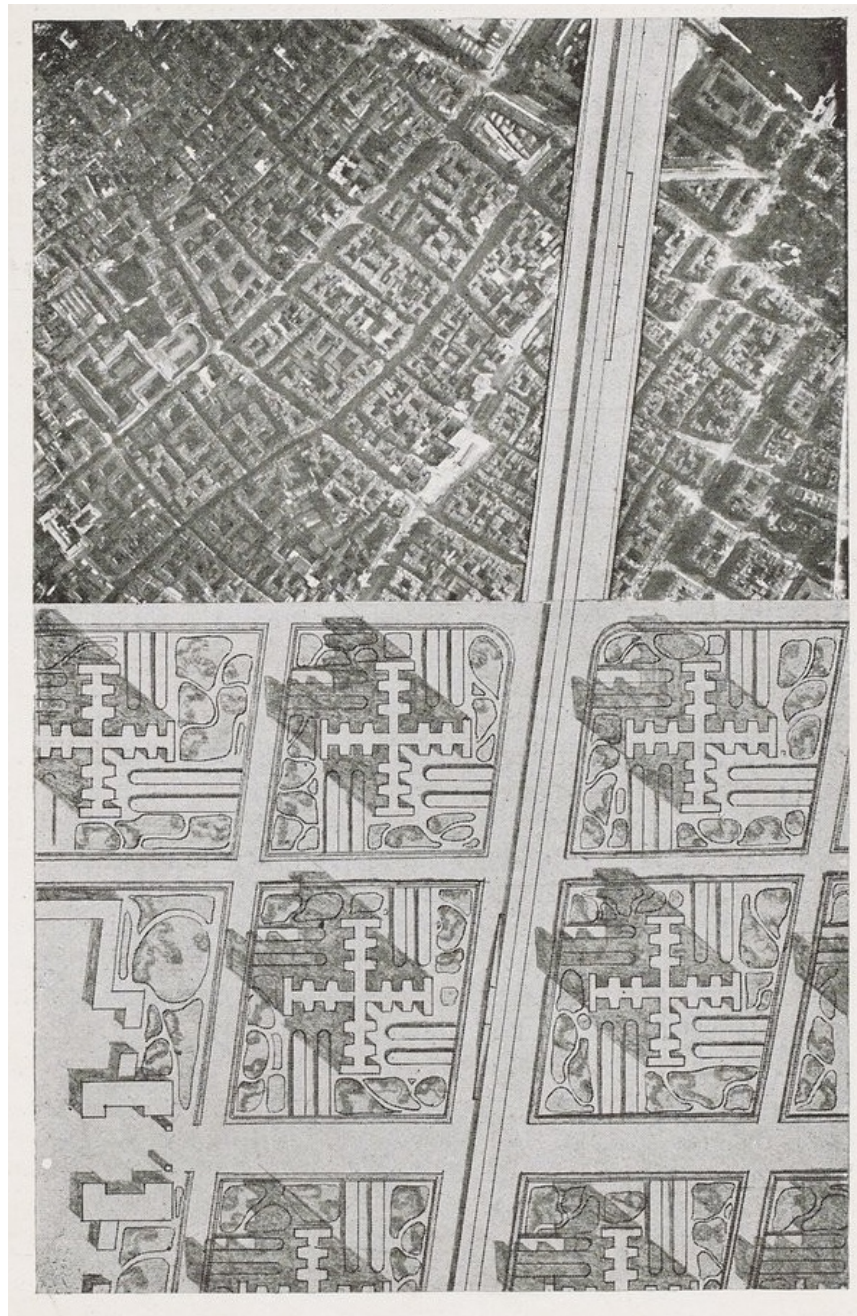
Le Corbusier. Plan Voisin. 1925. Fondation Le Corbusier.

Figure 70



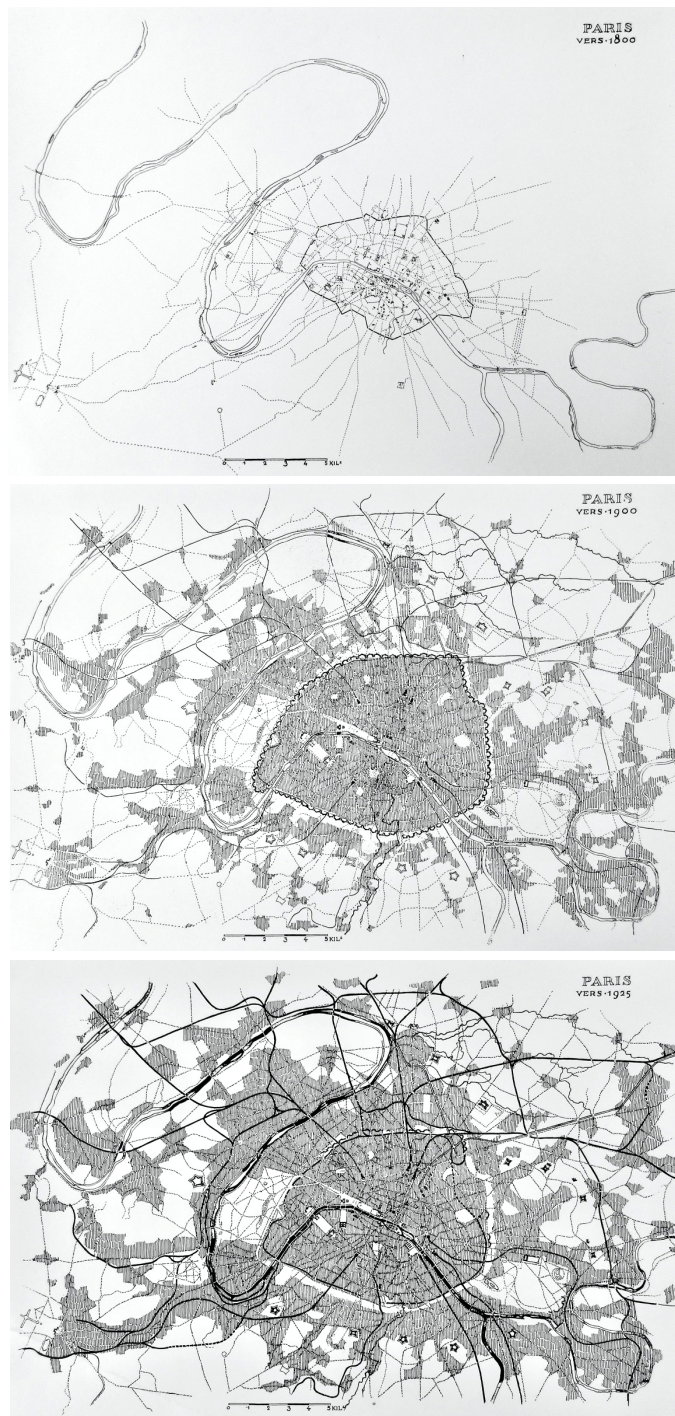
'PARIS ATTEND DE L'ÉPOQUE: LE SAUVETAGE DE SA VIE MENACÉE'.  
Manifesto accompanying Le Corbusier's display at the Salon d'Automne, 1922.  
Reproduced in *L'Esprit Nouveau* (29:1925). Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 71



Le Corbusier. Plan Voisin. Published in *Urbanisme* (1924). Reprinted in *L'Esprit Nouveau* (29:1925). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 72



The growth of Paris, 1800-1925. Produced for Louis Bonnier's 1930 conference 'Les transformations et l'avenir de Paris'. Centre d'archives d'architecture contemporaine.

Figure 73

*Figure 73 has been removed due to Copyright restrictions.*

Le Corbusier. *Still Life with Stacked Plates*. 1920. Oil on canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 74



« AIR EXPRESS », Paris-Londres en deux heures.


Alors pourquoi sur les gentilles villas des environs, ces immenses toits inutilés ? Pourquoi ces fontaines rares à petits carreaux, pourquoi ces grandes maisons avec tant de pièces fermées à clef ? Alors pourquoi cette armoire à glace, ce lavabo, cette commode ? Ailleurs, pourquoi ces bibliothèques ornées d'acanthes, ces consoles, ces vitrines, ces vaisseliers, ces argentiers, ces buffets de service ? Pourquoi ces immenses lustres ? Pourquoi ces cheminées ? Pourquoi ces rideaux à baldaquins ? Pourquoi ces papiers aux murs, pleins de couleurs, de damas, de vignettes baroques.

On ne voit pas jour chez vous. Vos fenêtres sont mal commandées à ouvrir. Il n'y a pas de vasistas pour aérer comme il y en a dans tous les wagons-restaurants. Vos lustres ne font mal aux yeux. Vos staffs et vos papiers de couleur sont insolents comme des valets et je renporte chez moi le tableau de Picasso que je venais vous offrir, car on ne le verrait pas dans le bazar de votre intérieur.

Et tout cela vous a bien coûté cinquante mille francs.

Pourquoi n'exigez-vous pas de votre propriétaire :

- 1° Les casiers à linge de corps et à vêtements dans votre chambre à coucher, le tout à une seule profondeur, à hauteur humaine, et pratiques comme une malle « Invalouin ».
- 2° Dans votre salle à manger, les casiers à vaisselle, à argenterie, à verrerie, fermant bien et avec assez de tiroirs pour que votre « rangement » soit fait en un tour de main, et le tout noyé dans le mur afin qu'au tour de votre table et de vos



Cléid Albert Marquet. PARTERSON, de 447 à 424 av. J.-C.

Le standard est une nécessité.

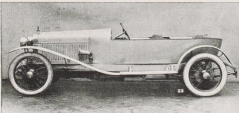
Le standard s'établit sur des bases certaines, non pas arbitrairement, mais avec la sécurité des choses motivées et d'une logique contrôlée par l'expérimentation.

Tous les hommes ont même organisme, mêmes fonctions.

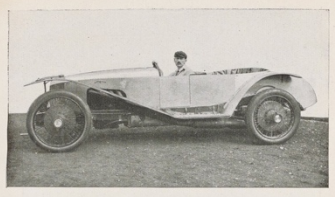
Tous les hommes ont mêmes besoins.

Le contact social qui évolue à travers les âges détermine des classes, des fonctions, des besoins standards donnant des produits d'usage standard.

La maison est un produit nécessaire à l'homme.



DELAGE, Grand-Sport 1921.



BIGNAN-SPORT, 1921.

L'établissement d'un standard procède de l'organisation d'éléments rationnels suivant une ligne de conduite rationnelle également. La masse enveloppante n'est point préconçue, elle s'écoule : elle peut avoir une attitude étrange au premier abord. Ader faisant une chauve-souris, ça ne volait pas ; Wright ou Farman faisant des plans sustentateurs, c'était heurtant, déconcertant. Le standard était fixé. Vint la mise au point.

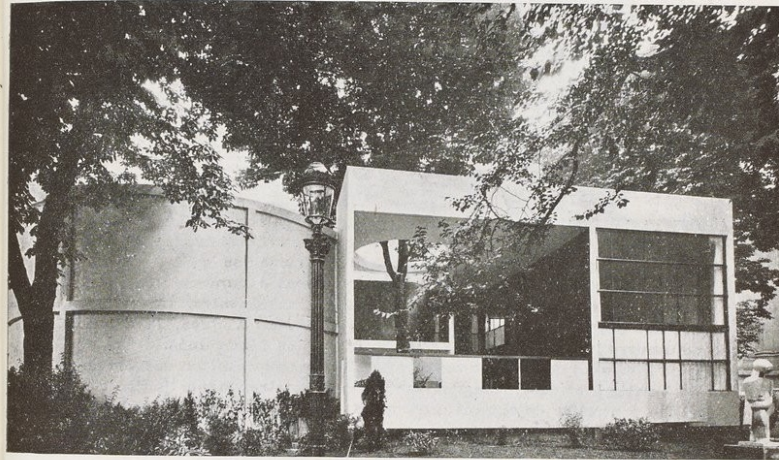
Les premières autos furent construites et carrossées à l'an-

	x
→ PAVEMENT PROPRETÉ à la maison.	0.085
○ ESPÈCE.	0.0135
→ DÉPENSES COURSES à l'AMANI.	0.109
→ DÉPENSES COURSES à l'AMANI.	0.033
○ CAROS COURSE CAROS DOUT DE DOUT.	0.002

Le choix de meilleure prestation issu de l'expérimentation et du calcul, confirme les critères rationnels, le principe, l'essence, etc. Application expérimentale : le dirigeable.

Purist proof. *L'Esprit Nouveau* (1920). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 75



Vue de face (1)

# LE PAVILLON

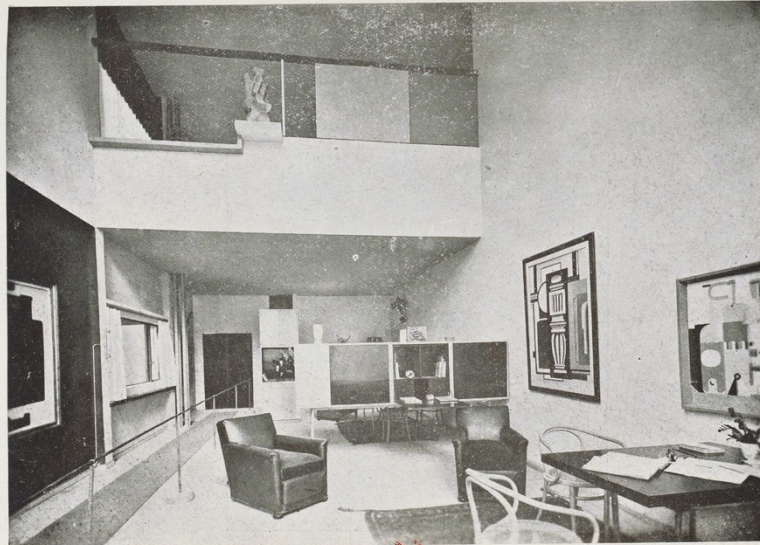
DE

## L'ESPRIT NOUVEAU

(La conception de ce pavillon et sa réalisation sont de LE CORBUSIER et PIERRE JEANNERET.)

Le pavillon de l' « Esprit Nouveau » est entièrement construit en éléments standards.

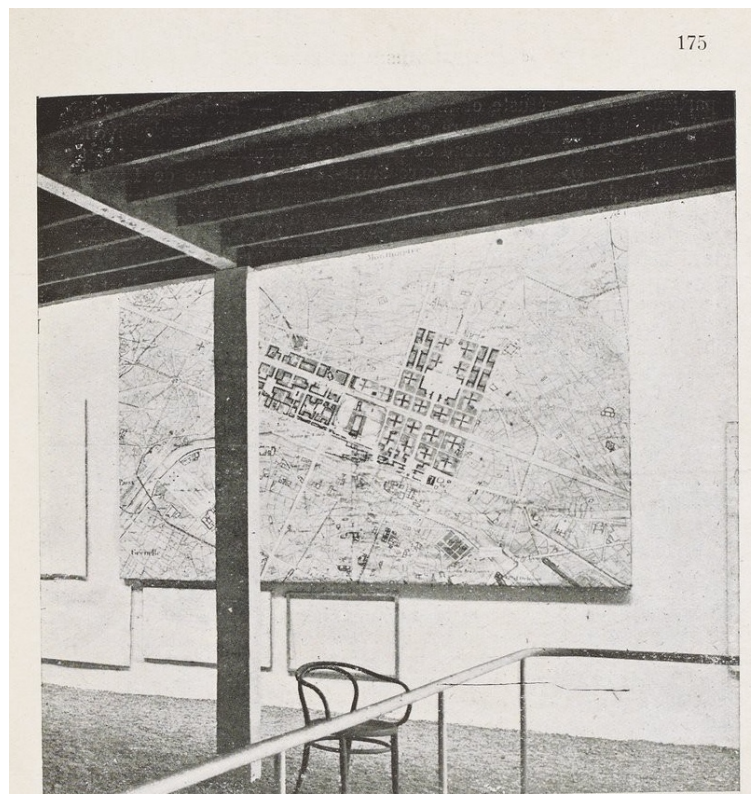
(Le Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau était situé dans l'une des parties les plus retirées de l'Exposition ; il était lui-même nettement caché par les pavillons le séparant du Cours-la-Reine. Ainsi de nombreux Parisiens et étrangers l'ont-il cherché en vain. On s'inquiéterait à vouloir discerner les raisons certainement savantes du tracé d'implantation des pavillons d'alentour.)



La salle, vue contre le boudoir de l'étage.

Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau. *L'Esprit Nouveau* (29:1925). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 76

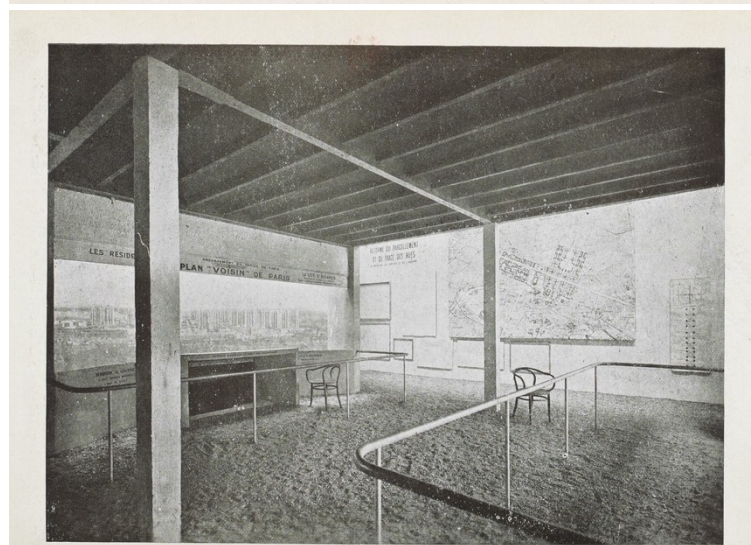


175

Le « Plan Voisin de Paris » au pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau.

## « LE PLAN VOISIN DE PARIS »

Le « Plan Voisin » de Paris comprend la création de deux éléments neufs essentiels : une *cit  d'affaires* et une *cit  de r sidence*.  
La *cit  d'affaires* fait une enprise de 240 hectares sur une zone



Refondre des dioramas. Diorama du « Plan Voisin de Paris »,   gauche. Au fond la *Plan du centre de Paris* ; aux murs par groupes,  tudes d'urbanisme : Une ville contemporaine de 2 milliards d'habitants, « Le Probl me architectural » ; la R forme des Parcellements et du trac  des rues ; « les Cit s jardins » ; le diorama d'une ville contemporaine.

'Le Plan Voisin de Paris'. *L'Esprit Nouveau* (29:1925). Biblioth que nationale de France.

Figure 77



Statue de Louis XIV, par Coyssier (Place des Victoires). — Photo J.-A. Boiffard.



Statue de Cheops, par G. Farcy, 1893 (Carrefour de boulevard Raspail et du boulevard Saint-Germain). — Photo J.-A. Boiffard.



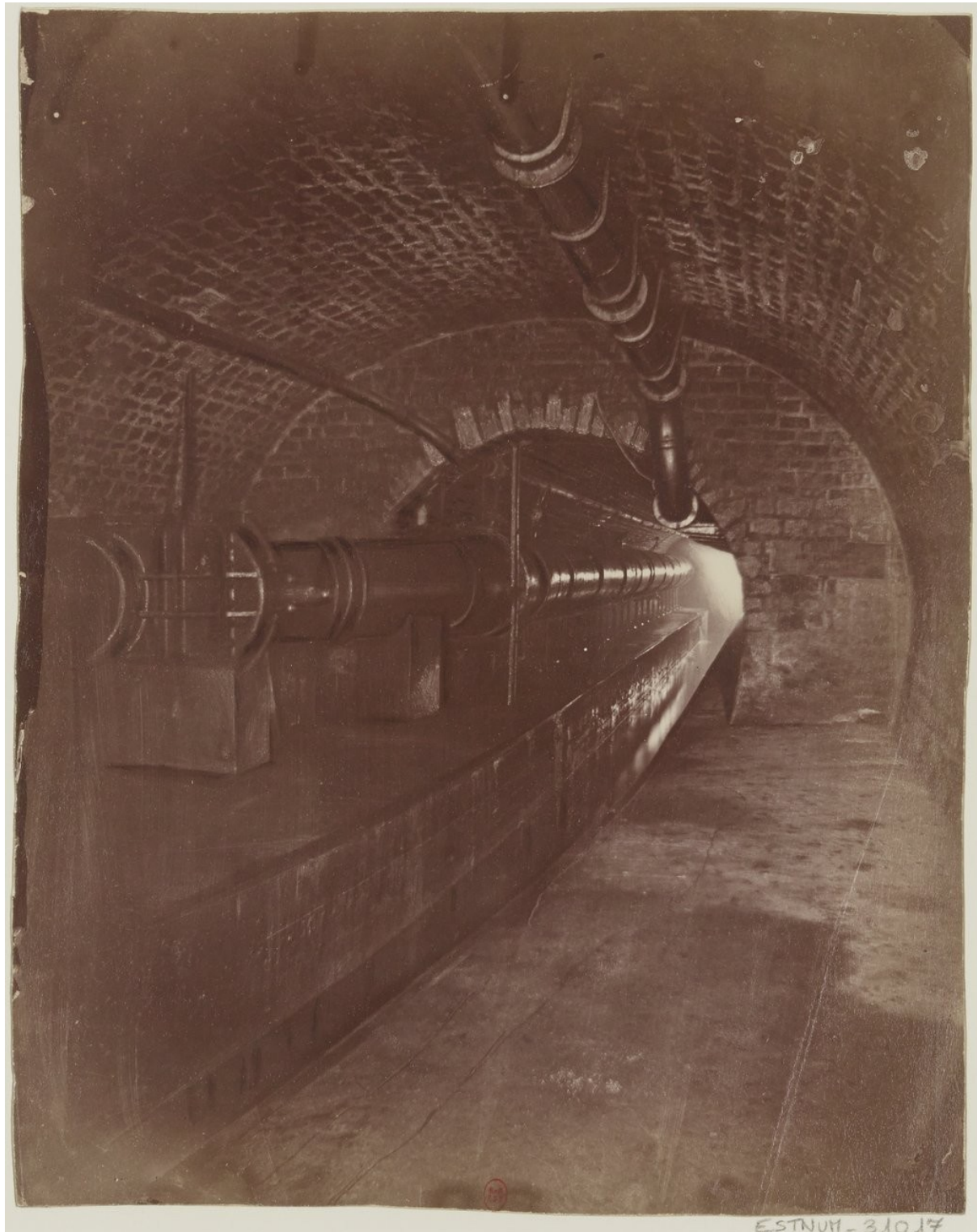
Mémorial de la Défense Nationale, par A. Barthelemy (Porte des Ternes). — Photo J.-A. Boiffard.



Mémorial à Louis S. Gallot, 1858-1937, (Place Saint-Ferdinand). — Photo J.-A. Boiffard.

Jacques-André Boiffard. Photographs illustrating Robert Desnos' essay 'Pygmalion et le sphinx,' *Documents* (1:1930).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 78



Félix Nadar. *Égouts de Paris: Chambre du Boulevard Saint-Denis, n°2*. Photograph. 1864-1865. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 79



Eli Lotar. *Aux abattoirs de la Villette*. Photograph illustrating Bataille's dictionary-entry 'Abattoir,' *Documents* (6:1929).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 80



Photograph illustrating Bataille's dictionary-entry 'Homme,' *Documents* (5:1929).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 81



'Place et fontaine des Innocents, près des halles, autrefois cimetière (ou charnier) des Innocents.' *Documents* (5:1929).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 82



'Si Paris s'américanisait : le rêve de l'Esprit-Nouveau aux Arts décoratifs,' *Le Rappel* (14 September 1925).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 83



Les « mal logés » (Quartier Saint-Merri).

Aéro-Photo.

‘Les ‘mal logés’ (Quartier Saint-Merri)’. *Les Cahiers de la République des lettres, des sciences et des arts, XII: Vers un Paris nouveau ?* (1929). Bibliothèque nationale de France.

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