A CHANGING OF THE GUARD:
THE EVOLUTION OF THE FRENCH AVANT-GARDE
FROM ITALIAN FUTURISM, TO SURREALISM,
TO SITUATIONISM, TO THE WRITERS OF
THE LITERARY JOURNAL *TEL QUEL*

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate

School of the Ohio State University

By

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The Ohio State University
2008

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ABSTRACT

    The avant-garde is an aesthetic movement that spanned the twentieth century. It is made up of writers and artists that rebelled against art and against society in a concerted effort to improve both, and their relationship to one another. Four avant-garde groups, the Futurists, the Surrealists, the Situationists, and the writers of the journal *Tel Quel*, significantly contributed to the avant-garde movement and provided perspective into whether that movement can exist in the twenty first century.

    The first *Futurist Manifesto*, published in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1909 by Philippo Tommaso Marinetti, instigated the avant-garde wave that would be taken up after the Great War by the Surrealists, whose first 1924 *Manifeste du Surréalisme* echoed the Futurist message of embracing modern life and change through art. The Surrealists, however, focused more on Marxism and psychoanalysis, developing ideas about life and art that combined these two ideologies in order to link the improvement of society with the unconscious individual experience. The Situationists, whose group formed in 1957, took up the themes of social revolution and freedom of the unconscious, developing a method for creating situations that were conducive to both of these things. The writers of the journal *Tel Quel*, who published from 1960-1982, claimed to be part of this literary history, and continued the discussions begun by the others, providing insight into how

language and its structures, which paralleled those of society, needed to be changed in order to change society.

This dissertation aims to define the twentieth century avant-garde and to inquire about its existence in the twenty-first century. The first chapter examines the socio-historic and philosophical context from which these groups emerged and against which they reacted. The second and third chapters analyze the themes of the city and politics in avant-garde works to demonstrate the aims and ambitions of the groups. The fourth chapter looks at avant-garde membership from a gender perpective, focusing on the example of the female Surrealist poet, Joyce Mansour. Taking these criteria into consideration, the conclusion opens a discussion about the relevancy of these groups nearly a century after the publication of the first *Futurist Manifesto* and looks into the possibility of a twenty-first century avant-garde.

Dedicated to my mother
and the memory of my grandmothers

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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1.   "Nicolas Calas' Surrealism: Liberating the National Greek Identity." <u>Modernism and Modernity in the Mediterranean World</u>. Ed. Luca Somigli and Domenico Pietropaolo. Ottowa: Legas, 2006. 103-114.

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: French and Italian

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Introduction

> …there is no singular theory that can encompass the avant-garde…
> it is best understood through a negotiation of plurality of,
> sometimes contradictory, *theories*.
> Andrew J. Webber (9)

The aim of this study is to analyze four avant-garde groups that span the length of the twentieth century, to inquire about how the ideas that defined these groups evolved, and to determine whether we can still speak of an avant-garde today. The first chapter focuses on studying the social, political, and aesthetic ideologies that made the birth and existence of the avant-garde possible. The following two chapters each deal with a particular theme in avant-garde art and ideology, which demonstrates the development and evolution of the avant-garde the length of the twentieth century. The final chapter singles out a particular avant-garde artist, Joyce Mansour, who is not typical of the movement, but whose work contributed to an important alternative discourse within the movement. The conclusion, considering the avant-garde as defined in the previous chapters, deals with the possibility of whether movement can exist in the current social, political, and aesthetic paradigm.

As the opening quote by literary theorist Andrew Webber suggests, defining and understanding the avant-garde is no easy task. First, there is no coherent avant-garde movement. The different artists (who sometimes associated themselves with groups) in

no way represent a monolithic and consistent ideology. In order to clarify the term, I

have chosen just four groups which are most representative of the ideology described

briefly below, and in more detail in the following chapters. These are the Italian

Futurists, the Surrealists, the Situationists, and the writers associated with the journal *Tel*

Quel (heretofore referred to as *TQ*). Although there are numerous avant-garde groups

which contributed significantly to the overall movement, these four are important for the

following reason: most literary critics, especially those who write about the avant-garde,

consider the Futurists, the Surrealists, the Situationists, and the *TQ* group significant, if

not central and essential members of the movement.

   Three of the most cited avant-garde critical works are Renato Poggioli's *Theory of the*

Avant-Garde (published in Italian in 1962 and in English in 1968) ,Charles Russell's

Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries (published in New York in 1983), and Peter

Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (published in German in 1974 and in English in

1984). The latter work is especially useful in this study because it provides a social and

historical framework in which to place the avant-garde. Bürger sees the phenomenon of

the avant-garde more than an aesthetic movement that experimented in style, form and

content. He defines the avant-garde as a group of artists whose art challenged the role of

art in bourgeois society, which had become a passive reflection of bourgeois life, meant

to be appreciated solely for its aesthetic qualities. The avant-garde aimed to create art

that would challenge the institutional status of art and provoke the spectator to engage

with it in a different way.

   There are numerous twentieth century artistic groups that fall into the criteria named

above. The Dada group, frequently considered a part of the avant-garde by the above

mentioned critics, is not considered at length in this dissertation. Because the movement

was so short-lived (from about 1916-1920), because it was mainly nihilistic and did not

develop much of a theory or ideology, and because several of the members left to form

the Surrealist group (André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, and Francis Picabia), who applied

and developed some of the Dadaist concepts, the Dada group will not be considered in

any detail here.

   The OuLiPo group, or Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (founded in 1960), was also

an experimental group, as were the Nouveau Romanistes (1950s) and the Existentialists

(1950s and 1960s). There was even a feminine avant-garde group who called their work

l'écriture féminine.   It had a press (Des Femmes); it had a group (Psychanalyse et

Politique, or Psychépo); and it had a leader (Antoinette Fouque). Hélène Cixous, Luce

Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva are considered members. All of these groups would fit into

Bürger's criteria, as they attempted and arguably succeeded in changing and improving

society through art during the twentieth century.

   The Nouveau Romanistes and the writers associated with Psychépo, however, denied

the existence of a coherent ideology among them, and did not associate with one another

or attend meetings as the members of the avant-garde groups considered in this

dissertation. OuLiPo and the Existentialists boasted the group dynamics of the other

avant-gardes considered in this dissertation, but neither Raymond Queneau nor Sartre, the

two respective leaders of the groups, linked themselves with other avant-garde groups or

defined themselves as the inheritors of the avant-garde tradition in the way that the

groups discussed here did.

In addition to considering themselves part of a group, the avant-garde artists in this dissertation considered themselves part of a literary heritage. Each of the groups mentioned built its reputation, in part, on the assumption that it inherited the previous group's avant-garde spirit. Harold Bloom, in his book *The Anxiety of Influence*, explains why these artists felt compelled to legitimize their aesthetic worth. Every great poet, according to Bloom, feels the influence of a previous great poet, and the resulting anxiety affects the later poet's artistic production. Bloom describes in detail five processes in the struggle to overcome the precursor, and the precursor's ultimately enduring presence. Bloom's theories about artists and how they consider a previous "strong" poet a literary forefather explains why the four groups considered here linked themselves to one another and claimed to be part of the same literary tradition, while at the same time attempting to distinguish themselves from the previous groups.

The first chapter in particular looks at these defining aspects of the avant-garde. In addition to the theories of Bürger and Bloom, other theorists, such as Jürgen Habermas, shed light on the avant-garde experience and what aspects of bourgeois society promoted its development. The first two sections of the chapter, Development of Sciences and Philosophy, and Historical Development of Art, are devoted to explaining the social conditions that promoted the birth of the avant-garde. The final section of the chapter, Generations of Avant-Garde Writers, demonstrates how each avant-garde group carved out its place in the avant-garde tradition, and how this consciously created lineage is part of what defines the avant-garde.

Chapters two and three analyze two different themes in avant-garde ideology: the city and politics. Chapter two explores the former theme, looking how the works of all four

groups incorporate the city into their work. It is important to consider how the city was represented in these works, and what role it played. For most of the groups, the city represented a place where artistic talent could flourish, and where progressive ideas could be lived out. But as the city evolved over the course of the twentieth century, so too did its place in avant-garde art.

The chapter concludes with a representative work of the *TQ* group published in 2007. Although this work refers to specific urban themes in previous avant-garde works and embraces some of the urban ideology expressed in these works, it also presents a different picture of the city that suggests, unlike its predecessors, that it may no longer be the ideal location for avant-garde activity.

The third chapter looks at the theme of politics and changing everyday life through political action. Like the concept of the city, political involvement was a defining part of the avant-garde groups. Political themes permeate the art of all the avant-garde groups discussed here, whether it is a painting of a political hero, like Carlo Carrà's *Funeral of the Anarchist Galli*, or whether it is Julia Kristeva's more subtle work on how language reflects political ideologies that repress and inhibit creativity. But the avant-garde also actively participated in politics, joined official parties, and propagated political agendas on their behalf. Communism influenced all of the groups here in different ways. And as the communist movement evolved, so too did the stance of the avant-garde groups that promoted it. Although there is little consistency in their political opinions, in their art and in the official party activities, each of the groups maintained a focus on improving life through politics.

The final chapter re-evaluates the aims and ideas analyzed in the first three chapters from the viewpoint of a peripheral Surrealist artist, Joyce Mansour. Mansour was not the only alternative avant-garde artist. Each of the groups discussed here benefited from the participation of alternative (i.e. feminine, homosexual) perspectives. Some examples are the Futurist Valentine Hugo, the Surrealist Jean Cocteau, the Situationist Michèle Bernstein, and the *TQ* writers Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva. These writers were in no way less important than their male heterosexual counterparts; they were simply different, adding an alternative voice to the dominant discourse.

Mansour's gender is not the only aspect of her identity that differentiates her from the more traditional Surrealists. One of the few female members of the Surrealist group, she joined the movement long after its period of vitality and prolific artistic production. Of Egyptian decent, she learned the French language as a young adult. Feminine, belated, oriental and francophone, she was fourfold removed from the traditional avant-garde group of which she is considered a part. Even though avant-garde art was by definition peripheral, Mansour's position as an outsider of an outsider group made her work more marginal.

By applying the theoretical work of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, this dissertation analyzes, in three respective sections, the female gaze, feminine writing, and resistance to the portrayal of women as commodities. Considering how Mansour's poetics engage in a different kind of avant-garde discourse that highlight the feminine francophone experience sheds light on the truly revolutionary potential of the avant-garde.

The conclusion looks at the evolutionary course of the avant-garde discussed in the previous chapters in order to see where the avant-garde stands today. Is it still possible to

speak of an avant-garde now, and if so, what does this avant-garde look like? The

conclusion looks at the current postmodern paradigm, and applies the theories of

postmodernists such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Frederic Jameson in an effort to reveal

how the avant-garde of the previous chapters would not be able to exist in the same way

in the postmodern era. But the conclusion also incorporates the theory of Paul Mann,

who argues that language and discussion perpetuate art, and that discussing the death of

the avant-garde merely prolongs it.

    The conclusion, and Mann's theory in particular, illustrates why studies about the

avant-garde, although numerous, are still important today. By talking about the avant-

garde, we are keeping it alive. The discourse about the avant-garde continues to thrive

despite the fact that theorists have been talking about its death since the 1970s. Just in

the past sixth months there have been several important public avant-garde retrospectives.

In October of 2007, in the Veneto area of Italy, Daniele Lombardi, composer, pianist, and

author of books and essays about futurist music, organized a month-long music festival

on the futurist Luigi Russolo.[1] The British library in London, from November 2007 to

March 2008, organized a myriad of speeches, performances and events, most of them free

to the public, for an exhibit entitled *Breaking the Rules: The Printed Face of the*

European Avant Garde 1900-1937.[2]

    In addition to these retrospectives, there are less obvious contemporary references to

the avant-garde. For example, the 2006 black-and-white animated movie *Renaissance* by

Christian Volckman, displays poignant Futurist and Situationist architectural images in

its vision of Paris in the year 2054. The city resembles some of the futurist architect St.

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[1] http://www.danielelombardi.com
[2] http://www.bl.uk/breakingtherules

Elia's drafts and radiates the ideas expounded by the situationist urban theorist Constant Nieuwenhuys. The fact that independent artists and public institutions are spending money to create and promote avant-garde retrospectives proves that the avant-garde is still an important part of contemporary art and aesthetic discourse. This study is a response to these and other similar manifestations of interest that prolong the existence of the avant-garde.

CHAPTER 1

REBELLION: BIRTH OF THE AVANT-GARDE

> *To study a movement of ideas without*
> *attending to what preceded or followed it,*
> *ignoring the social and political situation*
> *that nourished it and on which, in its turn,*
> *it may have acted, is a futile effort.*
> Maurice Nadeau

One of the more significant claims of the historic avant-garde, that it represents a

complete break with the past and a comprehensive renewal of aesthetic values, demands

an investigation into the very tradition it rejected. Understanding the avant-garde and its

evolution throughout the twentieth century is impossible without a thorough inquery into

the context in which it was born and developed. Why did these artists rebel against their

precursors? To what were they in opposition? How did they rebel? Was there anything

unique about this rebellion? This chapter will attempt to answer such questions by

examining the seeds of this rebellion, and the circumstances in which they germinated,

grew, and developed into the four representative avant-garde movements examined in

this dissertation.

1.1   Development of sciences and philosophy

The Futurists, the Surrealists, the Situationists, and the writers of the *TQ* journal were four avant-garde groups that contributed momentously to the story of the twentieth century avant-garde. They were part of a movement called modernism[3], which was directly linked to and influenced by scientific and philosophical movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The modernists, including all of the avant-garde groups considered here, experimented with the concept of time and how the individual perceived its progression.

Henri Bergson (1859-1941), a prominent philosopher and lecturer at the *Collège de France*, insisted that our understanding of time was subjective and based on human intuition. Contrary to the positivist way of understanding the world, Bergson stressed that the existence and essence of things could not always be proven scientifically; he believed that intuition was a path to knowledge just as valid as science. His key argument in *L' Evolution Créatrice* was that rational conceptual thought could not accurately describe reality; the true meaning of reality came from inner perceptions or experiences, vital forces he defined as the "élan vital," and not from fabricated categories like time. Seconds, minutes, hours, and days, for example, are always measured in the same length by clocks, ticking at the same rate, while the human experience of time, where some minutes seem longer than others, is quite different.

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[3] From hereon, modernism will refer to a period, roughly from the end of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, and will denote what Matei Calinescu calls "aesthetic modernity." In his book *The Five Faces of Modernity* Calinescu explains that modernism is the attempt to undermine the tenets, ideologies and morals of bourgeois society (or modernity), which was in various ways a society defined by the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Modernism is thus the aesthetic critique of modernity. The early modernists, according to Calinescu and other literary critics, are mid to late nineteenth century artists that instigated this reaction against modern society.

The Futurists were familiar with Bergson and his ideas about the limits of rationality.[4]
Ideas about intuition and the uniqueness of each individual human perspective were
elaborated upon in Futurist works such as "Sensibilité Numérique," where the leader of
the movement, Philippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), explained how a new language
was needed to express in more accurate terms even the human experience. Marinetti
chose the example of hearing church bells, and how the sounds of the bells and the
resulting human reaction needed to be expressed differently. He wrote:

> …au lieu de dire comme un écrivain traditionnel: *un son de cloches vaste et profond* (notation imprécise et inexpressive) ou bien comme un paysan intelligent: *les habitants de tel ou tel village entendent cette cloche* (notation plus précise et plus expressive) je saisis avec une précision intuitive le son de la cloche et j'en détermine l'ampleur en disant: **don dan** *cloches ampleur du son 20 km².*[5]

Marinetti claimed that daily events, like the sound of a bell, could not be accurately
described by conventional methods. He suggested the use of intuition and innovation, of
employing an entirely new grammatical structure, often with verbs, if included at all, in
the infinitive, and a new vocabulary based on onomatopoeia and pronouncing sound
inspired by pure instinct.

  This example illustrated Marinetti's idea of *parole in libertà* or *motlibre* concept,
which called for the complete liberation not only of verse, but also of the physical
position of the words on the page and was meant to facilitate the exploration of subtle and
complex human emotions. Another more elaborate example of *parole in libertà* is
Marinetti's disquieting pictogram "Le Soir, couchée dans son lit, Elle relisait la lettre de

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[4] The Florentine group of writers for "La Voce, » a literary journal in which Marinetti had published, had translated writers like Bergson and William James – see Lista, *Préface*, VIII. For an exhaustive list of artists that inspired or influenced the Futurists, see Chapter 2 of Tisdall and Bozzolla's *Futurism*.
[5] Marinetti, *Les Mots en Liberté Futuristes*, 69.

son artilleur au front." Published in 1917, it depicts, in the bottom right hand corner, the black shadow of a shapely female figure lying on her stomach propped up by her elbows. She is gazing down at a few undecipherable words scribbled on the page on which she also lies, and above her, she is seemingly compressed by an assortment of odd and visually heavy words, chaotically arranged in various designs, imitating the sounds of war and the language of love. The sensuality of the sole figure in the pictogram attracts the eye as the viewer's peripheral vision peruses the dynamic movement enveloping the figure. The motion evoked on the black and white page by the vertically stacked words and the innovative use of type print contributes to the pictograms overall chaos; there is a sense of time standing still, and at the same time, of momentous events unfolding. Marinetti's pictogram was able to eliminate the concept of time progressing forward while depicting historical events like war and its effect on human relationships.

Experimentation with the idea of time and how the individual perceived it was also happening in the realm of science. In 1905, Albert Einstein published a series of papers that would lead to his winning the Nobel Prize in 1921. His research on particles of light and problems of molecular motion and mass contributed to his formulation of "The Theory of Relativity," which he elucidated in a paper entitled "On the Electrodynamics of Moving bodies." In this paper, Einstein explains how time and space are not absolute, but are relative to the observer's position and movement in space. Time passes more slowly as the speed of an object increases.

Like Bergson, Einstein and his research pointed to the importance of the position of the individual in relation to surrounding events. These newly emerging theories stressed the personal perspective and the position of the individual in his or her surroundings. In

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essays like the first *Futurist Manifesto*, or the 1910 *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting*, both of which refer to the concept of "universal dynamism," Marinetti sets out ideas that stress the importance of the individual perspective, particularly in relation to time, motion, speed, and energy. The concept of "universal dynamism," as explained by Tisdall and Bozzolla, "… was the principle that drew together all objects in time and space."[6] Although somewhat ambiguous, this notion of movement and vigor permeates not only Marinetti's writings, but the graphic art of Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916), Carlo Carrà (1881-1966), Gino Severini (1883-1966), Luigi Russolo (1885-1947), and Giacomo Balla (1871-1958), as well as the architectural drawings of Antonio Sant'Elia (1888-1916). All of the Futurist artists, and particularly Marinetti, whose first airplane flight over Milan took place the same year as the publication of his political novel in free verse describing the event, *Le Monoplan du Pape*, wanted to integrate modern experiences and new concepts of time, space, and speed into the realm of art.[7]

Whereas the Futurists formulated an overarching concept encapsulating these new scientific and philosophical ideas, the Surrealists formulated a special technique to express them aesthetically. For the Surrealists, speed and spontaneity were integrated into the process of writing using the method of *écriture automatique*. Without spending time on thinking through each idea, the Surrealists recorded instantaneously what came to their minds in an effort to access the unconscious and intuition. Although this technique was influenced by theories about the unconscious put forward by Sigmund Freud, there was also a sense of immediacy and intuition that can be connected to the Futurists' ideas about speed and immediacy.

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[6] Tisdall and Bozzolla 31-32.
[7] Lista, *Préface*, IX.

The Situationists wrote more theoretical tracts than fiction or poetry; they were

influenced by Marxism and a historical and social understanding of the progression of

time.   Situationist film, while incorporating Marxist philosophy, also does an interesting

job of employing new techniques to depict the progression of time. Most viewers would

agree that watching a Situationist film is not an easy or necessarily pleasurable

experience, largely because they are difficult to follow.[8] Due to the absence of

chronology, temporal progression, or plot, Situationist films like *In girum imus nocte et*

consumimur igni confuse the viewer and often conjure feelings of discomfort and

agitation. This film, made in 1978 by Simar films and shown in Paris that same year, is a

series of images (some original film footage, some stills, and some borrowed footage)

that critique in Situationist fashion global consumer capitalism. The speed with which

the images pass on the screen parallels the speed with which a contemporary stroller

might move through the streets of Paris, accosted by advertisements and symbols of

consumer society.

The *TQ* group was also marked by Marxism and by theories about the historical

progression of society. But various *TQ* writers experimented in their fiction with

depicting time, speed and movement. The poetry of telquelian Denis Roche, which has

been linked to Surrealism, also exudes this sense of rapidity and urgency found in

Surrealist and Futurist writing.[9] Another *TQ* writer, Jacques Henric experimented with

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[8] Perhaps the most difficult of these is *Hurlements en Faveur de Sade*, filmed in 1952, which is a feature length film without any images whatsoever. A white screen appears during segments of dialogue (which do not exceed in total twenty minutes) interspersed with complete silence accompanied by a black screen (the longest of which lasts twenty four minutes and constitutes the final sequence of the film). The first showing on June 30th 1952 at the "Ciné-Club d'Avant-Garde" in Paris, was violently interrupted by the audience and by the directors of the ciné-club. See the section entitled "Fiches Techniques" in the booklet attached to the orange sleeve containing *Hurlements…* in the *Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes*.
[9] Forest, 155.

expressing time and movement on the written page. The structure of *Archées*, a novel

published in the *TQ* Collection in 1969, imitates the trajectory of a speeding arrow that

seems "immobile because of the force of its speed."[10] One of the "paragraphs" begins

with: « parti comme une flèche », which, with the help of the French quotation marks,

looks like a sharp arrow flying towards the rest of the paragraph.[11] Forest argues that the

trajectory of a speeding arrow seems "immobile because of the force of its speed." Other

devices, such as punctuation ["/)"] that resemble an arc, suggest the fast forward

movement forward of an arrow, but at the same time "perturb the linearity of the

reading."[12] The way in which Forest describes Henric's arrow, dynamic but at the same

time immobile on the page, parallels Einstein's theory of how speed and motion are

relative to the observer, who, if observing from a moving point, may perceive the arrow

as being slow or even still.

   Writers like Philippe Sollers, leader of the *TQ* group, also presented time in a different

way. He focused on a more vertical rather than a horizontal understanding of it. Leslie

Hill writes:

> Modern and avant-garde texts have tended, of course, ever since
> Mallarmé's 'Un Coup de dés', to prefer space over time, and Sollers
> carries that process one step further….The aim is to escape the linearity of
> time and the teleological narrative order which goes with the idea of a
> time-based plot…Unlike time…space is reversible and multi-directional.[13]

According to Hill, avant-garde writers like Sollers redefined time as something

multidimensional, much like space. In Sollers' novel *Drame*, for instance, he plays with

the concept of a chessboard, which has sixty-four squares, the same number of segments

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[10] Forest, 245.
[11] Henric, 13.
[12] Forest 245-246.
[13] Hill, 110.

in which the book is divided.[14] Like a chess game, time and writing can move forward

and backward and from side to side. Through this presentation of time, the novel

suggests that human experiences can be depicted in various ways.

By considering time as something that would not eventually be lost in the irretrievable

past, the avant-garde distinguished itself from the modernists, whose works tended to

focus on understanding the past by attempting to access it and access memories of it. The

modernists' vast exploration of sentiments such as nostalgia reflected their desire to

recover some lost sense of wholeness that had been shattered by the modernization of the

world. Many of the great modernist works are defined by a profound need to make sense

of the world. Several lines from the 1921 poem "The Second Coming" by W. B. Yeats

have been quoted by various theorists for the purpose of illustrating the chaos brought on

by modernity:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Although this poem is often understood in the context of the Irish Civil war, it also

symbolized the kind of modernist art that was permeated by a sense of loss and desperate

search to recover what in the past was whole.

The avant-garde, however, rejected such nostalgic odes to the past. They were highly

sensitive to what they considered the uselessness of longing for something that no longer

existed. Avant-garde artists challenged the conviction that there was meaning behind

human existence, that a rational humanism was capable of preventing the world from

falling apart, and that humanity could be improved. Even in their prose (like Marinetti's

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[14] Hill, 110.

Le Monoplan du Pape, or surrealist leader André Breton's *Nadja*), the avant-gardistes insisted on highlighting the present moment, the experience of the now, and the constant and multidimensional movement of time. For these writers, modernism's nostalgic quest to make man whole was futile.

Although new scientific and philosophical discourses facilitated thinking about things such as time and speed in different ways, the avant-garde recognized the limitations of science. Science itself demonstrated its own limitations. Werner Heisenberg, who also conducted research in quantum physics, concluded in 1927 that it is impossible to determine at the same time both the precise speed and position of an electron; one could only describe its probable speed or position. Not only were reality, time, and speed dependent upon the observer, but according to Heisenberg, these things could only be described in approximate terms. Although Einstein tried, he could not refute Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and the complete ambiguity and lack of certainty that it suggested. The limits of human knowledge had been exposed, and this new way of thinking freed the imagination of artists, allowing them to see beyond a reality that heretofore had seemed impenetrable and finite.[15]

The twentieth century avant-garde expressed this need to explore what lay "beneath the surface" of reality, and each of the groups discussed here invented a specific method that allowed them to do that: for the Futurists, it was "universal dynamism," for the Surrealists, it was the dream realm, for the Situationists, it was the "dérive," for the telquelians, it was literary and textual theory. All of these techniques, in one way or

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[15] Kramer, Chapter 1.

another, proposed a different way of understanding the world, and thus suggested that art could facilitate that understanding.

1.2   Historical Development of Art

Aside from the philosophical and scientific ideas that filtered their way into avant-garde art, the development of society itself and the way in which it was structured directly influenced the formation of the avant-garde. According to Peter Bürger in his seminal book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, the main feature distinguishing the twentieth century avant-garde from all other literary groups was not what the avant-garde produced, but how its art functioned in society. Bürger considered the development of art and its place in society as a process that happened over time, resulting in what he calls the institutionalization of art in the modern age.

In the first stage of this process, artists became independent of their patrons. Instead of producing art for the church (as was predominantly the case in the Middle Ages) or for the King (as was the case for the production of art at the court of Louis XIV), modern art was produced for anyone who would pay for it. With the expansion of bourgeois capitalism, art became more and more a victim of market whims and artists became ever more dependent on it.

In the second phase of Bürger's periodization, artists began to actively resist the market by producing art that was not marketable. They produced art for art's sake, or

"l'art pour l'art."[16] Producing art for its own sake gave their creations a certain status in society and allowed it to exist independently, as an institution along with the other social institutions, political and economical, that comprised modern civilization. This concept of creating art for purely aesthetic purposes was only possible in an age where financial freedom had liberated artists from dependence on their benefactors and patrons. Pierre Bourdieu in *Les Règles de l'Art* explains how this financial freedom, which was possible for the first time in the nineteenth century, facilitated the emergence of an independent art market.

Although most artists had to cater to market demands in order to survive, there was one group of artists that boldly defied the demands of the market. These were mostly independently wealthy bourgeois intellectuals who were able to create a new kind of art for which there was often no financial compensation. During this phase, artists experienced a significant amount of freedom and liberation from constraints limiting artistic production. By distancing themselves from market demands, they were able to experiment with language and form. Without catering to an intended audience, for whom their work would have to make sense or be appealing, these artists were free to play with the message and the effect of what they created and give their productions meanings that were ambiguous or controversial.[17]

At the same time, the development of art and its position in society in some ways paralleled the industrialization and emerging new production practices. The changes in production during this time, which were brought on by a wave of industrial revolutions,

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[16] *Les Règles de l'Art* by Pierre Boudieu illustrates the emerging autonomy of art in the 19th century. At the same time, Bourdieu points out that art is inextricably linked with various social structures, such as economics and politics, which inevitably influence art reception and art production.
[17] Bürger, xii.

first in England in the eighteenth century and the in Europe and finally in America in the nineteenth century, permeated all levels of society and permanently changed everyday life. New inventions such as the assembly line and general improvements in machinery resulted in what is now the familiar division of labor. This separating and isolating different actions of production paralleled the separation of such aspects of social life as art into isolated compartments within society.

Although art had gained freedom from financial limits and removed itself from certain social constraints, it also suffered, as did most products in the modern age, from isolation. Some artists began to feel that art had become too removed and separated from society, and that despite gains in artistic freedom, art had actually become isolated from its surroundings. Without any connection with or responsibility toward society, art had secluded itself in the realm of pure aestheticism. The function of art had become too elitist, with little or no significance in what Bürger calls the *life praxis* or the everyday practical life of men and women.

Not only had bourgeois art become elitist and removed from society, the content of the works functioned in such a way as to uphold the laws and ideas of the bourgeoisie, so that art was consistently reinforcing and supporting the dominant ideology. Herbert Marcuse, a German philosopher and sociologist associated with the Frankfurt School, criticized capitalist society and its potential to stunt and repress creativity. Bürger explains Marcuse's ideas about bourgeois culture:

> Just as Marx shows that religion stabilizes undesirable social conditions (as consolation it immobilizes the forces making for change), so Marcuse demonstrates that bourgeois culture exiles humane values to the realm of the imagination and thus precludes their potential realization.[18]

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[18] Bürger, 11-12.

Bürger applies Marcuse's criticisms of bourgeois culture, using it to support his theory that art in the bourgeois age promoted sublimation and thus passivity and submissiveness. Bourgeois works tended to place man and human existence at the center of a mythically whole and unbroken world. Instead of producing feelings of alienation, "the citizen who, in everyday life, has been reduced to a partial function (means-ends activity) can be discovered in art as 'human being.'"[19] Art in the capitalist era helped maintain capitalist society by providing an escape for frustrated and alienated members of society.

The bourgeois novel, for example, which had become one of the most popular literary genres in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was certainly a part of the everyday routine of many individuals. Reading a Jane Austen novel, although a very popular pastime for young women of the nineteenth century, actually instructed them on how to play by the rules of bourgeois society and solidify their place within its structure.

Similarly, the opera in Italy throughout the 19th century also enjoyed immense popularity and a steady attendance from various social groups. Attending an opera performance may have been a part of everyday Italian life, but the actual opera itself, the storyline, the music, the aesthetic qualities of the performance, did not necessarily challenge the audience or provoke spectators to think differently about society. Although these two examples suggest that art continued to be a part of everyday routines, they did not prove that art interacted with the reader or the audience in a profound and life-altering way. These examples served more to reinforce already existing social structures and ideas.

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[19] Bürger, 48.

In Bürger's third phase, certain artists recognized how useless art was in society and consciously tried to change that by integrating art back into the social realm, and by creating art that challenged the assumptions of society. It is against the institution of art, the formal establishment of bourgeois aestheticism, that the first rebellious artists of the tradition now known as the avant-garde began to react. Bürger writes:

> The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of the works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in a society…[20]

The avant-garde reaction to the function of art in society was characterized by a struggle to find a place for art in the modern world, and to redefine the meaning of art in that society.

Putting art back into the *praxis* of life did not simply mean assuring art a place in everyday rituals; it meant interacting with society in such a way as to facilitate a questioning of these rituals. Futurist theater, for example, incited audience members to participate in a such a chaotic and wild way that they left the theater thinking and behaving differently than when they had entered. These performances, in fact, often ended in a kind of riot.[21] The same can be said for Surrealist cinema. Ado Kyrou, an Athenian born artist who left Greece after the Second World War for Paris where he met and befriended the leader of the Surrealist group André Breton (1896-1966), and where he attended the daily café meetings at "Le Cyrano," contributed considerably not only to

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[20] Bürger, 49.
[21] See chapter 3 for more detail.

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the way cinema was understood, but to the way art in general could have significance in the modern context.

A founder, along with Robert Benayoun, Gérard Legrand, and Georges Goldfayn, of the Surrealist review *L'Age du Cinema* and a contributor to the journal *Positif*, where he continued to set out his ideas on Surrealist film, Kyrou elaborated his ideas about how the viewing of art was to be an active endeavor that would change the life experience of the viewer and of those around her. Critic Ioann Papaspyridou explains Kyrou's theories:

> Disciple d'une pédagogie sauvage du spectateur, Kyrou propose à ce dernier de transgresser toute règle en évitant, par exemple, de payer le prix normal ou en fumant pendant la projection malgré les interdictions. Il lui indique également le moyen de sortir après le film 'furieux, exalté(s), prêt(s) à élever des barricades.[22]

According to Papaspyridou, Kyrou calls on the spectator to become part of the show, to contribute to the story that unfolds while observing it. The concept of engaged art, or art that interacts with the observer is typical of the twentieth century avant-garde. Despite the failure of his first and only feature-length film "To Bloko" or "The Roundup" in 1965, Kyrou's ideas about cinema and art aptly describe one of the main themes in avant-garde aesthetics: generating change in the world by altering the traditional way of understanding art. Kyrou's theories about how cinema should interact with society reflect the avant-garde's theories concerning the social significance of art.

Kyrou's ideas about artists maintaining a connection with the world around them, and allowing their surroundings to influence their art as they attempted to influence their surroundings, encapsulate the avant-garde endeavor. Almost sixty years before Kyrou, F.T. Marinetti, in his first manifesto, suggested some of the same things. On February 20

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[22] Papaspyridou, 72.

1909, in the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro*, Marinetti published his "Manifeste du Futurisme," carrying out, according to Giovanni Lista, the founding act of the first avant-garde movement of the modern period.[23] With this act, which preceded the existence of the Futurist group, but which alluded to it as if it were already a significant movement, the tradition of manifesto writing was born. These political diatribes aimed to inform the public that the current social, political and artistic paradigm had to be changed or destroyed.

Like Jean Moréas' 1889 Symbolist manifesto, which is considered the first of such aesthetic manifestos, and which was also published in *Le Figaro*, the Futurist manifesto disseminated aesthetic ideas into the public realm. At the same time, the publication of Marinetti's manifesto in one of the most popular Parisian newspapers proved that literature could cross over into the realm of politics and enter into everyday life. Unlike Moréas' coherent essay, which was proposing a new aesthetic movement more meaningful and pertinent than the Romantic, Realist and Naturalist Movements, which had reigned for most of the century, Marinetti's essay was less rational and lucid.

The formal experimentation and style of the Futurist tract diverges starkly not only from previous manifestos lik Moréas', but from most literary works, contemporary and historical. This manifesto was a synthesis of ideas that Marinetti had been formulating and collecting from responses to an inquiry into free verse, a project he began four years earlier with a probing article he published in his Milanese literary review *Poesia*. The resulting style, which he applied to the first Futurist manifesto, was highly acerbic, calling for violent action in a provocative way.

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[23] Lista, *Préface*, V.

The confrontational style and experimental form of the manifesto are, according to some, Marinetti's forte. Perloff writes:

> Not only are Marinetti's manifestos more interesting than his poems, novels, or even than such experimental collage-texts as the problematic *Zang Tumb Tuuuum*; his *arte di far manifesti* became a way of questioning the status of traditional genres and media, of denying the separation between, say, lyric poem and short story or even between poem and picture.[24]

Marinetti's dramatic style and bold list of suggestions engage the reader and motivate him or her to question ideas about life and literature. Marinetti's first manifesto suggests that the reader embrace danger, energetic living, and recklessness.[25] The enthusiasm with which Marinetti suggests changing life and art is typical of the manifestos of later avant-garde groups. Specifically, the manifesto format facilitated the expression of the group's ideology and provided a direct avenue to a new dialogue with the public. These manifestos also were important for the group members, as they defined the aesthetic, social, and political aims and ambitions of the group.

The language of the avant-garde manifestos was formulated in a way that seemed to wage war on all conventional ways of thinking and expression. The avant-gardistes experimentation with language, whose caustic and vibrant qualities are displayed in the manifestos, was meant to subvert and liberate both art and society.

Textual subversion in particular remained one of the prime goals of all the avant-garde groups. The later groups (the Surrealists, the Situationists and the *TQ* group) because of their profound interest in Marxism, became concerned with revealing the discrepancies and exploitations of capitalist society present in language. Surrealism employed

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[24] Perloff, 90-92.

[25] *F.T. Marinetti, Teorie e Invenzione Futurista*, p 9: "Noi vogliamo cantare l'amor del pericolo, l'abitudine all'energia e alla temerità." Translated in *F.T. Marinetti Critical Writings*, p 13.

techniques that tapped into the unconscious in order to find meaning beneath the surface of this society, and beneath the surface of the language it used. The Situationists tried to manipulate and change, or "détourne" the intended meaning of language in order to suggest alternative meanings. The *TQ* group focused on illuminating incongruities or inconsistencies in the text, or "deconstructing"[26] the meaning of a text in order to prove that there is not one unique and omnipotent interpretation. Forest writes:

> Le projet répétitivement et explicitement défendu par la revue consiste à faire de l'écriture le lieu d'un questionnement offensif dirigé vers la philosophie et les sciences humaines. Le texte est pensé comme le lieu actif de la subversion de toute pensée.[27]

For the avant-garde, questioning the meaning of language and offering alternative forms, styles and meanings in art was pivotal in changing the relationship of art with society.

The liberation of words was a way for the avant-gardistes to reject the rules of art and society and liberate the artist and his work from social constraints. The parallel between liberation of aesthetic constraints and of social rules was elucidated in various ways by each of the groups concerned in this dissertation. The Futurists called for the destruction of both literary criteria and social laws. Complete annihilation of the laws of language, of all grammatical and syntactical rules, and even public displays of irreverence for the institution of art like "spitting on the Altar of Art" are elucidated in *Manifeste Technique de la Littérature Futuriste* (also referred to as *Destruction de la Syntaxe*), first published in French on May 11, 1912. Marinetti explains, "Le Futurisme a pour principe le complet renouvellement de la sensibilité humaine."[28] The total renewal of human sensibility

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[26] A term coined by Jacques Derrida, a close friend of Sollers and other writers of *TQ* during the sixties, and whose important work *L'Ecriture et la Différence* was published in the *TQ* editions.
[27] Forest, 300.
[28] Marinetti, « La Sensibilité Futuriste et l'Imagination sans Fil, » Les Mots en Liberté Futuristes, 35.

referred to by Marinetti was necessary for the development of human intuition, and to make possible a more profound understanding of the universe.

The manifesto format that allowed Marinetti to explain his intentions and to respond to his critics in a clear and straightforward manner was at least superficially rejected by the *TQ* group. Beginning with the first number of the journal in March of 1960, the eclectic group of writers that made up the editorial committee refused to print a manifesto that would articulate the journal's specific goals. Instead, the "Declaration" found in this first issue stated what the journal was not: it was not, in the existentialist sense, an "engaged" journal and it was not part of the other camp of French journals that had defined themselves in opposition to Sartre's philosophy of engagement and thus focused on aesthetics. This double negation, far from limiting the aims and intentions of *TQ*, enabled the journal to be free of association, to be independent and thus capable of innovation and originality, qualities for which the journal is remembered today.

Despite *TQ's* refusal to define itself with a founding manifesto, the contributors of the journal, and especially its editorial committee led by Marcelin Pleynet and Philippe Sollers, agreed to certain aesthetic and political criteria for the journal's articles that left little room for dissent. The cult of personality that avant-garde groups of the twentieth century seemed to produce inevitably led to misunderstandings, fights, and ostracizing among the members. Among all the groups, a member would emerge whose name would become synonymous with the movement. Philippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), André Breton (1896-1966), Guy Debord (1931-1994), and Philippe Sollers (1936-), although they were not necessarily the most productive or significant writers of their respective groups, nonetheless became leaders who often dictated in no uncertain terms

the directions their movements would take. These "dictators" were not always

unanimously endorsed, and factions would emerge that complicated and sometimes

stunted the groups' intellectual progress. Forest writes:

> *TQ* n'aura pas peu contribué à la folklorique geste des
> avant-gardes. Dès la naissance du groupe, la revue s'engagea dans
> de perpétuels combats internes, ne se refusant ni au jeu des
> exclusions ni à celui des alliances.[29]

Although all of the avant-garde groups suffered from the clashing of egos, the original

editorial committee of *TQ* experienced a particularly absurd moment when they

dismissed one of the founding members.

   Sollers admits that from the beginning, the young intelligent members of the *TQ* group

had little in common, and this soon led to disagreements and clashes. The relationship

between Jean-Edern Hallier and Sollers was a good example. Due to irreconcilable

differences, all but one of the members of the editorial committee decided to oust Jean-

Edern Hallier, who was not in Paris at the time, from his position as chief. They then

wrote Hallier's family to warn them of this important decision that they believed would

deeply affect their son. General Hallier Sr., who at the time was vacationing at his Swiss

chalet with the family, begged the *TQ* group to inform his son in person of their decision.

After much deliberation, the group decided to take the lengthy journey to the snowy

hamlet of Crans. During the brief stay at the Hallier's getaway, during which time

Sollers claimed he had been threatened by the General, the group left in a huff,

completely cutting ties with Hallier, who later went on to establish his own critical

literary journal, *L'Idiot International*.[30]

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[29] Forest, 94.
[30] Forest, 126-128.

Later on, in his memoirs, Sollers would write that the General intervened in his military posting during the Algerian war in an attempt to send him to the violent Tunisian front and thus eliminate Sollers and make room for his own son's Parisian literary career.[31] Hallier denies the accusations, and adds that his father's brusque reaction during the Swiss expedition was due to an insult he received from Sollers.[32] Such melodramatic stories of cutthroat rivalry and blind egoism are not uncommon among many avant-garde intellectuals, who were just as volatile in their private interactions as they were vigorous in their intellectual practices.

Avant-garde leaders like Sollers benefited from a certain tradition in France of placing intellectuals in positions of prominence and respect. According to Philip Wood, French writers like Jean-Paul Sartre were more inclined than others during the modern period to become involved in everyday life and politics, mainly because of the historical role of the French state as a centralized and organizing force of cultural activity. The involvement of the state in cultural development reinforced and legitimized the position of the intellectual in society.[33] Sartre, perhaps more than any other modern intellectual, acquired such a prestigious reputation that, even during his lifetime, crowds thronged to hear him lecture on philosophy.

In 1964, that is toward the end of his career, Sartre, along with de Beauvoir, organized a conference entitled "Que peut la littérature ?" As expected, in his lecture Sartre promoted politically engaged literature and criticized contemporary literature for being totally disconnected from reality and unable to effect social change. Faye and Ricardou

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[31] Sollers, *Un Vrai Roman*, 83, 87.
[32] Forest, 123.
[33] Wood, 1-12.

attended the conference and defended the *TQ* (and avant-garde) position they felt Sartre

was attacking. They argued, using Saussurian linguistic theory, that the simple presence

of literature could evoke feelings, transmit messages, and define ideas more effectively

than overtly revolutionary literature. Sartre did not seem to know much about Saussure,

structuralism or the new avant-garde, and the Telquelians criticized him for mixing up

Husserlian terminology with vocabulary from Saussure. This, as far as they were

concerned, proved to them that Sartre was outdated and no longer a real avant-gardiste.[34]

   TQ's position was clear; the journal felt that it was more forward-thinking, more

sophisticated, and more avant-garde than any of its contemporaries, especially the

Existentialists. Initially, *TQ*'s ideology, laid out in the first issue in the *Déclaration*,

denounced the political « engagement » promoted by Sartre. By the end of the 1960s,

however, *TQ* grew to be more militant in its espousal of Marxism, and eventually

Maoism. In 1971, the journal published two manifesto-like texts employing political

rhetoric that clearly enunciated its Maoist position. The following year, several members

of *TQ* founded a militant journal entitled *Bulletin du Mouvement de Juin 71*.[35] Although

this journal only published three issues, its existence marked a heightened period of

political awareness for the *TQ* group.

   A more thorough discussion of the relationship between politics and the avant-garde

can be found in the third chapter of this dissertation. Suffice it to say at this point that

politics marked the existence of all the twentieth century avant-garde groups. Here again,

the twentieth century avant-garde was not the first group of artists concerned with

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[34] Forest, 211.

[35] The name comes from the date of publication of Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi's "De La Chine," a pro-Maoist text inspired by a visit to China, and thus controversial for the PCF, who continued to support Stalin and Russian communism.

political causes. Intellectuals like Zola, who was threatened with imprisonment for the position he took publicly supporting Alfred Dreyfus, a French artillery captain wrongfully convicted of treason in 1894 due to anti-Semitism, also wanted to correct social injustices.

There is, however, an important difference between the political engagement of the avant-garde and that of earlier figures like Zola. Unlike Zola's essay "J'Accuse," which was printed in the Parisian daily *L'Aurore* and led to the eventual exoneration of Dreyfus, later avant-garde political positions were never separated or isolated from their proponents' art and aesthetic ideology, as Zola's was. Although the success of Zola's essay is a landmark in the history of intellectual power and influence in France, it had little to do with his own ideas about writing and about art in general. For the avant-garde, however, changing society was inextricably linked with changing art and aesthetic values.

Furthermore, the avant-garde's political positions were not always as clearly expressed as Zola's were in "J'Accuse." The manifestos of the avant-garde, although arguably more straightforward than its artistic works, often were tempered with their aesthetic beliefs and with a certain playfulness and sense of humor that served as a powerful weapon against detractors. While Marinetti's first manifesto was critical and serious, it also at times displayed a tone of sarcasm and ridicule. The juxtaposition of serious political ideology and playful experimentation with language and its meanings were typical of twentieth century avant-garde art. Even when exploring darker subjects, like war, violence, anger and frustration, such experimental writers were able to insert a

dimension of playfulness and humor (at times ironic or sarcastic) that shattered more traditional and rational ways of understanding the world.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this public rejection of social values and practices was that it could take place at all. Jürgen Habermas, in his extensive analysis of the nature of the public sphere and how it developed in the bourgeois age, explains how "private people" acquired public identities and responsibilities. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* describes how the emergence of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century, and the way of life which entailed congregating in public coffee houses, organizing salons, and efficient epistolary exchange, new forums for the discussion of public affairs came into being. Jürgen Habermas argues in his book that, initially, the focus of public discussions was mainly literary and intellectual. The evolution of the public sphere into a political forum was gradual.[36] The possibility of an aesthetic reaction against contemporary social and political crises like the First World War was possible thanks to the existence of a free and unrestricted public space.

Of course people always were capable of having opinions about public matters, but Habermas distinguishes this from the phenomenon of people gathering together in a public space to openly discuss matters of social and political importance. Habermas dates the first example of such a public discussion having a significant influence over public policy to the 1722 publication of the first issue of the *London Journal* by the Tories in order to promulgate opposition against the dominant Whigs. Thus was born public opinion, according to Habermas, and a new sort of authority for the people.[37] The

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[36] Habermas, 29-32.
[37] Habermas, 60.

relationship between the citizens and their government became more engaged, with the opinion of the public playing a more and more decisive role in public policy.[38]

In France, in particular, the shaping of the public sphere was greatly influenced by various social and political revolutions, beginning with the Revolution of 1789 which eliminated (but not permanently) royal power. According to Habermas, the French Revolution created the social and political organizations and institutions necessary for the greater development of a public sphere. Bourgeois ideals and morals were propagated through these institutions and exercised a significant authority over many spheres of life, including the production of art. As a result, art became part of the social structures that supported the governing powers, and vice versa.[39]

The revolution of 1848, however, helped create a counter public discourse. Bourdieu points out that the 1848 revolution served to awaken and politicize both the intelligentsia and artists, laying bare the social constraints under which art suffered. Ironically, this compelled certain artists to subvert their own class in order to improve art and its place in society.[40]

But the Paris Commune, (from March to May of 1871) was the pivotal step in shaping a critical public discourse. In her book *The Emergence of Social Space*, Kristin Ross argues that the Paris Commune was a turning point in French history when many norms and customs were completely overturned in order to create a new and more powerful

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[38] The extent to which public opinion remains powerful is revealed when intellectuals like Noam Chomsky in his book *Hegemony or Survival* cite journalists who state that the two major world powers of the 21st century are the United States and Public Opinion.

[39] Habermas, 69-70.

[40] Bourdieu 79-91. For a more substantial discussion on how 19th century Avant-garde artists were inevitably entrenched in the very culture they derided, see Kristin Ross page 65. She discusses how these artists did not necessarily understand their profound ties to the bourgeoisie, and nonetheless attempted to detach art from a culture they critiqued and at the same time identified with.

public voice.   During the seventy-three days of revolt and upheaval, spaces in Paris were appropriated by the common people and used for their own purposes. They converted private homes into public meeting places and barricaded them, using them as battle grounds to fend off the government army.[41] The center of the city and the spaces most strategic and accessible to the greatest amount of people became contested areas.

   Many Parisian workers, who had been relocated to the northeastern suburbs of Menilmontant and Belleville as a result of Baron Haussman's plans to "clean up" the city, came back to occupy the center of the city, "using the elements or terrain of the dominant social order to one's own ends, for a transformed purpose."[42] The social classes forced to the peripheries by Haussman's architectural plans took the opportunity of the chaos to reinstate their presence in the politically, socially and economically important city center.

   The events of the Commune can be seen as democratizing forces; they gave a voice to a class other than the bourgeoisie, and they did away with divisions such as high and low art (exalting news reporting for instance and giving acute importance to poster announcements), increasing the significance of women as revolutionaries, and destroying symbols of power such as government monuments. The dramatic re-appropriation of common city space bears a striking similarity to activities a century later by the Situationists. Just as the Commune rebels launched an "attack on verticality,"[43] symbolized by the destruction of the Vendôme monument (which praises Napoleon's exploits), the Situationists also wanted to do away with hierarchy in the city. They

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[41] Ross, 37-38.
[42] Ross, 42.
[43] Ross, 5.

believed that the meaning of the city could be re-appropriated or turned around (*détourné*) in order to give more significance to common spaces.

In 1962, a group of Situationists, Guy Debord, Atilla Kotányi, and Raoul Vaneigem wrote a tract entitled *Sur la Commune* that elaborated on this idea that the Paris Commune represented a historical moment where not only social classes were over turned, but where the physical spaces that calcified these social strata were challenged and even destroyed. The Situationists wrote:

> La Commune représente jusqu'à nous <u>la seule realization d'un urbanisme révolutionaire</u>, s'attaquant sur le terrain aux signes petrifiés de l'organisation dominante de la vie, reconnaissant l'espace social en terme politiques, ne croyant pas qu'un monument puisse être innocent…. 'Tout espace est déjà occupé par l'ennemi…Le moment d'apparition de l'urbanisme authentique, ce sera de créer, dans certaines zones, le vide de cette occupation…'[44]

For the Situationists, the link between urban structures, social classes, and ideological paradigms was important. They believed that changing the spaces of the city and how they were used would lead to a change in social and political ideologies.

Ironically, the bourgeois creation of a public space, both ideological and physical, resulted in a growing critical discourse about bourgeois values. The critical public space opened up by a series of events and circumstances allowed artists, who had until now separated themselves from society, creating "art for art's sake," to pull art down from its lofty heights and make it an instrument for pointing out social problems. The modernist phase, as we have seen in this section, and the historical development leading up to it, created various conditions that facilitated the birth of the twentieth century avant-garde.

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[44] *Internationale Situationniste*, "Aux poubelles de l'histoire,"110. Originally published as "Sur la Commune" on March 18, 1962, and reprinted as "Aux poubelles de l'histoire" in *Internationale Situationniste* numéro 12, septembre 1969. Translated into English in Knabb 314-317.

1.3   Generations of Avant-garde Writers

In this section we will see how the avant-garde, coming at the end of the modernist period, created a place for itself within this tradition, but at the same time set itself apart from the modernists. The manner in which the avant-garde vituperated literary tradition, but at the same time created its very own literary canon, is one of the defining features of the avant-garde groups considered in this dissertation. Harold Bloom's seminal work *The Anxiety of Influence* explains how the anxieties and insecurities associated with the greatness of previous artists influences the development of later artists. In the case of the avant-garde, the anxiety resulted in a concerted effort to aggressively attack previous artists,[45] but it simultaneously provoked the conscious formation of an alternative aesthetic genealogy.

The lineage created by the avant-garde groups was a history of associations and dissociations. Beginning with the Futurists, the relationships that these artists forged with other artists created links in the different generations of avant-garde writers. Marinetti, for instance met Alfred Jarry (1873-1907), a French playwright best known for his experimental play *Ubu Roi*, in the Parisian neighborhood of Montmartre in 1903. The two writers kept in touch after Marinetti returned to Italy, exchanging letters about Marinetti's first major play *Le Roi Bombance* published in 1906 in *Le Mercure de France*, for which Jarry gave his Italian friend encouragement.[46]

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[45] See Louis Aragon's 1928 *Traité du Style*, where the author criticizes and mocks the literary canon.
[46] Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 35.

Marinetti was also friends with Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), a half-Italian half-Polish contemporary of the Futurists who was also part of the Montmartre artistic circle.[47] Apollinaire attended a Futurist exhibit in Paris in 1912[48], and later coined the term "Surrealism" in the program notes for Jean Cocteau and Erik Staie's ballet *Parade*. Futurists like Gino Severini and Luciano Folgore published in the liteary journal *Sic* alongside Apollinaire and Surrealists like Aragon, Breton, Soupault and Tzara.[49]

Both Jarry and Apollinaire were important for the Surrealists as well.[50] Despite their negative and disparaging nature, Breton's remarks about Apollinaire in the First Manifesto and elsewhere attest to the latter's importance among the Surrealists. Jarry's importance can be seen in Breton's naming him a Surrealist, probably because Jarry had embodied some of the most important Surrealist ideas, such as changing life and art in a way that upset bourgeois discretion.[51]

Breton also mentions Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) in his 1924 manifesto, and unlike the references to Apollinaire, they were unequivocally positive. Perhaps this was in part due to the fact that Breton was not a contemporary of Baudelaire, as he was with Apollinaire, and thus felt less competitive towards him. Baudelaire had died thirty years before Breton's birth, and his reputation, at the time of Breton's career, was one of *poète maudit*. Such a peripherally aesthetic figure was exactly the kind of poet the Surrealists wanted to appropriate as their own and emulate. Baudelaire gained his reputation as a rebellious artist by reacting against such powerful social institutions that had emerged

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[47] For an account of these Monmartre artists, see Roger Shattuck's *The Banquet Years*.
[48] Gershman, 116 and Flint, 21.
[49] Gershman, 117.
[50] For further information on the aesthetic relationship between Apollinaire and Breton, see Adrianna Paliyenko's article entitled "Rereading Breton's Debt to Apollinaire: Surrealism and Aesthetics of Creative Imaging" in Romance Quarterly, v.42, issue 1, 1995. p18.
[51] Breton, *Manifestes*, 38.

under Napoleon III (1852-1870) as the influential salons, which could dictate the production of art, and served to at once weaken these institutions and change the role of art in society.[52] The press also exercised authority and at times even censured culture and aesthetic expression.[53] According to Pierre Bourdieu in his book *Les Règles de l'Art*, Flaubert, Baudelaire, and others strongly resented such institutions and their "bourgeois" standards, to such an extent that they claimed to be indifferent to them.[54]

Bourdieu explains how these modernist writers felt compelled to distance themselves from conventional political and aesthetic views, and how such resistance became respected in artistic and intellectual circles. He writes:

> C'est seulement dans un champ littéraire et artistique parvenu à un haut degré d'autonomie, comme ce sera le cas dans la France de la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle (notamment après Zola et l'affaire Dreyfus), que tous ceux qui entendent s'affirmer comme membres à part entière du monde de l'art, et surtout ceux qui prétendent y occuper des positions dominantes, se sentiront tenus de manifester leur indépendance à l'égard des puissances externes, politiques ou économiques ; alors, et alors seulement, l'indifférence à l'égard des pouvoirs et des honneurs, même les plus spécifiques en apparence, comme l'Académie, voire le prix Nobel, la distance à l'égard des puissants et de leurs valeurs, seront immédiatement comprises, voire respectées, et, par là, récompensées et tendront de ce fait à s'imposer de plus en plus largement comme des maximes pratiques de conduites légitimes.[55]

Indifference toward honors became a widespread attitude among innovative and anti-traditional artists of the period. Bourdieu sees Baudelaire as the prototypical avant-garde artist of this time, and his rejection of the nomination for the Académie the exemplary act of this group of artists: "Baudelaire incarne la position la plus extrême de l'avant-garde,

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[52] Bourdieu, 79-82.
[53] Bourdieu, 84-91.
[54] Bourdieu, 90.
[55] Bourdieu, 94.

celle de la révolte contre tous les pouvoirs et toutes les institutions, à commencer par les institutions littéraires."[56]

The struggle of these early modernists parallels the struggle of the twentieth century avant-garde on many levels. Despite the efforts of the modernists and their avant-garde successors, the press continued to be a concern for foreword thinking artists well into the last decades of the twentieth century. According to Jacques Henric, who published three of his novels in the *TQ* collection, French critics and the official press were both adverse to avant-garde experiments in literature. He explains:

> …on se heurte à deux obstacles : une grande presse dont les critiques, eux-mêmes souvent écrivains, sont des traditionalistes opposés à tout ce qui est nouveau, tout ce qui marque une rupture, et pas seulement dans la production actuelle mais dans tout ce qui est l'aventure de l'art moderne depuis la fin du XIXe siècle. Mallarmé, Lautréamont, Jarry, le Futurisme, le dadaïsme, Artaud, Pound, Joyce, Bataille, même le Nouveau Roman… Comment voulez-vous qu'on puisse avoir la moindre existence à leurs yeux ?....Et puis il y a l'autre obstacle, plus intéressant à mes yeux, constitué par des journaux qui font souvent preuve d'ouverture à une littérature dite expérimentale ou d'avant-garde et qui, bizarrement, excluent, selon des critères de discrimination qui leur sont propres, certains livres….Trop lié à *TQ* ?[57]

Henric criticized the press for its traditionalist views vis-à-vis all modernist writers, particularly writers associated with *TQ*. For this reason, Henric claimed, *TQ* writers were often ignored and excluded from literary journals. Henric's frustration with the press was symbolic of the avant-garde's struggle with conventional aesthetic tastes.

In addition to reacting against the strictures of the press, the early modernists were reacting against the concept of "art for art's sake," which emerged with the rise of such bourgeois concepts as the supreme value of working hard and accumulating wealth.

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[56] Bourdieu, 95, 99.

[57] Forest, 585, quoting Henric in *Dirty*, February 1981, talking about his book *Carrousels* and how it was treated by the French press.

These aspects of life were separated from leisure, pleasure, and aesthetic development. This separation of art from certain parts of life, and the dictation of art standards by those in power led the early modernists to try to bridge the gap between aestheticism and real life. Although artists like Baudelaire promoted the idea that art was not supposed to be useful or effective, the emphasis on the difference between art and work, between beauty and everyday life, only served to emphasize class and hierarchy within society. Ross writes that the aestheticist writers appropriated "the old aristocratic doctrine that manual work, work related to concerns of practicality or utility, was the attribute of inferiority."[58] For Ross, the aestheticists emphasized the separation between work and pleasure.

Baudelaire and other poets who were associated with the Decadents attempted to close the gap by writing poetry about traditionally non-aesthetic subjects like the poor, drunkards, and streetwalkers. Such themes, which were in part the result of the growth and spread of urbanization, were not considered appropriate objects of admiration and beauty that traditional romantic poetry solicited. Baudelaire, however, attempted to extract beauty from all realms of everyday life.

Another Decadent poet, Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), treated the theme of work and everyday life. His work, according to Ross, promoted "the right to laziness," and rejected the bourgeois work ethic by lauding vagabondage and the bohemian lifestyle. Ross points to two contemporary works, Rimbaud's *Une Saison* (1873) and Lafargue's *Le Droit à la Paresse* (1883) as demonstrating the anti-working mentality of the period.[59]

In addition to subverting bourgeois ideas, subverting traditional form was important for modernist writers like Baudelaire and Rimbaud, who used free verse and untraditional

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[58] Ross, 65.
[59] Ross, 60-65.

rhythm in their poetry. These experiments with form plus the attempts to defamiliarize

content in order to help the reader view it as something new and different, when it very

often was not, were part of the trend in modernist art to change perceptions of art and

everyday life.

   One of the better known acts of defamiliarization and aesthetic defiance was put

forward by Marcel Duchamp, an important Dada and Surrealist artist and one of the more

commercially successful members of the group. Duchamp chose to react against

Leonardo da Vinci. His 1919 readymade[60] *La Joconde aux Moustaches (L.H.O.O.Q)* is a

reference to da Vinci's Mona Lisa. The abbreviated letters at the end of the new title of

the now mustached and goateed figure, when read aloud in French, sound like "elle a

chaud au cul" or "she has a hot bum." The letters also sound out "look" in English.

These added words, combined with the peculiar facial hair and the racy title, poke fun at

the serious respect the work normally demands. Such extreme "misreadings"

distinguished the twentieth century avant-garde from other aesthetic movements. Their

surprising tactics, and the intensity with which they worked in order to change the

viewer's perceptions, contributed to the avant-garde's redefinition of art.

   In rejecting a certain kind of art, and in redefining a specific work's significance in

society, the Surrealists carved out their niche in the lineage of the avant-garde. The

Situationists in turn wanted to link themselves with Surrealism but at the same time

distinguish themselves from it. Guy Debord, the leader of the Situationist group, writes:

> Le dadaïsme et le surréalisme sont les deux courants qui marquèrent la fin
> de l'art moderne… Le dadaïsme a voulu *supprimer l'art sans le réaliser* ;
> et le surréalisme a voulu *réaliser l'art sans le supprimer*. La position

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[60] A term coined by Duchamp, a "readymade" is piece of art that is partly or wholly made from an already
existing object. The newly found object is then changed or presented in a different way.

> critique élaborée depuis par les *situationnistes* a montré que la suppression et la réalisation de l'art sont les aspects inséparables d'un même *dépassement de l'art*.[61]

Debord implies that the Dadaists wanted to redefine art, but were excessively nihilistic. He claims that the Surrealists, on the contrary, created art without destroying the constraints imposed by previous aesthetic paradigms. According to Debord, then, only the Situationists both destroyed art and created something entirely new.

Although highly critical of the early avant-garde, Debord grouped them together as part of a heritage to which he considered Situationism the obvious heir. But instead of passively accepting this legacy, Situationism imposed on it a certain perspective. Like all of the avant-garde groups before them, they wished to distinguish certain aspects of the earlier avant-garde, thus redefining it and creating an original avant-garde "canon." The Situationist mechanism called "détournement" enabled an artist to consider a work, interpret it, and give it a new meaning. For the Situationists, the most effective way of rebelling against tradition and creating something new was to take what already existed (whether it was a piece of art, literature, or a simple scrap of paper or magazine advertisement) and give it a new and different meaning.

Analyzing the work of Asger Jorn (1914-1973), Claire Gilman elaborated on the meaning of *détournement*, explaining that it does not necessarily imply negation or reduction. On the contrary, when the Situationists applied the technique of *détournement*, they added additional layers of meaning to the work of art. *Détournement* is different from the techniques used in typical avant-garde collages such as Duchamp's drawing a mustache on the *Mona Lisa,* which detracts from the work's renowned status

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[61] Debord, *Société de Spectacle*, 191.

as a serious masterpiece and gives Leonardo da Vinci's painting a playful comic meaning

instead. Situationist *détournement* acknowledges the original significance of the work

but imposes another meaning on it that often emphasizes its obsoleteness as a work of art.

Gilman writes:

> …instead of dismantling the original work of art to make an effective political statement, appropriation preserves the work, albeit as an inert artifact. The work is not superseded by a new, enlightened meaning, but reconfirmed as a mere object suitable for the museum. Such a recontexutalization exposes the very fallacy of radical claims for reinvestment or "indignation," and ultimately positions the [work of art] as an object of "indifference."[62]

Jorn's collages went beyond simply giving the work another meaning; they emphasized

the limited significance of the work of art in society and stripped away any pretensions

that the work might have had.

   Bloom's theory on the anxiety of influence sheds some light on the Situationists' and

other avant-garde groups' attempt to carve out their own place in history. Bloom

explains how the interactions between different artistic generations can have certain

effects on artists and their works. He identifies six different psychological processes, or

"revisionary ratios" by which an artist attempts to repress the anxiety experienced when

facing the greatness of artistic precursors. Although each phase of the process makes the

artist stronger and helps him/her understand his/her anxiety, the anxiety is never defeated.

Instead of being successful in overcoming the anxiety, Bloom claims that every poet is

inextricably linked to great precursors, that every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent

poem and the manifestation of the anxiety that results from misinterpreting a precursor.

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[62] McDonough, 197, taken from Claire Gilman's "Asger Jorn's Avant-Garde Archives."

Bloom's fifth revisionary ratio, "askesis," where the later poet transforms his own

work through "the purgations of his revisionary stance" is one way of understanding the

Situationists' idea of *détournement*. Bloom describes "askesis":

> The later poet does not…undergo a revisionary movement of emptying,
> but of curtailing; he yields up part of his own human and imaginative
> endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor,
> and he does this in his poem by so stationing it in regard to the parent
> poem as to make that poem undergo an askesis too; the precursor's
> endowment is also truncated.[63]

Much as in Bloom's description, the Situationists had to "limit" or delineate their own

creativity in an effort to separate themselves from previous art. They did this by similarly

limiting the parent work and imposing on it a different meaning, which in effect limited

the original work's influence. The Situationists' attempt to reveal the pretentiousness of

their predecessor's art would be seen by Bloom as a sign of their own anxiety concerning

the predecessor's greatness.

TQ also looked to artistic fathers in order to appropriate and to redefine them. The

writers of the journal were particularly impressed by Surrealism, which they considered

the most important literary event of the first half of the twentieth century.[64] TQ writers

looked to poets whom the Surrealists admired, like Lautréamont (born Isidore

Ducasse1846-1870). His collection of lyric poems entitled *Chants de Maldoror* had

been brought to light by Breton, but *TQ* exposed the relatively unknown poet further.

Marcelin Pleynet, a significant contributor to *TQ*, published an analysis of Lautréamont's

work in 1967 entitled *Lautréamont par Lui-Même*. In addition to becoming a bestseller

and elevating a heretofore relatively little-known poet to the lime light, Pleynet's piece

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[63] Bloom, 15.
[64] Marcel Pleynet, "Les Problèmes d'Avant-Garde," in n. 25 of *TQ*, Spring 1966, pp. 77-86,.

inspired former Surrealist Louis Aragon (1897-1982) to write about his own discovery of the *Chants de Maldoror*. Aragon's piece, in turn, provoked a positive response from various newspapers and journals like *Le Monde* and *Les Lettres Françaises*[65]

In addition to drawing attention to a talented writer, Pleynet was also able to bolster *TQ*'s legitimacy by applying some of its own literary theories to Lautréamont's poetry. Since there was no official biography of the author (we know relatively little about his life) and because his poetry was not easily classifiable, Pleynet had a clean slate on which to apply the theories of *TQ* to poetry that, with the exception of the Surrealists, had been largely ignored and undervalued by the literary establishment. Furthermore, Pleynet's analysis, because it treated a poet respected by the Surrealists, strengthened the conection between the Surrealists and the *TQ* group.

Sollers followed up on Pleynet's project in the following years with two of his own pieces on the poet: "La Science de Lautréamont" in 1968 and "Encore Lautréamont" in 1971.[66] The journal further tightened its control over Lautréamont's reputation in an anonymous piece published at the end of issue number 17, in which Maurice Saillet, who had recently been commissioned by *Livre de Poche* to oversee a complete collection of Lautréamont's work, was criticized as a pseudo intellectual.[67] The belligerent attitude towards Saillet demonstrated how reluctant *TQ* was to accept judgments by others on writers they considered part of their own intellectual heritage.

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[65] Pleynet's work began a tradition of launching certain mysterious and peripheral poets into more mainstream positions. See below.
[66] "La Science de Lautréamont," is in Sollers' collection of essays entitled *Logiques*. "Encore Lautréamontt" in n. 46 of *TQ*, Summer 1971.
[67] "L'Incroyable Saillet," in n. 17 of *TQ*, Spring 1964.

TQ chose other artists in addition to Lautréamont to include in its list of literary

predecessors, most of them in some way connected to Surrealism. During the first

conference held by *TQ* in late summer of 1963 in Cerisy-la-Salle, Michel Foucualt, soon

to be one of the most widely respected twentieth century French philosophers, and who

was presiding over the proceedings on this occasion, addressed the audience with the

following remarks:

> Vous vous référez tous en parlant de vos œuvres à des expériences
> spirituelles. D'autres vous ont précédés dans cette voie. Ce sont les
> surréalistes. Mais eux exploraient le domaine psychologique pour saisir
> l'inconscient. A *TQ*, ce qu'on explore, c'est l'espace de la pensée.
> Georges Bataille et Maurice Blanchot, eux aussi, se sont dirigés dans ce
> sens. Philosophiquement vous vous attachez aux interrogations de
> Heidegger : 'Qu'est-ce que penser et parler ?' Et c'est pourquoi le
> langage, au lieu d'être, comme chez les surréalistes, un instrument d'accès
> à l'inconscient ou son enregistrement dans l'écriture automatique, est la
> matière même où vous pratiquez vos expériences.[68]

By mentioning the differences between Surrealism and *TQ*, and by pointing out the

similarities between *TQ* and Georges Bataille (1897-1962), a writer ousted from the

Surrealist group by Breton, Foucault was attempting to define the journal as an avant-

garde enterprise linked to Surrealism, but independent of it.

Bataille continued to be an inspiration to the *TQ* journal. In June and July of 1972, *TQ*

organized a conference at the chateau of Cerisy-la-Salle whose title hinted at the

existence of a different strain of Surrealism: "Vers une Révolution Culturelle : Artaud,

Bataille." Like Bataille, Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) was another artist who was

expelled from the Surrealist group. Both writers had been ostracized by the Surrealists

and were still considered at this time by the general public as second class writers on the

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[68] This is quoted by a literary critic for *Le Monde* Jacqueline Piaitier in a piece entitled "Six Ecrivains et un Philosophe en Quête d'une Nouvelle Littérature," 7 September 1963.

periphery of Surrealism.[69] The organizers of the *TQ* conference wished, among other

things, to cast more light on these two peripheral figures of Surrealism who were

considered illicit rebels by Breton and his supporters. By doing so they reinvented each

of these writers and made them a part of TQ's avant-garde lineage. As J.F. Fourny points

out, « Le Lautréamont de *Tel Quel* se devait donc d'être un Lautréamont différent de

celui que Breton et Aragon avaient littéralement découvert à la B.N. »[70]

   Despite the differences that *TQ* purposefully insisted existed between itself and

mainstream Surrealism, the journal was nevertheless closely linked to its avant-garde

precursor. For example, a couple of years after the publication of his first novel, *Une*

Curieuse Solitude in 1958, Philippe Sollers, one of the founders of *TQ*, met Breton, who

approved of the novel and of the *TQ* project. Initially, Breton, like the poets Maurice

Ponge and Bataille, was considered by *TQ* to be a major talent worthy of praise. Breton's

interest in Sollers and in *TQ* promised a fruitful exchange. In 1963, Sollers and

Thibaudeau wrote a radio broadcast praising Breton that was published in n. 13 of *TQ*.

Certain literary critics like Jean Ristat have pointed out similarities between Sollers and

Breton.[71]

   But there was dissention among the neo-Surrealists and the *TQ* writers concerning the

official lineage of avant-garde artists. Breton's death in 1966 only exacerbated these

disagreements. The 1968 Winter issue attacked Jean Schuster, an important neo-

Surrealist, and the Surrealist group itself, in a piece entitled "Le Surréalisme?"[72]

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[69] Forest, 437.
[70] Fourny, 231.
[71] Kauppi, 56.
[72] *TQ* n. 33 Summer 1968, *TQ* n. 35 Winter 1968.

The journal also attacked other writers associated with the Surrealist movement. For example, Louis Aragon, the director of the communist literary review *Les Lettres Françaises*, wrote about Breton after the Surrealist leader's death.[73] Aragon recalled their friendship and experiences with Dada. He described his discovery of Lautréamont, as well as of Breton and Philippe Soupault's *Les Champs Magnétiques*, one of the first important Surrealist works because of its experiments in automatic writing.[74] *TQ*, however, considered this "posthumous reconciliation" opportunistic, and was highly opposed to Aragon's appropriation of Surrealism when the leader was no longer around to oppose.[75] Aragon, a staunch supporter of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) until his death, took offense.[76] The tension between the journal and the communist writer were played out a few months later in the Fall issue of *TQ*, when the journal officially cut its ties with the PCF.[77]

But TQ was not ready to cut completely its ties to the Surrealist tradition. In the issue following the May events of 1968, *TQ* drew on Foucault's earlier mention of Georges Bataille, a rogue Surrealist who seemed to have much in common with the journal. In this issue, Denis Hollier presented an unpublished Bataille text that criticized what Bataille had considered the poetic idealism set out in Breton's *Second manifeste du surréalisme*, a document where Bataille was criticized by Breton.[78]

Hostile exchanges in journals and at conferences ensued in the following years. In 1971, in number 45 of *TQ*, Pleynet published a revision of his study on Lautréamont

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[73] See Aragon's "Lautréamont et Nous" in *Les Lettres Françaises*, 1st and 8th June 1967, reed. Sables, 1992.
[74] *TQ* n. 46, Summer 1971.
[75] *TQ* n. 45, Spring 1971, see Pleynet's "Lautréamont Politique."
[76] Ffrench, 183.
[77] *TQ* n. 47 Fall 1971. The issue opens with a citation of Mao Zedong. See also Forest p. 360.
[78] The title of Bataille's text is : La "Veille Taupe" et le Préfixe *Sur* dans les mots *Surhomme* et *Surréaliste*.

entitled *Lautréamont Politique,* first published in 1967 as *Lautréamont par lui même*. In the revised version, Pleynet attempted to minimize the role of Breton and Aragon in their "discovery" of Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* and *Poésies*. In the following issue, *TQ* published several articles by Sollers and others that attempted to show how neo-Surrealism continued to propagate the same mistakes and misunderstandings perpetrated by Breton in his applications of Hegel, Trotsky and Freud.[79]

The neo-Surrealists responded to the criticisms. In June of 1972, after the publication of Sollers' controversial novel *Lois*, Alain Bosquet, a freelance writer who was associated with the last wave of Surrealists and who contributed to newspapers and journals like *Le Monde*, *Le Magazine Littéraire*, and *La Gazette de Lausanne*, delivered an equivocal review of the novel, writing that Sollers was driving the avant-garde « au bordel » but that *Lois* was nonetheless the most original work of the year.[80] The mutual aversion felt by both sides is evident in this judgement, as is *TQ*'s wish to put some distance between itself and the neo-Surrealists.

The war over avant-garde legitimacy continued on the conference front. In May of 1972, during the "Semaine Surréaliste" in Nantes, Jean-Louis Houdebine, in the name of the *Mouvement de Juin 71*, a militant journal closely associated with *TQ*, distributed a tract entitled "A bas le surréalisme ! Vive l'avant-garde."[81] The suggestive title, declaring the existence of an avant-garde without Surrealism, was provocative.

1.4   Conclusion

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[79] *TQ* n. 45 Spring 1971, *TQ* n. 46 Summer 1971.
[80] Forest 453, quoting Bosquet's critique in *Le Magazine Littéraire*, June 1972.
[81] Forest 436-437.

Defining itself among the various groups of twentieth century artists, the avant-garde wrote its own history, carefully choosing to include and exclude a select group of writers and artists that encapsulated their ideas about revolution, modern life, and art. Influenced by the scientific and philosophical discourses of the time, and reacting to the historical development of art in the bourgeois age, the avant-garde forged its path in the twentieth century, creating its own strata of generations spanning the decades. For most of these writers, art was a way to subvert the depressing and horrifying aspects of reality. The dramatic effects of the Great War are often cited as a catalyst for the emergence of the avant-garde. But even at the end of the twentieth century, when the cold war had chilled most of the political crises that had scarred a generation, the avant-garde writers of *TQ* still felt the need to create and promote art that would provide an alternative lens through which to view the world.

Because of the evolution of certain scientific and philosophical ideas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially the questioning of rationality and of the rational progression of time, which led to a new understanding of the importance of the position of the individual in conceiving the progression of time and motion, artists began to experiment with portraying modern life in different ways. Thanks to the historical development of art in the bourgeois age, which resulted in the separation of art from society, such experimentation was possible. But the isolated status of art in the bourgeois age inspired a group of artists called the avant-garde to continue with the formal experimentation started by the modernists, and go a step further and experiment with the role of art in society. The artists changed concepts about art and its place in society, and in order to legitimize their mission, they consciously constructed a list of

artists whom they claimed were also working towards these aesthetic and social goals. For all of these artists, from the Futurists, to the Surrealists, to the Situationists, to the *TQ* group, art was a means of generating hope and optimism in a modern world where art was at risk of becoming useless and futile.

Near the end of *TQ*'s existence in 1979, the director of the Seuil publishing house, Michel Chodkiewicz asked Sollers and the journal committee to reconsider its mission in the face of internal controversies and a dwindling readership. After eighteen years of existence, Sollers still saw the mission as a simple one. He responded to Chodkiewicz in a letter dated January 10th:

> Cher ami, Votre question d'hier était donc : « A quoi sert TQ ? » Il me semble à la réflexion que je vous dois une réponse plus personnelle (qui, par conséquent, si vous le voulez bien, restera entre nous). C'est la suivante – et je pèse mes mots : « A ne pas mourir de désespoir dans un monde d'ignorance et de perversion. »[82]

Sollers' words describing the mission of the avant-garde journal which he helped to found resonate with the optimism that permeated all the groups discussed in this dissertation. Criticized by some for being naïve, the avant-garde's hope for social change and improvement in the modern world never perished. Sollers' straightforward but powerful words emphasized that the emergence and existence of the avant-garde was inextricably linked to the relationship of the artist to the society in which he or she lived, and was devoted to improving and enriching a superficial and trivial relationship resulting from an increasingly capitalistic culture. The following chapter looks at the theme of the city in avant-garde art and how it illustrated the avant-garde precepts so eloquently stated by Sollers.

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[82] Reproduced in Forest, 596.

CHAPTER 2

THE CITY

The city is a theme that has permeated avant-garde art. It provided insight both into the individual experience and the common human condition in modern times. Whether it depicted the lone individual in a vastly populated urban landscape, or whether it displayed on a larger scale the progress of material history, the city offered the avant-garde artist a view into modern life, and a possibility of improving it. This chapter will look at how the city was an important part of avant-garde philosophy, highlighting the relationship between the artist and society, and providing a means of ameliorating that relationship.

As discussed in the first chapter, the social and historical events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries greatly influenced the development of avant-garde groups. The changes taking place in modern urban areas where these artists were congregating in order to share ideas inevitably made their mark on the artists trying to comprehend them. Renato Poggioli, whose book, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, was one of the first to analyze the defining aspects of the avant-garde, argued that the modern world, particularly the modern city, left avant-garde artists bewildered, perplexed, and hostile.[83]

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[83] Timms, 2.

This negative response to the modern urban environment was the subject of a case study entitled *Du Suicide* published by Émile Durkheim in 1897. Durkeheim's study pointed out that the circumstances of living in the modern city, with fewer social ties and connections to one's surroundings, seemed to promote a higher rate of suicide. Durkheim used the term *anomie*, to denote the phenomena that often accompany urban living: anonymity, alienation, and purposelessness, among others.

It is true that the Modernist movement, of which most critics consider the twentieth century avant-garde a part, produced works that expressed these negative reactions to urban life. But one of the characteristics that distinguished the avant-garde from their modernist counterparts was that they were not categorically antagonistic toward city life. The avant-garde felt both fascination and disdain towards modern life. The Situationists, for example, were severely critical of advertisements in city streets, which they saw as a part of the capitalist enterprise that culminated in isolation and alienation of the individual from his surroundings. But they were also interested in the effects of such advertisements. They thus frequented streets lined with such advertisements and set out to study and then ultimately subvert their intended message.

Billboard advertising was one characteristic inherent to modern city life that shaped avant-garde thinking. Other nineteenth century phenomena, like colonialism and imperialism had changed the city, making it more international and cosmopolitan in nature. Due to this shift in the character of the metropolis, the artist gained a new perspective on the surrounding world. Raymond Williams argued that their reactions to

these modern urban phenomena distinguished the avant-gardiste response to the city from those of any other group of artists.[84]

The new international character of the city, which included more foreign cultural exchange, touched some of these avant-garde artists personally because they themselves were immigrants in the new Parisian metropolis.[85] These novel experiences, they thought, had to be expressed in different artistic mediums, which was why these artists experimented with the form of their writing and artistic productions. For Williams, this experimentation with form was a key factor that differentiated the avant-garde from other aesthetic groups. Williams explained how this new form developed:

> Liberated or breaking from their national or provincial cultures, placed in quite new relations to those other native languages or native visual traditions, encountering meanwhile a novel and dynamic common environment from which many of the older forms were obviously distant, the artists and writers and thinkers of this phase found the only community available to them: a community of the medium: of their own practices.[86]

Creating a new kind of writing was a process that reflected the shaping of these artists' new identity in the modern city. The combination of modern experiences and writing experimentation led to the production of aesthetic works that portrayed the modern phenomenon of metropolitan existence.

Baudelaire, who spent most of his life in Paris, was an example of an artist shaped by his experiences in the modern urban environment. He was intrigued by his *ville natale* and often described it in his writing. In his collection of prose poems entitled *Spleen de Paris*, in part inspired by the nostalgic and forlorn engravings of the city by Charles

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[84] Williams, "The Metropolis and Modernism",19-20.
[85] See Chapter 1.
[86] Williams, "The Metropolis and Modernism", 21.

Méryon, Baudelaire described wandering through the modern urban terrain and feeling a stranger in one's nevertheless familiar surroundings.

For Daniel-Rops, who authored the introduction to *Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire was the first French poet to write effectively about the modern French capital. Daniel-Rops explained:

> Baudelaire a vraiment introduit dans la poésie française un registre nouveau, celui de la poésie des capitales, avec leurs énormes masses humaines qui se coudoient sans se connaître, leurs profondeurs vertigineuses, leur atmosphère putride et exaltante, et cette sorte de mythologie inconsciente, si bien exprimée par Baudelaire, qui transforme l'abstrait en concret, le paysage en humain.[87]

One of the more better known concepts that Baudelaire used to express these new reactions to the city was that of the *flâneur*, or person who, often alienated, wandered the spaces of the city in order to know and experience it anonymously.

The *flâneur* is an emblematic figure for various reasons. Walter Benjamin, in his analysis of Baudelaire and the city in the chapter "Paris: the capital of the Nineteenth Century," from his book *Charles Baudelaire*, suggests several reasons why habits like strolling the city streets proliferated in this period. Thanks to Haussmann's urban planning in the mid 19th century, Parisians were able to leave their homes and stroll through the wide boulevards and pedestrian-friendly arcades, which were lit with the first gas lamps. The safer brighter evenings lured otherwise weary walkers out for strolls that heretofore had been too perilous. Europe's most highly centralized government, in addition, provided other incentives to lure its citizens out into the city streets. Theses

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[87] Daniel-Rops, XXIV-XXV.

included the 1889 World Fair, which improved public spaces and oversaw the construction of monuments like the Eiffel Tower.[88]

2.1   The Futurists

No longer being a darkened alley of unknown dangers, the new city could provide strollers with escape, freedom and adventure. This is the Paris that the leader of the Futurist group Filippo Thommaso Marinetti knew while a student there. Marinetti was the second of two sons of an Italian immigrant family in the Egyptian mercantile industry. Thanks to his education in Egypt with the French Jesuits, and his preparatory baccalaureate courses at the Sorbonne, he was fluent in French and well versed in French symbolism, a rich source for material denigrating bourgeois values. When his elder brother died at a young age, Marinetti, although the family underdog because of his literary interests and childhood sicknesses, inherited a significant bourgeois fortune. He used his money to feed his aesthetic penchants and by the age of thirty-three, was able, thanks to affluent and well connected friends, to publish the first *Futurist Manifesto* in one of the most prestigious Parisian newspapers, *Le Figaro*.[89]

Marinetti's international background influenced his philosophical and literary tastes, including his hope for change, especially in regards to science and technology. Marinetti and the Futurists, perhaps because of an awareness of Italy's industrial belatedness, believed the railway, automobiles, and the airplane, embodied the speed and agility of the modern age and had the potential to alter society in a positive way. The invention of the

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[88] Collier, 26.
[89] Berghaus, Gunter. *Introduction* to F. T. Marinetti; Critical Writings, xix.

cinema also had a profound effect on the Futurists, who saw film's potential to portray

the speed of modern times. Although they were never able to develop a significant

cinematic movement, and the few Futurist films that were produced are now lost, such

manifestos about Futurist cinema as *La Cinematografia* (1916), written by the makers of

the Futurist film *Vita Futurista*, still survive and make clear why and how cinema was to

be used to disseminate Futurist ideas. According to the manifesto, the cinema was one

way of expressing the speed and dynamism associated with modern life.[90]

 Most Futurist work, like the painting by Umberto Boccioni called *La città che sale*

(1910-1911), exemplified the Futurists' preoccupation with the fast pace of city life. In a

letter to art critic Nino Barbantini, Boccioni wrote that the painting was:

> …inspired by the purest intention, that of erecting a new altar to modern
> life, an altar vibrant with dynamic modern life, an altar vibrant with
> dynamic energy, as pure and exalting as those that were erected to the
> mystery of the divine by religious contemplation; I say that a painting with
> such an aim is infinitely superior to any more or less subjective
> reproduction of real life.[91]

Boccioni translated these ideas about the energy of the streets into the painting *La strada*

entra nella casa (1911), which displays a chaotic street scene and a woman looking onto

it from her balcony. Although the balcony railings divide the street from the interior of

the house, the perspective of the painting, which opens from behind the woman, flattens

its depth and thus suggests that everything, including the noise and the movement of the

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[90] The *Vita Futurista* (1916) which Marinetti, along with Bruno Corra, Emilio Settimelli, Arnaldo Ginna, Giacomo Balla, and Remo Chiti made, is the only film that set out to strictly adhere to Futurist doctrines. It has been lost. For a description of the film, see the announcement published in *L'Italia Futurista* October 15 1916, reprinted in *F. T. Marinetti Critical Writings* pp 266-286. Anton Giulio Bragagli (1890-1960) directed four films during his stint with the Futurists. All but one have been lost, and the identity of the remaining one, which is housed in the Cinémathèque Française, is questionable, although most critics seem to think it is Bragaglia's *Thais*: see Tisdall and Bozzolla, 143. The manifesto "La Cinematografia," can be found in *F. T. Marinetti, Teoria e Invenzione Futurista*, 183-187

[91] Hultén, 452:

city, has entered into the woman's private realm and became inseparable from her private life. The same is true of Gino Severini's *Il Boulevard* (1911), or Carlo Carrà's *Funerali dell'anarchico Galli* (1911); both depict the chaos and energy of the streets penetrating into everyday life.

   The Futurists' fascination with the street and the relationship of the city with the city dweller also translated into attempts at city planning and architecture. Between 1913 and 1914, Boccioni wrote a manifesto entitled *Architettura Futurista* calling for a return to necessity, and a rejection of decoration.[92] He also praised velocity and movement. Antonio Sant'Elia (1888-1916), however, was the main architect of the group. Formally trained as a civil engineer, he pursued his interests in architecture and design after completing a diploma in civil building, hydraulics, and roads in 1906. In March of 1914, Carrà and Marinetti saw some of Sant'Elia's drawings at an exhibit of *Nuove Tendenze* the architectural group to which Sant'Elia belonged. That same year, Carrà introduced Sant'Elia to the rest of the group, initiating his membership; he was 26 years old.[93]

   On July 11th, Sant'Elia published *Il manifesto dell'architettura futurista* in *Lacerba*, the unofficial Futurist journal. The manifesto proclaimed that the buildings of today should not be built to last forever because each generation must build his own city. Sant'Elia advocated practicality, but not at the expense of aesthetic quality. Futurist buildings were to have a practical purpose, but at the same time apply experimental ideas of transience and mobility using new technology and materials. One such experimental

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[92] Hultén, 417.
[93] Tisdall and Bozzolla, 125, 129.

idea was asymmetry. Instead of the perpendicular and horizontal lines of traditional architecture, Sant Elia dynamic, oblique, and elliptic lines in his building designs.[94]

Sant-Elia's elegant drawings of Futuristic structures in his portfolio *La città nuova* (1913-1914) were important in that they displayed an aesthetically fresh vision of the city of the future. But they have been criticized as unrealistic. Sant'Elia did not leave behind concrete instructions as to how to build this city. In fact, no Futurist building, let alone city, was ever erected. Sant-Elia died tragically at twenty-eight during the war when he was serving in the Lombard Volunteer Cyclist Battalion, much of his artistic potential still unrealized.[95]

In addition to experimenting in architecture, the Futurists considered music a way to understand and gain access to the energy of the city. They believed that traditional music could not relate the modern urban experience, and was so removed from everyday life and disconnected from the audience, that it was no longer pertinent in contemporary society. On October 11 1910, Francesco Balilla Pratella (1880-1955) wrote *Il Manifesto dei Musicisti Futuristi* in which he seriously criticized traditional Italian music, especially opera. The Futurists, in fact, in order to demonstrate their aversion to opera-going, would often disrupt performances.

For example, on February 27, 1911, several Futurists invaded La Scala in Milan during a performance of Richard Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*. They inundated the theater, which was full of an "upper bourgeois and aristocratic"[96] audience, with thousands of manifestos containing the following message:

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[94] Hultén, 417-418.
[95] Tisdall and Bozzolla, 129-133.
[96] Berghaus, *Theater, Performance...*, 98.

> Noi Futuristi esigiamo inoltre che la Scala, cessando di essere la Pompei del Teatro italiano o la vetrina chiassosa dei grandi editori, faccia in ogni stagione l'esperimento di almeno tre opere di giovani musicisti italiani, audacemente novatori e ancora sconosciuti.[97]

The message was clear: the Futurists demanded a new type of Italian music, free from historic constraints and they wanted new and experimental artists to be given a chance in Italy. Distributing fliers during an opera performance led to just the kind of antagonistic reaction that the Futurists hoped for.

A few years later, on September 15th 1914, just weeks after the outbreak of the First World War, Marinetti and several others invaded the Teatro dal Verme in Milan during the premiere of Puccini's *Fanciulla del West*. This time, their message was more political and inflammatory, and resulted in their arrest and six days of confinement in prison. As a result of the arrest, the police opened a file on Marinetti that would grow as his political activities and sojourns in prison accrued.[98]

But the Futurist experiment with music was not always so violent. They made clear in the flyer distributed at La Scala that they supported new and innovative ideas about music. Luigi Russolo, trained as a painter, was perhaps the group's most innovative musical theoretician. On March 11 1913, he published the manifesto *L'Arte dei Rumori* that was dedicated to Francesco Balila Pratella. In this text, he explained his ideas about the range of human noises outside of those used for speaking. He advocated experimenting with every possible human noise. Russolo also wrote about the "Futurist ear," an organ he believed should be attuned to the noises of modernity.

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[97] Marineti, *Teoria e Invenzione...,* 514.
[98] Berghaus, *Theater, Performance…,* 97 and *Berghaus, Futurism and Politics*, 282.

In addition to human noises and retraining the ear to modernity, Russolo focused much of his energies on creating machines, or *intonarumori* (noise intoners) as he called them, which would reproduce the noises of the modern city. The only original recording of the *intonarumori* is from 1924 and includes two pieces performed by Russolo's brother, Antonio Russolo. "Chorale" and "Serenata," however, are not the typical *intonarumori* performances, in that Antonio used the *intonarumori* "tamely" and with other instruments that reduced the brash and surly sound the instruments usually made.[99]

It is nearly impossible to recreate with any accuracy the true spirit of Russolo's instruments, none of which survived the Second World War. Nor to date have any of his complete scores been found. Gianfranco Maffina, the curator of the 1977 "Historic Archives of Contemporary Arts" of the Venice Biennale which organized an exhibit of Russolo's works, nonetheless had five *intonarumori* recreated for the event. From seven bars of Russolo's *Risveglio di una città* published as an excerpt in *Lacerba* in 1914, Maffina created a recording. This is one of the few examples we have of Russolo's innovative works.[100]

Even today, nearly a century later, Russolo's music is curiously contemporary and fascinating. One hears what sounds like cars and horns, and then realizes that the "noises" are not exactly what one hears on the streets. His music has an undeniable aesthetic quality that shows how positive and exciting his vision of city life was. The overwhelming noises of the city become, in this recording, a synthesis of sound, energy

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[99] Lombardi web page.
[100] See Maffina, particularly pp. 129-177, where he reprints Russolo's 1916 "L'arte dei rumori" a collection of previously published articles printed in *Poesia*, including the excerpt of "Risveglio di una città," originally published in *Lacerba* in 1914. The *Poesia* version of collected articles that Maffina reprints providess precise explanations of how Russolo's instruments work.

and movement as the vibrations of the horns and the melodious engines throb and merge with modern city life.[101]

   Daniele Lombardi, an Italian musician and artist who continues to perform and interpret Futurist music, and who organized in October 2007 in Portogruaro, the hometown of Russolo, a series of concerts and lectures on Futurist music, more recently interpreted these seven bars of the "Risveglio di una Citta." He wrote after hearing his interpretation of Russolo's composition:

> With a multi-track tape recorder I was able to realize only eight of the 12 "voices," and yet despite this, and in spite of living in the '80s, after electronic music, the impact of the sound and emotion which had previously been expressed only theoretically in the manifestoes, was impressive.[102]

Despite the missing "voices" of the original score, Lombardi's composition is still powerful and innovative enough to surprise and impress a professional musician nearly one hundred years later.

   There are other examples of Futurist compositions that attempted to imitate the urban environment. As was the case for their theatrical works, the performance of these musical works was usually eventful. The first such performance took place at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome on February 21 1913.[103] Another one was in 1920, when Russolo staged his *Concert for Factory Sirens* in Russia. This concert was intended to recreate the "beautiful" sound of the factory sirens calling the workers to their jobs. Tisdall and Bozzolla, who considered Marinetti's experiences with Fascism as defining and significant, interpreted this concert as the beginnings of a fascist ideology. They

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[101] Russolo, from the CD *Futurism & Dada Reviewed*.
[102] Lombardi, "Futurism and Musical Notes."
[103] Tisdall and Bozzolla, 113.

understood the sirens as an attempt to disband the workers movements and bring them back to working in the factories.[104] The publication of Marinetti's diaries in 1987, however, clarified some of these matters. In these writings Marinetti elucidated in concise economic and political terms his vision of the Future, which among other things demanded that all members of society contribute their part to the improvement and modernization of the world.[105]

The musical productivity of the group, however, slowed when Russolo began to suffer from severe head wounds due to injuries sustained during World War I. Another Futurist, Franco Casavola (1891-1955), continued to experiment with the noise intoners during the years from 1920-1927, but World War II brought a final end to such experiments as the instruments were lost in the confusion. But the years following the First World War and the ensuing political instability in Italy and in Europe had an effect on the Futurist movement. Russolo for instance, after his convalescence, left Italy "disgusted…with its deplorable and disgraceful political and civil life." [106] Other Futurists reacted to the situation differently, staying in Italy but breaking with the movement.

Others like Marinetti continued to call themselves Futurists, but changed and reinvented Futurist aesthetics. The changes were perhaps necessary due to the decline of Futurism "to a state of near-insignificance" during the years after the Great War. At this time, Marinetti began to focus on things like Italian cuisine and the experience of eating, which he analyzed with his new theory of *tactilism*, the idea that touching could convey

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[104] Tisdall and Bozzolla, 115.
[105] Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 132-133.
[106] Tisdall and Bozzolla, 119.

more meaning than speaking, seeing or hearing. This new focus on touch, although in line with his previous emphasis on the senses and on intuition, signaled an attempt to adapt and survive amidst significant social and political upheavals. Marinetti continued to work on projects such as *arte sacra* (a strange turn towards spiritualism and religion), *aeropittura* and *aeropoesia* (art that was also inspired by spiritualism, metaphysics, and glorification of the machine) and theater, this last one being particularly successful in bringing experimental theater more into mainstream Italian and European culture.[107]

Berghaus explains that the success of Futurism in Italian culture was in part due to the subsidies granted by the Fascist regime in the interwar period. These artists were not under the same constraints as their German counterparts, and were thus able to maintain some autonomy and experience some success.[108] According to Berghaus, Futurist art not only survived the Fascist regime, it "had become recognized, if not respected, as a major cultural force."[109] Despite Berghaus' argument emphasizing Futurism's success, its questionable relationship with the Fascist regime and its sometimes conflicted attitude about the war left an indelible mark on its reputation.

2.2   The Surrealists

Although the First World War often instilled in the Futurists a sense of nationalism and interventionism, it had the opposite effect on the Surrealists. The war engendered in them a disgust of violence and nationalism. André Breton made this clear in many tracts, including a 1934 essay entitled "Qu'est-ce que le Surréalisme?" In this essay Breton

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[107] Berghaus, *Theater, Performance…,* 128-133
[108] Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 246-255.
[109] Berghaus, *Theater, Performance…,* 129.

wrote that the Surrealists, in union with Lautréamont and Rimbaud, embraced a "defeatist" attitude concerning war.[110] For the Surrealists, war killed hope for social improvement and political revolution.

Breton also mentioned in this same essay that rejection of war and other social and political ideas were best propagated in an urban milieu. Small towns, according to Breton, nurtured a sense of nationalism that the Surrealists found dangerous; the provinces seemed to harbor patriots ready to go to war. He wrote that the most "idiotic" of the provincial cities was his home town, which was "practically impossible to find."[111] This attitude about the insignificance and deleterious effect of small provincial towns highlighted the contrast between the countryside and the city, where the Surrealists saw more potential for innovation and improvement. In Marxist terms, the city represented the progression of history and thus the potential for improvement and moving forward.

The city also acted as a caché of fantasy and desire in Surrealist literature. Although the Surrealists were interested in the material conditions of the city and the social circumstances it produced, they also were interested in the individual unconscious, in dormant and hidden thoughts, and in dreams and what they signified. For the Surrealists, the city symbolized two differing philosophies: historical progression in a broad sense, the possibility for the exploration of the human psyche on an individual level. Some critics have seen this dual interest in the socio-historical process and in the individual experience as contradictory. In his book *The European Avant-garde*, Andrew Webber highlights this unresolved contradiction:

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[110] Breton, *Oeuvres….,* 227-228.
[111] Breton, *Oeuvres….,* 228.

Surrealism embraces a Marxist ideology that demands an orthodox approach to history as a product of the material interaction of collective interests; but it also embraces the more personalized ideology of psychoanalysis with its prioritizing of the case history over history writ large. Even as the Surrealists attempt to objectify the subjective through forms of materialist registration of the psyche – automatic writing or 'hasard objectif' ('objective chance') – the intrinsic immateriality of the unconscious remains a haunting presence, a ghost in their machine.[112]

The city served in Surrealist literature as the place where this contradiction played itself out. Urban streets, cafes and alley ways encouraged Surrealism's interest in the material conditions of life; the lone *flâneur* and his strolls through the city offered the Surrealists a conduit into the internal mindset of the urban individual.

In the character of Nadja, Breton was able to bring these two ideas together. She embodied the city's potential for chance encounters and meaningful human experiences. She also, according to Andrew Webber, embodied the new kind of urban society in which the Surrealists invested their hope: she resisted social conventions by being late for meetings, by living for the present moment, and by not caring for money. At the same time, wandering with her in the city streets allowed Breton to explore Nadja's problematic existence and enigmatic emotional state, which was inextricably linked to her experiences in the urban setting. She was emblematic of the Surrealist psychological case study: she was Breton's "project," his object of psychoanalytical examination.[113]

Some Surrealist works attempted to psychoanalyze the individual as they wandered through the maze of Parisian streets. These works proposed a parallel between the map of the mind and that of Paris. In order to facilitate access to the mind, Surrealist art facilitated access to the city. As Peter Collier pointed out in an essay about Paris and

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[112] Webber, 14.
[113] Webber, 14-15.

literature, the city in *Nadja* was small and intimate and resembled more a medieval map of the world, where only certain areas (for example, the areas frequented by Breton and Nadja) seemed to exist.[114] The inaccuracies in Breton's depiction of Paris rendered the city more accessible and approachable. In addition, they simplified and so distorted Nadja's psychological state and emotional problems.[115]

Mapping the city in realistic terms, however, was not the aim of the Surrealists, nor were they devoted to accurately mapping the human psyche. In his book *Les Vases Communicants*, published in 1932, Breton, in addition to publishing letters exchanged between himself and Freud, told the story of his life in Paris by describing his dreams, his interpretations of them, and his reflections on how these dreams interacted with his real-life experiences. In this way, Breton attempted to link his dream world with the reality of his daily life. He especially wanted, in writing and in his life practices, to bridge the divide between these two different worlds. In the last pages of his story, he explained how the role of the poet was invaluable in this effort. Breton wrote :

> Le poète à venir surmontera l'idée déprimante du divorce irréparable de l'action du rêve. Il tendra le fruit magnifique de l'arbre aux racines enchevêtrées et saura persuader ceux qui le goûtent qu'il n'a rien d'amer.[116]

For Breton, it was possible to act out one's dreams in real-life, and use the city as a facilitator in that process.

There were numerous examples in *Les Vases Commmunicants* where Breton described his dreams. They were often inspired by his experiences in the city, just as the city also inspired his dreams, thus blurring the distinction between urban and unconscious

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[114] Collier, "Surrealist City Narrative," 216.
[115] See Chapter 4 of this dissertation for more on Breton's misunderstanding of the feminine psyche.
[116] Breton, *Les Vases…,* 170.

experiences. For example, the first dream described in the book took place at the Villiers

Metro station. In this dream, Breton saw an old beggar woman, whom he later realized

was Nadja, whom he had written about four years earlier.[117] Both the metro station and

the street reminded Breton of where Nadja lived when he knew her. In this example, as

in others throughout Breton's book, the Parisian landscape intermingled with reality and

with dream   The city inspired the artist and facilitated the Surrealistic goal of creating a

realm where dream and reality merged.

   Breton's tactic of juxtaposing the dreamed city with real events was one way of mixing

the real and the surreal city. Louis Aragon mixed the two in his 1926 story *Le Paysan de

Paris*, where he created a new city space by juxtaposing writing about his imagined city

with reproduced material from the real place. Aragon actually copied onto the pages of

the novel the very marquees, restaurant menus, and other signs that the narrator saw

posted in the places he visited.

   Unlike the collages of such other Surrealists as Salvador Dali, Max Ernst or René

Magritte, who artificially combined objects from one geographical location with objects

from another, Aragon, according to Marie-Claire Bancquart juxtaposed different objects

all originating from the same place.[118] For instance, when Aragon wrote about the Park

Buttes-Chaumont, he combined passages in his own words describing the location, and

with writings copied from the actual pedestal of a statue, the addresses of businesses

nearby, and the indications written on a map of the area.[119] According to Bancquart, this

method of combining different but at the same time related things was more effective

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[117] Breton, *Les Vases…,* 30-37.
[118] Bancquart, 83-84.
[119] Aragon, *Paysan*, 194-204.

than random juxtapositions because the repetition reiterated the theme and increased the poignancy of the comparison.

The juxtaposition of Aragon's linguistic city with his collage city blurred the line between literature and advertisement, dream and reality. It was a way for the protagonist to impose his dreams, or according to the Surrealists, his desires onto the cityscape. These desires dictated the movement of the protagonist through the city and gave additional significance to the urban places he visited. Peter Collier described this process as a mapping of desire onto the city.[120] The Surrealist map of Paris became a palimpsest covered by various layers of desire, with traces of the real and the imaginary urban landscape peeking through. Collier, in his analysis of these two works, explained this mix of cityscape and desire:

> The unreal cities of Breton and Aragon are a hallucinatory projection of the unreal narrators trying to strenuously write out a space in which to exist through the linguistic formulation of their desire, in the face of a city which figures as an enticing mirror of their desire, but which finally eludes their control, by affecting the shape of the image of their desire, which reacts by distorting the reality of the city, and so on *ad finitum*.[121]

Collier is describing the cyclical process of the narrator/author imagining a city space conducive to the proliferation of existing desires, writing about that space, observing the creation of more desires in that space, absorbing these desires into the imagined city space and thus changing the conceived space, which then changes the desires generated the next time round. The infinite play of city space and desire described by Collier explains how the Surrealist city map is constantly evolving.

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[120] Collier, "Surrealist City Narrative," 217.
[121] Collier, "Surrealist City Narrative," 228.

The continuous shifting and movement of this map and its lack of structure paralleled the lack of structure in Breton's and Aragon's narrations. Neither *récit* had narrative flow or temporal progression and the reader never knew where exactly the narrator was going, whether he was in a restaurant, on the street, or with a friend. The ambiguity created a sense of disorientation; a shift away from rational thought.

An example of this kind of disorderly and irrational Surrealist map of the city can be found in another Bretonian récit, *L'Amour Fou* (1937). As in most Surrealist tales of love, Breton described his relationship with his second wife Jacqueline Lamba as "mad" and wild. The city played an important role in their meeting, which began when Breton spotted Lamba at a café he frequented and decided to leave the establishment and wait for her outside. The description of these moments waiting for her to exit illustrated the frenzy and excitement the Surrealists attempted to create in all of their experiences. When she finally did leave, Breton followed her through the windy streets of Montmartre, almost losing her but eventually catching up and talking to her.[122] The moments leading up to their initial encounter depicted the role of the city as a vital component in the creation of thrill and suspense and in influencing the development of important personal events.

The narrator in *Le Paysan de Paris* provided another example of how the chaos associated with the transitory scenery of the city could trigger change in sensitive urbanites. After mulling over ideas like reality, certitude and the consciousness of being, the narrator noticed the light of a springtime evening wash over the late-winter cityscape. Suddenly the world changed for him. He described the experience:

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[122] Breton, *L'Amour Fou*, 52-53.

> On vient d'ouvrir le couvercle de la boîte. Je ne suis plus mon maître tellement j'éprouve ma liberté…Tout me distrait indéfiniment, sauf de ma distraction même. Un sentiment de noblesse me pousse à préférer cet abandon à tout et je ne saurais entendre les reproches que vous me faites….Les sens ont enfin établi leur hégémonie sur la terre. Que viendrait désormais faire ici la raison ? Raison, raison, ô fantôme abstrait de la veille, déjà je t'avais chassée de mes rêves, me voici au point où ils vont se confondre avec les réalités d'apparence : il n'y a plus de place ici que pour moi. En vain la raison me dénonce la dictature de la sensualité. En vain elle me met in garde contre l'erreur, que voici reine.[123]

In this passage, a subtle adjustment in seasonal light initiated dramatic emotional release. The narrator opened up to his senses and sentiments, which led to a complete rejection of reason. He realized that in doing so, he could live a different kind of life where "l'erreur" or drifting through the city would reign over the events of his life. The potential of the city to bring about mental modifications like these was one of the reasons why the urban map was so prevalent in Surrealist literature.

Because "changing life" was one of the main goals of Surrealism, they focused on this transformational potential of the city. In *Les Vases Communicants*, Breton's narrator attempts to cultivate a personal relationship with the city in order to tap in to its powers for change and revolution. In the final pages of the *récit*, Breton wrote:

> Paris, tes réserves monstrueuses de beauté, de jeunesse et de vigueur, - comme je voudrais savoir extraire de ta nuit de quelques heures ce qu'elle contient de plus que la nuit polaire ! Comme je voudrais qu'une méditation profonde sur les puissances inconscientes, éternelles que tu recèles soit au pouvoir de tout homme, pour qu'il se garde de reculer et de subir ![124]

Stating his desires to discover even the dark corners of the city, the protagonist, using the second person informal address, reveals his longing to know Paris.

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[123] Aragon, 12-13.
[124] Breton, *Les Vases…,* 168.

In attempting to know the city better, the protagonist also gains a better understanding of himself. This self-exploration is evident in the first words of Breton's *Nadja*, which ask the question, "qui suis-je," introducing the story as a quest for identity, a search for the self. These introductory words, in contrast with the title of the book, which suggested that it was about Nadja, revealed an intense interest in discovering, by way of the female protagonist, the male narrator's own desires and dreams.

The fact that the narrator continued to live freely and in complete ignorance of Nadja's fate after she was institutionalized underscored her secondary role in the narrative. It also pointed to a failure in Breton's quest for self-knowledge: how could he know himself if he did not know or care about the suffering of his urban companion? This weakness in the Surrealist urban map, which was one-dimensional and failed to include the perspective of the object of desire, limited the Surrealist endeavor. But Breton did gain something from his experiences with Nadja.

He learned from her how to incorporate Surrealism in his own everyday life. Nadja was important for the development of the Surrealist urban map because she showed Breton how abandoning oneself to intuition and desire would reveal the power of *le hasard objectif*. Living in this way was like living in a parallel realm, a sur-real universe that encouraged artistic production and an alternative life. Not only did the city offer the individual artist an opportunity to change herself or himself, it presented a vision for an improved society, free from the domination of monolithic reason and rationality.

2.3   The Situationists

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The Situationists also had visions for improving the city. Unlike the Futurists or the Surrealists before them, the Situationists, in order to improve society, focused on a detailed critique of contemporary society. Influenced by Marx, and in particular by his analysis of commodity fetishism, the Situationists analyzed modern life and the urban environment in terms of social and environmental alienation. They considered the city a kind of stage that exhibited products through an advertisement medium that falsified the life of city dwellers and deprived that life of any real significance. *La Société du Spectacle*, written in 1967 by Guy Debord, the leader of a group of artists, architects, and philosophers interested in improving the conditions of modern life that was known as the *Internationale Situationniste*, explained how modern society had become a spectacle and how we had become spectators, moving through life as viewers of a show that we thought was life, but which in actuality was an illusion.[125]

The Spectacle emerged when merchandise began to absorb all aspects of social life, until it was no longer possible to distinguish between merchandise and consumer products on the one hand, and anything meaningful or real on the other. According to Debord, the Spectacle forced society to accept a "reality" made up of propaganda and advertising that desensitized us to the possibility of any real emotions or thoughts.[126]

While the city seemed to promote the success of the Spectacle, it also offered opportunities to act out against it; the *Internationale Situationniste* dedicated itself to explaining how. This movement lasted officially from 1957-1972 and published twelve issues of a journal by the same name from 1957-1969, which attempted to devise an urban philosophy based on the group's ideas about modern city living.

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[125] Jappe, 39.
[126] Debord, *Société...,* 42.

Although none of the *Internationale Situationniste* members had any formal training in architecture or design, Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005) (more commonly known as Constant) was the Situationist's foremost innovator in urban planning. Born in Amsterdam and trained as a painter, he was a member of the CoBrA group, which evolved into the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (IMIB) in 1954, and eventually joined forces in 1956 with Debord's *Internationale Lettriste* at a conference in Alba, Italy. These international avant-garde groups, which became the *Internationale Situationniste* in 1957, had one important common goal. They all, according according to Simon Sadler, strongly advocated political and social action "at a time when it was fashionable for avant-gardes to disengage from notions of social revolution."[127]

Unlike the other avant-garde groups discussed here, political engagement was inextricably linked with the Situationists' urban projects. This is perhaps one reason why, as Sadler pointed out, the debate about whether artists should participate in politics did not seem to divide the Situationists. By maintaining a clear philosophy about urbanism and its importance in political action, the Situationists were able to engage in the social revolution that the Surrealists before them, for example, had been hesitant to endorse.

City life in France had become, for Debord and his group, an experience that denied the importance of human interaction. The new architectural tendencies of the post-war era, led in France by Le Corbusier and his building projects like the 1952 Unite d'Habitation in Marseilles, were not conducive to the improvement of the human condition, according to the Situationists. Le Corbusier's massive concrete and steel

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[127] Sadler, 4.

apartment building, designed in the aftermath of World War II, exemplified the architect's ideas about functionality, practicality, and inexpensive building materials. The structure, with its heavy-set air of permanence and domestic conventionality, represented much of what the Situationists abhorred. The Situationists felt that the emphasis on functionality, a key component in such capitalist ideas as productivity and efficiency, did nothing to enhance the life of the individual or the community. Architecture was not meant to organize life into neat compartments of public and private space, of leisurely and functional activities. Life, the Situationists felt, unlike products on the factory assembly line, was not something that could be organized and artificially put together.[128]

The Situationists developed the concept of *unitary urbanism* in order to demonstrate that all aspects of life could contribute to a meaningful existence for the individual. *Unitary urbanism* stood for everything that functionalist architecture was not: transitory, *ludique* (fun-loving/game-like), integrative, chaotic, and human.[129] One example of a Parisian city space that did have such qualities was the Square des Missions Etrangères in the *septième arrondissement*, about which Michèle Bernstein wrote in *Potlatch*, the journal associated with the pre-Situationiste Internationale group the Lettriste Internationale.   Bernstein admired the city square for its eclectic mix of park sculptures, buildings, and its overbearing boundary wall, and because of its location in a "bourgeois area" surrounded by the "bohemian havens of the Left Bank." The unharmonious

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[128] "L'urbanisme unitaire à la fin des années 50," IS 1959, #3. Found in *Internationale Situationiste*, pp 12-15.
[129] See "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action," and "Elementary Program of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism," found in Knabb, p. 23, and pp. 65-67, respectively. See also the article "L'urbanisme unitaire à la fin des années 50" in #3, 1959 of the journal *Internationale Situationniste*.

elements of the park combined to create the type of disorientation and confusion that, for the Situationists, led to liberation from the stifling organization associated with contemporary urban planning.[130]

The Situationists also admired the Ledoux Rotunda at the Place de Stalingrade. This 1786 structure, which was originally built as a tollhouse on the Canal Saint Martin, is a round neoclassical building now surrounded by elevated subway tracks and hausmanian apartment buildings.[131] This area, which now has a more diverse population than it did in the 1950s due to the many resident drug dealers and the simultaneous neighborhood gentrification along the canal St. Martin, even today is a prime example of social confusion and architectural eclecticism.

Constant attempted to take these ideas and incorporate them into his New Babylon project, an elaborate collection of drawings and designs produced during his years with the Situationists. The project began in 1956 when his friend and International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus colleague Pinot-Gallizio asked him to design a structure to house gypsies that were camping on Pinot-Gallizio's land in Alba.[132]

Like the rest of the avant-garde project, Constant's plans aimed to change the relationship of the individual to his or her surroundings. And like Sant'Elia's Futuristic city, the structures were to be mobile. By envisioning the encampment as a fluid and adjustable structure, Constant challenged rational notions of time and space, thus liberating the dweller from confinements dictated by the building. According to Sadler, Constant's "new Babylon had the capacity for almost infinite expansion or contraction,

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[130] See Potlatch issue no.16, January 1955.
[131] Sadler, 70-72.
[132] Sadler, 4-9, 37.

its sectors leaving the landscape below apparently unaffected."[133] Constant tightened the

relationship of the individual to his surroundings by creating chaos, and undoing notions

of seriousness, productivity, rationality, and temporal progression.

Part of his idea about change and fluidity included a city of multiple vertical layers.

Constant envisioned the Situationist city lifted by *pilotis*, or huge supporting columns,

superimposed over the old city and open land, allowing vehicular circulation to flow

underneath them.[134] This too is an echo of the Futurist idea of multiple street levels. The

Futurist Sant'Elia wrote in his *Manifesto of Futurist Architecture*:

> …the street will no longer lie like a doormat at ground level, but plunge
> down into the earth, with multiple levels carrying the metropolitan traffic
> and linked up for necessary interconnections by metal gangways and fast,
> moving pavements.[135]

Similarly, in his article "A Different City for a Different Life" published on December

third 1959 in the journal *Internationale Situationniste*, Constant wrote that the ideal city

should be covered and suspended and that "all traffic…will pass underneath or on

overhead terraces, streets can be done away with."[136] In the same year, Debord wrote a

tract entitled "Positions Situationnistes sur la Circulation," criticizing the preponderance

of cars as a capitalist phenomenon that should be resisted. For Debord, the automobile

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[133] Sadler, 139. In order to view an easily accessible collection of Constant's designs and plans, from the gypsy encampment to the elaborate New Babylon project, see Sadler pp 38, 114, 127-128, 131, 137, 139-141

[134] See Constant's "A Different City for a Different Life," from Internationale Situationiste #3, December 1959, reprinted in McDonough pp 96-101.

[135] Hultén, 418.

[136] McDonough, 96, taken from Constant's "A Different City for a Different Life" (from *Internationale Situationiste* 3 Dec. 1959)

exemplified the capitalist commodity interfering with and eventually diminishing the quality of life in the city.[137]

Although Debord and Constant agreed on most matters concerning the Situationist city, their eventual falling out in 1960 revealed some inherent differences. Debord was hesitant about actually constructing a Situationist city, suggesting instead that Situationism had to be realized within the existing city. Many of the articles in the *Internationale Situationniste* elaborated upon ideas like *détournement*, which was based on subverting already existing structures. There were also articles in the same journal that criticized Constant of being too conventional. Instead of building a new city, the old one should be *detourned* in the attempt to uncover the true Stiatuionist city.[138] Even Constant, in private letters written to friends in the late 1960s, accepted the idea that building a Situationist City was no longer realistic or even possible.[139] Because Constant was the new Situationist city's greatest advocate, his departure from the group was a significant loss.

Situationist ideas about the city, nonetheless, influenced contemporary architectural discourse. Situationist ideas were referred to and their articles published in such journals as *Architectural Design* in Britain or *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* in France. They influenced various contemporaneous architectural groups like Britain's Archigram group or Italy's Superstudio group. The latter, unlike Constant, insisted on plans that were

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[137] Debord, "Positions Situationnistes sur la Circulation," *Internationle Situationniste*, #3, 1959, reprinted in *Œuvres* 993.
[138] Debord, "Critique de l'urbanisme," *Internationale Situationniste* #6, 1961, reprinted in *Œuvres* 1004-1007. Also see Sadler, 121.
[139] Sadler, p 153, fn 180 and 181.

"buildable" and provided details for their eventual realization. [140] Much like the

imaginative plans of Sant'Elia, Constant's New Babylon was criticized for its emphasis

on the aesthetic and its lack of realistic detail.

But being realistic did not interest the avant-garde. Like the Surrealists, the

Situationists were interested in what lay beneath reality, and they explored the role of the

human psyche in this endeavor. Both groups explored the relationship between the city

and the unconscious and attempted to connect them on the city map. The Situationist

urban map, however, was more tangible and graphic than the poetic and metaphorical

map of the Surrealist city.

The study of *psychogeography*, or the effect of different parts of the city on the drifter,

was a term invented by the Situationists to denote the different levels of feeling and

emotion that result from being in a different geographical location. More than a scientific

inquiry of the processes of the mind, *psychogeography* was an exploration into the

mysterious workings of the unconscious. Sadler explained, "psychogeography was a

reverie."[141] It was, in the Surrealist tradition, a way of penetrating into the urban surface

and discovering the unconscious dream beneath.

Like the Surrealists who experimented with aimlessly strolling through the streets in

order to escape bourgeois hubbub in favor of a more out-of-the way haphazard journey,

the Situationists also advocated drifting through the city in order to experiment with its

psychogeography.[142] The *dérive* or "the drift" was for the Situationists a way of walking

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[140] Sadler, 133, 145, 153.
[141] Sadler, 76.
[142] Debord, "L'urbanisme unitaire à la fin des années 50," *Internationale Situationniste,* #3, 1959, reprinted in *Œuvres* 990-992. See also " Les situationnistes sont contre la construction des églises " and " Les espaces urbaines différentes font surgir des émotions différentes ."

through the modern metropolis and being touched by its true potential. Defined by

Debord, the *dérive* was:

> … une promenade ludique qui a comme but la découverte de la
> psychogéographie de la ville. La dérive est mieux faite en petits groupes
> de deux ou trois, et que la compositions de ses groupes change pour
> chaque dérive.[143]

As Debord is pointing out in this passage, one of the most important components of the

dérive was its "ludic" or playful aspect.   In order to reject modernist architecture like that

of Le Corbusier, which advocated functionality above most everything else, the

Situationists embraced all activity that had no purpose or function. Leaving spaces for

fun and games, which were largely absent in most contemporary visions of the modern

city, became for the Situationists a primary objective.[144]

   This "ludic" quality was to be achieved in several ways. Walking through the city had

to be done in a sprightly manner, without lollygagging or lingering in any particular area.

Debord described the experience as "la pratique d'un dépaysement passionnel par le

changement hâtif d'ambiances."[145] There also had to be a carefully planned and thought

out agenda. Although the Surrealists conceived of ideological city maps, they did not

actually draw them. The Situationists did, because they preferred a "structured" event.

Maps such as "The Naked City" (1957), where Debord and Asger Jorn pasted cutouts of

buildings from a traditional Parisian map, connecting them randomly with arrows

pointing in various directions, provided Situationist *dériveurs* with an alternative city

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[143] Debord, "Théorie de la dérive," *Internationale Situationniste*, #2, 1958, reprinted in the anthology of the same name, 19-21.

[144] Debord, "Problèmes préliminaires à la construction d'une situation," *Internationale Situationniste*, #1, 1958, reprinted in *Œuvres*, 976-977.

[145] Debord, *Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste internationale*, presented by Debord at the founding conference of the Situationist International at Cosio D'Arroscia, July 1957, reprinted in *Œuvres*, 325.

map. The buildings of Debord's and Jorn's map represented psychological hubs consisting of potentially meaningful experiences.

For the Situationists, the city was not divided or superficially partitioned along economic and political lines. Nor was the city an object, to be viewed passively as one might view objects in a museum. Such experiences with the city, according to the Situationists, were false and pretentious and had been attached to the city by various exterior elements. For example, the architectural style of the Louvre, its historical function as the King's palace and its contemporary function as one of the most prestigious museums in the world, imposes a very specific value and meaning on the building. The Situationists wanted to redefine buildings like the Louvre and its meaning in modern Paris by walking through and around it, gaining a different sense of the building.

According to McDonough, "The *dérive* as a practice of the city reappropriated public space from the realm of myth, restoring it to its fullness, its richness, and its history."[146] The Situationists wanted to strip urban spaces and buildings such as the Louvre of their old historical and social meanings and allow for those spaces to serve the public in other more useful ways.

The *dérive* was important not only because it gave new meaning to the city, but because it also transformed the individual. The idea that everyone is responsible for his or her own destiny, traces of which can also be found in Existentialist literature and in the writings of the twentieth century philosopher Henri Lefebvre, was important in

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[146] McDonough, 261.

Situationist ideology, particularly in regard to the "construction of situations." During

the founding SI conference held in Cosio D'Arroscia, Italy in 1957, Debord announced:

> Notre idée centrale est celle de la construction de situations, c'est-à-dire la construction concrète d'ambiances momentanées de la vie, et leur transformation en une qualité passionnelle supérieure. Nous devons mettre au point une intervention ordonnée sur les facteurs complexes de deux grandes composantes en perpétuelle interaction: le décor materiel de la vie; les comportemens qu'il entraîne et qui le boulversent.[147]

Focusing on the "material settings of life," and attempting to redefine or subvert them in

order to render life more meaningful and thus empower the city subject was an important

Situationist goal.

Like the Surrealists, the Situationists believed that redefining art and life was linked to

desires and their liberation. Constructing situations was a way of promoting the

liberation of desires. In a tract entitled "Preliminary Problems in the Constructing of a

Situation," Debord explained how these situations were to be constructed:

> La direction réellement expérimentale de l'activité situationniste est l'établissement, à partir de désirs plus ou moins nettement reconnus, d'un champ d'activité temporaire favorable à ces désirs. Son établissement peut seul entraîner l'éclaircissement des desires primitifs, et l'apparition confuse de nouveaux desires dont la racine matérielle sera précisément la nouvelle réalité consituée par les constructions situationnistes.[148]

As Debord makes clear in this excerpt, uncovering desires and creating an atmosphere

conducive to their proliferation was essential for the construction of situations. These

constructed situations were the Situationists' attempt to create a different reality, a goal

they shared with every twentieth century avant-garde group. Unlike the Surrealists, who,

according to Debord, focused only on the unconscious and thus failed to transform the

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[147] Debord, *Rapport sur la construction des situations…,* reprinted in *Œuvres*, 322.
[148] Debord, "Problèmes préliminaires à la construction d'une situation," *Internationle Situationniste*, #1, 1958, reprinted in *Œuvres*, 976-977.

current reality of the contemporary world, the Situationists focused on actually constructing a new reality.[149]

There were, however, problems with this new Situationist way of living, particularly with the *dérive*. As one of the members of the group, Ivan Chtcheglov, pointed out, the *dérive* could not go on forever. He wrote that when taken to the extreme, the *dérive* could be inefficacious and even dangerous.[150] How then was one to control the drift and balance it with other more structured activities?

Another problem was that some Situationist writing, particularly Debord's *Panégyrique 1*, conveyed nostalgia for the old Paris.[151] Debord pointed to various changes to the city that had destroyed feelings of community and authenticity. One example was George Pompidou's plans to construct express lanes on either side of the Seine that "killed" the feeling of the old city. This kind of nostalgia, of course, contradicted the avant-garde's ideas about the future and the better reality it hoped to create. Such ideological problems concerning the Situationist city, however, did not diminish the group's originality and inventiveness. Their ideas, some of which were contradictory, not only helped to maintain the avant-garde tradition, they led to the creation of the final group analyzed here.

2.4   *Tel Quel*

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[149] Debord, *Rapport sur la construction des situations…,* reprinted in *Œuvres*, 309-328.
[150] Ivan Chtcheglov "Lettres de Loin," *Internationale Situationniste*, #9, 1964, reprinted in Debord, *Œuvres*, 1060-1061.
[151] The "old Paris" referred to here is the Paris before Haussman's urbanization and can be seen in the 2007 film *La Môme*.

TQ saw itself as part of the avant-garde lineage in which Debord had inserted the Situationists. At the same time, it differentiated itself from the Situationists and the other groups. *TQ*'s attitude toward the city is one example of this difference. Philip Sollers' most recent publication illuminates the differences and the similarities *TQ* and other avant-garde groups in regard to the theme of the city.

Un Vrai Roman, published just last year, exactly ninety eight years after the publication of the first *Futurist Manifesto*, presented the city in many of the same terms used by the avant-garde in other times: Sollers described it as fast and rhythmically stimulating. For Sollers, the city was a place that promoted *hasard objectif* and created a new kind of reality in which relationships, both amorous and not, flourished. He also described the city as a place that continued to harbor the Spectacle and to threaten the production of art with its potential to liberate the city dweller from the confines of capitalist institutions. These ideas, which are similar to those of the Futurists, the Surrealists, and the Situationists, are once again prominent in this latest avant-garde work.

The first reference to the avant-garde can be seen on the cover of the book, where the words "vrai roman" are printed as part of the title. Since the novel as a genre was denigrated by the avant-garde as the prototypical bourgeois art form, that Sollers called his book a "true novel," added to the book's provocative nature in that the avant-garde had questioned the very notions of real and artificial, of true and false.

The inherent contradiction of its title serves as an appropriate introduction to the rest of the novel, which is filled with various recurring contradictions. One of these concerned relations between the leader of the group and its members. All the avant-garde groups

discussed here, despite advocating innovation and progressive thinking, were conservative regarding their group identity. As a result, there were often disagreements and disputes. Sollers, for example, when describing the creation of his group, stated in an interview that, "Le conflit était immédiat….. un groupe, ça doit être un conflit." Not only was conflict necessary, but Sollers admitted that he liked it. He went on to say, "j'aime bien la contradiction."[152] And the history of *TQ*, as Sollers pointed out at various times in the novel, was a history of expulsions and exclusions.[153]

Another theme of conflict in Sollers' novel was that of the city and the non-city. Like the Futurists, the Surrealists, and the Situationists, Sollers associated the city throughout the novel with action and movement. He emphasized these qualities by contrasting this fast-paced urban milieu with rural places that were slower and more reflective, like seaside venues. For instance, the opening pages of the novel described Sollers' life in Bordeaux, a town, as its name indicates, near the edge of the water. Sollers gravitated throughout his life towards the water, despite his permanent residency as an adult in Paris. He continued to visit the familial retreat on l'Ile de Ré, and he also spent time in Venice[154], where, according to Sollers the flow of the sea helped him think.[155] He wrote "Venise-Ré : même bénédiction marine. C'est à Venise que je m'enfonce dans mon premier vrai livre (celui de cette époque que je peux relire): *Drame*."[156] For Sollers, the sea stimulated his creative capacities in important ways.

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[152] Philippe Sollers Esprit libre, entretien avec Guillaume Durand à propos d'"Un vrai roman, Mémoires." **Added:** November 26, 2007 URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFRul3DRMFo
[153] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 81, 123.
[154] Both Sollers and Debord pay homage to Venice in their works. Debord, in his film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* shows shots of the city while the camera is moving quickly on a boat.
[155] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 105, 124.
[156] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 99.

Although the water inspired thought, the city instigated real actions. In what he wrote about the seaside, unlike similar passages about Paris, Sollers did not enumerate his daily activities. Only in Paris did the protagonist mention his working schedule, what time he awoke, what time he began writing, what time he finished writing, and what time he consulted the daily news sources.[157] For Sollers, the city functioned as a space for intellectual activity.

Paris, for Sollers, represented his life as an intellectual. He went there in the first place in order to pursue his education. He also published his first novel there, and adopted his pen-name, Sollers, instead of his paternal name, Joyaux. Writing about his early career in Paris, he said:

> Tout cela est excitant, impressionnant, et très dangereux. La mer, ou plutôt l'océan, sont encore loin, si seulement ils existent. Mais enfin, me voici embarqué, sous mon nouveau nom, sur une écorce de pin.[158]

The pine bark to which Sollers referred in this passage was the metaphor Francois Mauriac had used in a December 12th 1957 *l'Express* magazine article critiquing Sollers' first novella, *Le Défi*. Mauriac had likened the beginning of Sollers' career to that of a frail little boat made out of pine bark that a child might put into a river in the hopes it would find the ocean. Mauriac had similarly hoped that Sollers would one day find success as a writer.

It is interesting that Sollers chose to include this metaphor by Mauriac to suggest that the ocean, the symbol for success, was something far away and perhaps unreachable. Sollers himself also alluded to the difficulties of the writer in the city by comparing the

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[157] Sollers, *Un Vrai…*, 177.
[158] Sollers, Un Vrai…, 65.

Parisian literary scene with survival in the Wild West. For him, the machinations, the competition, and the reputations of writers were like episodes of Western film:

> Le film que se raconte le milieu littéraire français, depuis plus de trente ans, peut d'ailleurs être décrit comme un western classique, sans cesse rejoué, avec, de temps en temps, adjonction de nouveaux acteurs. Il y a un Beau, un Bon, un Vertueux exotique, Le Clézio, et un Méchant, moi. Je m'agite en vain, Le Clézio est souverain et tranquille, il s'éloigne toujours, à la fin, droit sur son cheval, vers le soleil, tandis que je meurs dans un cimetière, la main crispée sur une poignée de dollars que je ne posséderai jamais.[159]

This short allegory, because of its humor and exaggeration, rendered the criticism of the literary establishment less violent than the criticisms in Futurist or Surrealist manifestos and tracts.

  Despite his criticism of the Parisian scene, Sollers is a successful literary figure in France, as can be seen by his frequent publications and television appearances. Sollers' success and his role as a public intellectual are in contrast with the traditional role of the avant-garde writer as someone separated and ahead of the rest of the pack. But Sollers has recognized the importance of his success.   Addressing himself, or perhaps one of his multiple personas, he wrote, "à vous de voir, mais d'instinct, vous refusez d'être marginalisé en pseudo-gourou inaccessible ou 'd'avant-garde'."[160] Instinctually refusing marginalization, one of the defining qualities of the avant-garde, Sollers revealed in this passage an inherent wish to distinguish himself from the very tradition in which at other times he had claimed to be a part.

  The city of Paris in particular symbolized the conflict between the literary establishment and progressive aesthetic currents. Sollers was aware of the city's role

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[159] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 151.
[160] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 146-147.

throughout history of generating clashes between established authority and experimental artists. He cited as an example Voltaire's description of the banning and burning of Helvetius' 1758 philosophical treatise *De l'Esprit* to prove that that historically, the relationship between the writer and the city was ridden with strife. The eventual departures from Paris of both Helvetius (by his own choice) and Voltaire (forcibly) highlighted the tumultuous relationship of the artist with the city.[161]

2.4.1. Escape from the city

Sollers, in his novel, demonstrated a need to avoid such clashes between the city and its intellectuals. His protagonist consistently found refuge in the garden. Unlike urban cafes and restaurants, bridges like the Pont Royal, or neighborhoods like Montparnasse, the garden, for Sollers, was a place without a name. As such, it provided anonymity to those who visited it. It was also geographically ambiguous. Sollers' literary gardens sometimes resemble that of his mother in Bordeaux, or the Luxembourg Gardens, or the Parc Monceau.[162]

The geographical ambiguity of the garden helped the protagonist feel as though, when in a garden, he could be free to explore his identity. The garden gave Sollers respite from his public persona and freed him from being himself. He wrote, "à 10 ans, au fond du jardin, je suis ébloui par le simple fait d'être là (et pas d'être moi), dans le limité-illimité de l'espace."[163] Freed from the constraints of the self, the narrator is able to look to the

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[161] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 156.
[162] Sollers, *Un Vrai….,* 58.
[163] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 162.

garden for wisdom. He explained, "le jardin, lui, sait tout."[164] Liberation and access to

self-knowledge were two important goals of the avant-garde, and in Sollers' novel, they

were both facilitated by the protagonist's absence from the city.

Another example of the protagonist's search for peace in the garden was when, after the

publication of the first number of *TQ*, he went to the Luxembourg Gardens with Ponge to

read it.[165] In this instance he was using the garden as a place for reflection on the birth of

one of the most important projects of his life. From the time of his childhood, Sollers

also used the garden in order to recuperate. He wrote, "…j'en suis encore à courir dans le

jardin, à me guérir, à transformer ma vulnérabilité et mes maladies en force. "[166] Here

again we see the difference between the vigorous action of the city and the more

reflective restorative activities of the garden.

The garden as a place of rest and source of internal strength is reinforced by the images

of darkness and obscurity that Sollers employed to describe it. In his chapter entitled

"Nuits," the garden clearly evoked the mysterious qualities of darkness and quiet. He

wrote,

> Avant de dormir, c'est le moment des notes jetées pour le lendemain, et
> puis, dans le jardin, le silence d'attente et d'appel…La Nuit m'enseigne, et
> je n'ai pas besoin de savoir quoi, bien au-delà des cauchemars ou des
> rêves vite démasqués, on connaît le film. J'aime marcher dans le noir
> profond, je fais ça depuis l'enfance.[167]

The contrast between the insistence of the notes left for the next day and the presence and

immediacy of the quiet night of the garden demonstrated the importance of the garden as

a shadowy yet thoughtful and restful space.

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[164] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 34.
[165] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 80.
[166] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 47.
[167] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 326-327.

2.4.2   The City as brightness

To highlight the obscurity of the garden, Sollers depicted the city through images of
brightness and intensity. In his novel, Sollers incorporated action, chaos and light, things
which were praised in Futurist art, with the urban setting. Sollers also paid homage to the
Surrealists and their idea of the city as a place of action. He described reading the
Surrealist journals at his neighborhood library, La Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. He also
wrote of how his meeting with the Surrealist leader and his reading of *Nadja* had
influenced his writing, which is evident in *Un Vrai Roman*.

In addition, Sollers incorporated into his novel the theme of the city streets and their
power to generate encounters and make things happen. When describing the sensation of
stepping onto the street, Sollers wrote, "…on sort dans la rue, il se passera forcement
quelque chose de magique. Et c'est vrai, ça peut être vrai, ça m'est arrivé."[168] He gives a
specific example of this kind of this kind of urban event, dictated by a force the
Surrealists called *hasard objectif*, in the following passage:

> Comme la vie peut être surréaliste, on se marie discrètement à la mairie du
> Ve arrondissement, devant un maire ahuri qu'on ne veuille pas porter
> d'alliances et qu'on soit sans cesse au bord du fou rire. On va ensuite
> déjeuner, avec la sœur violoniste de Julia et nos deux témoins, à La
> Bûcherie, sur les quais, en face de Notre-Dame, à côté de Shakespeare and
> Co. Mais quel est donc ce vieux couple morose, deux tables plus loin ?
> Non, c'est trop drôle : Aragon et Elsa Triolet. Intersigne, mauvais œil,
> exorcisme ?[169]

The refusal to wear wedding bands and the suppressed laughter during the ceremony
were typically Surrealist behavior. Mocking such bourgeois rituals, rebelling against

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[168] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 60.
[169] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 101-102.

them in a humorous and rebellious manner was exactly the kind of experience the

Surrealists advocated. And the coincidence of seeing one of the more important French

Surrealist writers at the following celebratory meal, with, as Sollers points out, his

Eastern European wife (who, as with Sollers' wife, was from a former communist

country), was an ideal example of *hasard objectif*.

Such chance encounters were often associated with a particular location within the

city. As he enumerated the different places where he cultivated these relationships,

Sollers emphasized the connection between place and feeling. He wrote:

> Et le Rosebud, ah ! le Rosebud, en compagnie de cette éblouissante jeune
> femme de 25 ans, échappée de sa Bulgarie communiste, beauté,
> formidable intelligence, travail acharné, nage et discussion à n'en plus
> finir… [170]

The names of the Parisian locales seemed to suggest something about the people he met

there. The Rosebud, for instance, suggested Kristeva's enigmatic beauty, or the Falstaff,

where Sollers and Barthes dined, evoked companionship and amiability, important traits

shared by both Barthes and the Shakespearean character.

Sollers put great value on the names of the places where his group met. He wrote that

La Promenade de Vénus, the café where the Surrealist group gathered, was not an

appropriate name for a revolutionary group. He suggested that the café Select de

Montparnasse, where Sollers and his friends met, was more suitable.[171] What Sollers did

not point out is that all of the names of his meeting places were English ones, perhaps a

reflection of the influence of his anglophile parents on him. In any case, the English

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[170] Sollers, *Un Vrai…., * 249.
[171] Sollers, *Un Vrai…, * 256.

names of the cafes, restaurants, and other meeting places, seemed to confirm Situationist

theories about the importance of geographical spaces and meeting places within Paris.

2.4.3   The City as Spectacle

In addition to these similarities between Sollers' ideas about city locations and those of

the Situationists, there are explicit references to Debord. Indeed, despite the fact that

Debord had criticized Sollers' work, Sollers praised him as being the only truly

"combatant libre" in the struggle of the 1960s.[172] This respect for Situationism is most

evident in Sollers' frequent references to and criticism of the Spectacle. For example,

Sollers described how he had to turn on the television after nightfall when at Ile de Ré in

order to feel the "pulse" of the Spectacle, and make sure it was still alive.[173]

The ever-present Spectacle had an especially deleterious effect on the individual's

sense of identity. In his treatise on the Spectacle, Debord had explained how the

Spectacle erased the limits between the self and the rest of the world:

> Le spectacle, qui est l'effacement des limites du moi et du monde par
> l'écrasement du moi qu'assiège la présence-absence du monde, est
> également l'effacement des limites du vrai et du faux par le refoulement
> de toute vérité vécue sous la présence réelle de la fausseté qu'assure
> l'organisation de l'apparence.[174]

In the chapter "Image," Sollers addresses the problems of identity that Debord identifies

in this passage.   Sollers suggests that embracing the confusion of the multiple images

projected by the Spectacle onto the individual can actually empower the individual. By

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[172] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 107-108.
[173] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 325.
[174] Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 219.

accepting numerous images, the individual reduced the risk of being completely controlled by the Spectacle.

Soller called these different identities IRS, or *Identités Rapprochées Multiples*.[175] One of his IRS was his penname Sollers, which he insisted was part of an identity that was separate from his paternal name Joyaux. Even in the narration, Sollers played with the idea of multiple identities by writing in the present tense and mostly in the first person, which he juxtaposed at certain times with a second person plural "vous" form. In this way it was unclear if the author had turned to address the reader, or had turned to address himself, or another one of his images. Sollers' multiple images and his ego, present and at times overbearing, increased right along with the page numbers of his book, reducing the risk of self-effacement.[176]

In addition to multiplying images, multiplying the layers of the text was another way of resisting the Spectacle. Examples of a metatext, or writing that referred to the writing itself, and of passages where the text turns to speak to the author, reveal the literary depth of Sollers' novel. This complex texture renders *Un Vrai Roman* more evasive. The more Sollers writes, the more textual layers he creates, the less chance the Spectacle has of exercising power over him. Sollers wrote, addressing himself:

> Vos livres ont disparu, mais vous êtes là. Soyez-en sûr: le Système insistera et vous réinvitera pour ne pas savoir. Encore faut-il que vous continuiez tranquillement à tenir le coup sur la page, comme si le Spectacle, dans son ensemble, n'était qu'une énorme blague (et il n'est rien d'autre).[177]

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[175] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 137-138.
[176] See pages 153-154, where he praises himself for giving glory (via *TQ* and *Infini*) to Sade, Artaud, Bataille, Ponge, Celine, Dante (with a modern translation), and providing new perspectives to the writings of Joyce, Proust, Claudel, Ezra Pound, Lautréamont and Rimbaud, among others.
[177] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 148-49.

By continuing to write and by "clinging to the page," Sollers was resisting the Spectacle and its tendency to efface the individual.

Writing alone, however, was not sufficient to undermine the Spectacle. Sollers argued that, like the fluidity of his multiple identities, his writing too had to be fluid. To avoid drowning in the currents and cataracts of the market, his books had to transform themselves into swimming fish. The more "fish" there were, the greater the chance that art could resist the Spectacle and shape its own destiny.[178] When at one point the narrator questions this philosophy of artistic production and asks himself, "Que faire ? S'en aller? Continuer? Se faire user et utiliser? S'imposer sans se déformer?" He answers himself : "Réponse tous les matins, très tôt, la plume à la main, sur la page."[179] Writing, the response to all of these aesthetic and existential questions, provides Sollers with hope. His prolific career, which to this date includes the publication of twelve novels, continues to be an effective method for resisting the hegemony of the Spectacle.

In this last passage, Sollers made clear how important art is as a means of resisting the Spectacle, and urban bourgeois and consumer society in general. "La vraie vie la vie, " he wrote, "réellement vécue, c'est le livre, car l'autre, la sociale, est toujours un enfer plus ou moins brûlant."[180] Here, Sollers emphasized the difference between the aesthetic realm and the social realm, a gap that the original avant-garde was determined to close nearly one hundred years earlier. How then do Sollers' ideas about art, the city, and the Spectacle contribute to the avant-garde discourse?

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[178] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 156-157.
[179] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 146.
[180] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 221.

Part of the postmodern discourse, which we will look at more closely in the conclusion, includes an acceptance of the gap between art and real life. Sollers integrates this aspect of postmodern philosophy into his last work. By accepting the separation between art and real life, and by giving up the hopeful search for resolving this separation, Sollers allows the city to be a place of contradiction. Unlike the previous avant-garde groups, Sollers did not attempt to create an alternative city, or a different urban map and experience, in order to live a better life. Instead, he incorporated various aspects of the avant-garde urban philosophy and emphasized the role of the Spectacle, claiming that the individual could manipulate it to his or her advantage.

Like the Futurists, Sollers saw the city as a bright and fast-paced metropolitan milieu where ideas evolved into action. Like the Surrealists, Sollers considered the city a place where hidden potential lay waiting to be discovered, particularly concerning human relationships and destiny. And like the Situationists, Sollers was aware of the dangers of capitalism and of the Spectacle that it produced.

Unlike the previous groups, however, Sollers' accepted some of the bourgeois and capitalist forces that the avant-garde traditionally rejected. Sollers' novel described a city in which the individual could also become part of the Spectacle. Sollers did not glorify the machine, modernity, or speed, as did the Futurists; he glorified himself. He did not rely on the city streets to generate magic; he relied on his own resourcefulness. And if he was unable to access the power of the streets, he simply left the city for a time. He did not try to undermine the Spectacle, as did the Situationists; he tried to beat it at its own game.

All of these tactics created a literary city where the individual had a certain power over his or her surroundings; this was important in previous avant-garde works as well. The traditional avant-garde, however, in addition to their aesthetic ideas about improving city life, espoused political ideologies. This last avant-garde work (if we choose to call it that), distances itself from the militant political and social ideas espoused by the historic avant-garde. In lieu of politics, Sollers embraces various contradictory philosophies (needing to escape the city but always returning, the city as symbol of brightness but harboring dark gardens, the city as Spectacle but as potential to resist the Spectacle) which are never resolved, and which create an alternative politics of acceptance. Instead of social action, Sollers allows for the paradoxes of contemporary times and advocates individual promotion as a compass in the postmodern chaos.

Despite these differences, Sollers' novel displays one very important similarity with the avant-garde: its tendency to refer to a specific lineage of avant-garde groups, including itself, in its history. These references to the historic avant-garde, known for their seditious tendencies, place Sollers' in that subversive and rebellious tradition. The following chapter will take a look at how politics in particular played a role in the development of avant-garde philosophy, and how, like the city, it provided an opportunity for improving everyday life.

CHAPTER 3

POLITICS AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Tout ce qui est intéressant se passe dans l'ombre.
On ne sait rien de la véritable histoire des hommes.
Céline

   The idea of changing the world was not exclusive to the twentieth century avant-garde.

Most artists hope their work influences the public in some way and perhaps permanently

alters perceptions and opinions. Although there were different ideas among the avant-

garde groups concerning the methods for changing the world, they all adhered to the idea

of transformation, encapsulated so poignantly by André Breton's combination of Marx's

"transform the world" with Rimbaud's "change life."[181] The avant-garde, in addition to

applying these ideas to their art, applied them to politics by joining parties and

participating in official political discourse, and through social gestures. Whether in art,

political discourse, or social gestures, avant-garde artists couched their message in

subversive terms. This chapter will take a look at how the different avant-garde groups

employed subversive techniques in both politics and society to change everyday life.

   Céline's quote introducing this chapter referred to the kind of change that shaped

history, but which was not necessarily well known. An illustration of an interesting and

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[181] "'Transformer le monde', a dit Marx ; 'changer la vie' a dit Rimbaud : ces deux mots d'ordre pour nous n'en font qu'un." André Breton: Speech to Le Congrès International des Ecrivains pour la Défense de la Culture, Paris June 1935, found in Œuvres, 2: 451.

significant act of this kind that happens in the "shadows" can be found in the behavior of the René Magritte. Robert Hughes, a distinguished art critic who spent much of his career writing for *Time*, described the eerie sense of reality in some of Magritte's paintings, when they were displayed in the spring of 1974 at the Belgian Surrealist exhibit at the New York Cultural Center. In order to show how this feeling of seditious revolution portrayed in the paintings connects to real life, Hughes recounts the following story:

> A dealer visiting Magritte at his unremarkable suburban house in Brussels was met by the Surrealist in his normal business-suit attire. At tea in the parlor, the visitor dropped something, bent down to pick it up, and experienced an agonizing kick in the backside. When he spun around, he saw Magritte imperturbably stirring his cup as though nothing whatever had happened. As in life, so in art.[182]

Magritte's behavior (the hidden motive, the sneaky assault) in what seemed to be a very normal bourgeois context created an atmosphere of doubt and questioning that upturned rational and traditional ideas and expectations. More importantly, Magritte acted out "in the shadows," subversively making his move, without anyone seeing.

This type of subversive tactic is evident in all avant-garde art, and is one reason why interpreting it is not easy or painless. Avant-garde art was not meant to soothe and pacify, but rather to provoke and challenge. Avant-garde writing was not "readable" in the way realist fiction was; it did not correspond to our own experience of the world, in regard to such matters as the progression forward of time, the phenomenon of cause and effect, and the attempt to rationalize the meaning of our surroundings. When Barthes, in his essay entitled *Sollers Ecrivain* asked how one was supposed to read Sollers' novel *H*, when most readers declared it unreadable due in part to its lack of punctuation, he

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[182] Hughes, last paragraph of article.

emphasized an important aspect of avant-garde writing: the complexity of its form and its unwillingness to relay a clear message.[183]

3.1   The Futurists

Marinetti's free-word poem *Zang Tumb Tuuum* is an example of such art that is resistant to an easy interpretation. The poem was published in various print types and sizes, and words read in different directions across the page. Instead of giving a linear and factual account of the siege by the Bulgarians of the Turkish Adrianople in the Balkan War, which Marinetti witnessed as a war reporter, the poem recreated the chaos, noise, and speed of the experience. *Zang Tumb Tuuum* challenged the idea of war as a series of historical events by emphasizing the emotional and psychological state associated with such an experience.

The poem was an example of the avant-garde's intention to interact with the reader and subvert his or her perceptions without making these intentions obvious. The Futurists focused much of their energies on theatrical performance. For the Futurists, performance became closely linked with political action. Günter Berghaus, a critic of Futurism and particularly of Futurist theater, wrote:

> Futurist politics were performative, just as Futurist performances were political. Politics came to be conducted like a theatrical enterprise, and vice versa, politics played a significant role in Futurist theater.[184]

Connecting with the audience and forming a relationship, even an antagonistic one, with the spectator was a way for the Futurists to undermine not only theater as a genre, but

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[183] Barthes, Sollers…, 69.
[184] Berghaus, *Theater, Performance…*, 96.

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also the experience of theater-going which traditionally involved accepting the dominant

cultural paradigm: relaxing and enjoying the show.

The first Futurist *serata* (or evening) was held on January 12, 1910 in Austrian Trieste.

Tisdall and Bozzolla described the event as

> …a dynamic concoction of manifesto reading, poetry declamation,
> theatrical interludes and outright provocation of the audience…The degree
> of success of such an Evening depended…on the level of abuse
> received.[185]

The Futurist *serate* were testimony to the importance of living according to the Futurist

doctrines of liberation, speed, and dynamism. By changing the social practice of going to

the theater into an adversarial contest between the performers and the spectators, the

Futurists succeeded in changing a daily custom and in integrating art into everyday life in

a way that did not otherwise exist.

Marinetti's numerous tracts on the theater explained in detail what Futurist theater

should be. In the *Manifesto of the Futurist Synthetic Theater* of 1915, he wrote in bold

print that the theater should be:

> **…le battute in libertà, la simultaneità, la compenetrazione, il
> poemetto animato, la sensazione sceneggiata, l'ilarità
> dialogata, l'atto negativo, la battuta riecheggiata, la discussione
> extralogica, la deformazione sintetica, lo spiraglio
> scientifico**....[186]

All descriptions call for a completely free and spontaneous performance meant to liberate

the mind. For the Futurists, liberation was to be accomplished by challenging the

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[185] Tisdall and Bozzolla, 91.
[186] *F.T. Marinetti Teorie e Invenzione Futurista*, "Il Teatro Futurista Sintetico," 104. The following translation is by Doug Thompson in *F.T. Marinetti Critical Writings* as "A Futurist Theater of Essential Brevity," p 206: "…**dialogues in freedom, simultaneity, interpenetration, short animated poems, dramatized sensations, comic dialogues, negative acts, lines reechoed, nonsense discussions, disintegration of form, scientific spirals, coincidences, display windows, and so on**."

audience. In 1910, in a manifesto originally distributed as a flier entitled *Manifesto dei*

drammaturghi futuristi, Marinetti explained that getting a reaction from the audience,

even a negative one, was necessary in a theatrical production. He wrote:

> …noi insegniamo agli autori e agli attori la **voluttà d'esser fischiati**.
> Tutto ciò che viene fischiato non è necessariamente bello o nuovo. Ma
> tutto ciò che viene imediatemente applaudito, certo non è superiore alla
> media delle intelligenze ed è quindi *cosa mediocre, banale, rivomitata o
> troppo ben digerita*.[187]

For Marinetti, being booed was better than being applauded, for the latter indicated that

the audience was not being challenged, but simply patronized.

The Futurists used various tactics to induce such an antagonistic response. They would

announce a theatrical performance for a specific date and time, and to foment confusion

and excitement, sometimes not show up. When they did show up, they would brazenly

insult the crowd to such a degree that the crowd would retaliate and threaten to kill

them.[188] Forcing the crowd to become involved in the performance was one of the

necessary components of Futurist activity, according to the 1916 *Manifesto of Dynamic*

and Synoptic Declamation. The performers had to walk through the audience, provoke

its members and make them react.[189]

The theater was an important venue for the Futurists to promulgate their subversive

political and social ideas. But they also spread their ideas in journals and newspapers.

The journal *Lacerba*, which was print seventy issues from January 1 1913 to May 22

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[187] *F.T. Marinetti Teorie e Invenzione Futurista*, "La Voluttà d'esser Fischiati," 268-169. The following translation is by Doug Thompson in *F.T. Marinetti Critical Writings* as "A Futurist Theater of Essential Brevity," p 206: "….let us remind authors and actors of **the pleasures of being booed**. Everything that is booed is not necessarily either beautiful or new. But everything that is immediately applauded is certainly not superior to the average intelligence and is thus *something that is mediocre, banal, spewed up again, or overdigested*."
[188] Tisdall and Bozzolla, 91-92.
[189] *F.T. Marinetti Teorie e Invenzione Futurista*, "La Declamazione Dinamica e Sinottica," 104-111.

1915, was an important vehicle for the promulgation of Futurist propaganda. Although

the journal was based in Florence and was never the official organ of the movement (it

accepted work from such various artistic movements and countries as France with

Lautréamont and Apollinaire) it helped to disperse Futurist ideas, especially

interventionist ones before the Italian participation in World War I. The price of the

journal was low and dropped from four soldi to two before the war to in order to increase

circulation. Indeed it was at this time that twenty thousand copies of *Lacerba*, four-fifths

of which were bought by workers, reached the Italian public. On May 22 1915, Italy

declared its entry into the war, the same day that *Lacerba* published its last issue.[190]

When the war began, the Futurists decided to consecrate most of their energy to

military efforts, many of them joining in the hostilities. Not all the avant-garde groups,

however, were as certain about which course of action to take. The Surrealists, for

example, debated about which was more important, aesthetic revolution or social

revolution. After some internal squabbling, Breton concluded in 1926, that is well after

the war was over, in an official tract entitled *Légitime Défense* that it was imperative to

change the mentality of people first through art, and when the time was right, to act. As a

result of this decision, the Surrealists' relationship with the French Communist Party

(PCF), which began a year later, was often precarious, since the Party was committed to

imminent social revolution. After years of mounting tension, in 1933 the PCF officially

expelled the Surrealists.[191]

The Futurists had also been interested in Communism and experimented with the idea

of changing society through politcal action. Marinetti paid tribute to the Bolshevik

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[190] Tisdall and Bozzolla, 165-166, 169, 175.
[191] Nadeau, 154.

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revolution in an essay entitled *Beyond Communism* that he wrote from jail in 1919 and published in 1920.[192] In this essay, Marinetti developed his concept of "Futurist Democracy" and of the "Italian Revolution," which was markedly different from the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Although Marinetti staunchly disagreed with their morals and middle-class values, he did not, like the Bolsheviks, aim to abolish the bourgeoisie, which he deemed a legitimate class within the structure of the capitalist economy. Instead of preferring any one class and granting power to it, Marinetti advocated a "dictatorship" of various social strata, including the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Berghaus, in his analysis of Futurism and politics, suggested that the vision expounded by Marinetti in his essays[193] and diary entries means that Marinetti's ideal ruling class would be comprised of:

> … the best and most able, the most modern and forward-looking 'technocrats' of the country. They [would be] functionaries, recruited from the 'proletariat of geniuses' and accountable to the whole population. They [would serve] the masses and [work] for them in their capacity of being knowledgeable, gifted and trained, of having an innovative, unblinkered and practical mind, of being willing to try out new approaches and original methods. For the everyday political business and the administration of the country there were going to be elected representatives of the productive work force. As a safeguard against abuse of political power [Marinetti] foresaw veto rights and referenda where the population could exercise direct influence on the running of the country. Each individual citizen would be given maximum liberty. The influence of institutions such as the Church would be curtailed, so that a modern ethics could develop. A progressive social legislation would ensure the well-being of all citizens and the equality between the sexes.[194]

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[192] For information on jail sentence, see below page 5.
[193] Berghaus refers to the political essays published sporadically and then collected in *Democrazia Futurista. Dinamismo Plitico*, Milan 1919, which is reprented in *F.T. Marinetti, Theoria e Invenzione Futrista*, pp 297-407.
[194] Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 132-133.

Marinetti's vision of a varied social class included a "proletariat of geniuses" that would preserve diversity, dynamism, and "anarchic individualism," and would lead Italy toward a better future.

Marinetti's idea of the future was inevitably shaped by his upbringing in Italy, a country economically and industrially backward in comparison to the rest of Europe. Born in Alexandria and educated in Italy by French Jesuits, Marinetti went to Paris to pass the baccalaureate exam, and then came back to Italy to obtain a degree in law at the University of Genoa, graduating in Genoa on July 14, 1899. His exposure to different cultures and his facility with French sensitized him to Italy's economic, social, and technological belatedness, in comparison with the rest of Europe. Hultén explains that the difference between old and new was more pronounced in Italy and Russia than in France, and resulted in the difference in attitudes, and the growth of Futurism in the first two countries.[195] Marinetti's call for a modernization of art and life was in a sense a call for Italy herself to catch up with the rest of the world.[196] These nationalist sentiments are the basis of the fraught and often misunderstood relationship that the Futurists developed with fascism.[197]

Marinetti's fascination with the future and with modern technological advances were evident in his work, where he created oppositions between "modern" and "primitive," and "civilized" and "uncivilized."[198] In *Mafarka le Futuriste*,[199] a partially autobiographical novel, Marinetti revealed his enchantment with the primitive when he

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[195] Hultén, 15.
[196] Perloff, 36.
[197] For a thorogh assessment of this relationship, see Günter Berghaus' *Futurism and Politics*.
[198] The terms "modern" and "civilized" are being used here in the context of an orientalist discourse, the words "modern" and "civilized" meaning western.
[199] First published in French by Sansot in early 1910, and late that same year, in Italian translation by Marinetti's secretary Decio Cinti.

described with pride being nourished "at the breast of a Sudanese wetnurse."[200] John

White, in his book *Literary Futurism: Aspects of the First Avant-garde*, wrote that

fascination with the primitive was among the five major themes in Futurist literature that

distinguished it and placed it in an antagonistic relationship with its predecessors. White

points out that the various slaughter-scenes in *Mafarka*, including 'The Rape of the

Negresses,' exemplified Marinetti's fascination with primitivism and pointed to a sense

of supremacy, which White saw as a reflection of his fascist leanings.[201]

   An attraction to modernization was not the only point the two movements had in

common. In addition to "romantic and uninformed glorification of the machine

(technology)," Tisdall and Bozzolla described two other common characteristics shared

by fascism and Futurism: "the use of physical violence against opponents, and infatuation

with youth."[202] More recent research has proven, however, that these themes are not

necessarily directly linked to one another, and that Futurism and fascism, although there

were moments of collaboration, more often were in conflict with one another.

   Günter Berghaus' study of this relationship in his book *Futurism and Politics* exposed

the reasons why the Futurists, and other Italians of their generation, believed that Italy

needed radical change in order to compete with its colonialist neighbors. These men

came of age at the end of the nineteenth century, under the government of Giovanni

Giolitti, who felt he had to quell Italian urges toward nationalism and colonialist

expansionism that had lingered since the reunification of the country and focus instead on

domestic issues. Marinetti's generation, appalled by the scandals that beset Giolitti's

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[200] Tisdall and Bozzolla, 11.
[201] White, 297.
[202] Tisdall and Bozzolla 200.

parliamentary government of bourgeois liberalism, concluded that Giolitti and all he stood for had failed. They believed that, under the right leadership, Italy could be a contender with her northern colonialist European counterparts. These young men further believed that WWI would provide Italy with the kind of political and economic renewal it so badly needed.[203]

While the exact date is not known, Mussolini and Marinitti did meet sometime before the First World War, while both were part of the interventionist campaign to join the war. During these years, the Futurists published the *Futurist Political Programme* (1913) and founded the Futurist Political Party (1918). In 1919, the Futurists aligned themselves with Mussolini and supported the founding of his political group *Fasci di Combattimento* in March of that year. When the party failed in the November elections, Marinetti decided to focus on the leftwing element of his supporters, whereas Mussolini went in the opposite direction, and chose instead to distance himself from the socialists.[204]

This was the first in a string of reunions and separations that culminated in mistrust on both sides; Mussolini began to maintain a secret surveillance file on Marinetti's subversive activities, while various Futurists began to speak out against fascism and even apologized for their fascist activities. Fortunately for the Futurists, the fascist regime tolerated them and their activities. Berghaus argues that thanks to this at times symbiotic, at times antagonistic relationship between fascism and the Futurists, with their close connections to European artists and art dealers, the Italian state, unlike its fascist German

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[203] Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 7-8.
[204] Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 8-9.

counterpart in the 1920s and 30s, saw the development of art forms independent of the government.[205]

Although collaboration with the fascist regime was unarguably a nefarious part of Futurism's story, it was only part of a much larger story. As Berghaus explained, a combination of factors contributed to the Futurists' engagement in fascist politics, including a sincere hope for change. And this hope for change was not only channeled through politics, but was propounded in the Futurist manifestos as well.

The First Futurist Manifesto of 1909 was a mix of literary fiction, political ideas, and opinions on the art of living. The essay begins as a lyrical narrative with the lines, "Avevamo vegliato tutta la notte – I miei amici ed io – sotto lampade di moschea dall cupole di ottone traforato, stellate come le nostre anime, perchè come queste irradiate dal chiuso fulgòre di un cuore elettrico."[206] The tone of the manifesto continued to suggest a secretive and intimate yet percolating excitement that culminated in the iruption of the poet and his friends into the street and surrounding city. This dream-like sequence was followed by an eleven-point list of practices the Futurists intended to live by. These included the glorification of danger, aggressive action, feverish insomnia, speed and movement, war, and the denigration of museums, libraries, morality and feminism, among other things. The last part of the manifesto was a diatribe against the past and tradition, and concluded with proposals for a new way of life in a future freed from the oppressive burden of history.

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[205] Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 11-12, 277-302.
[206] *F.T. Marinetti Teoria e Invenzione Futurista*, 7. For English translation, see *F.T. Marinetti Critical Writings*, p 11: "My friends and I had stayed up all night, sitting beneath the lamps of a mosque, whose star-studded, filigreed brass domes resembled our souls, all aglow with the concentrated brilliance of an electric heart."

War, one of these eleven points, was described by Marinetti as the world's "sole hygiene." The Futurists, of course, have been widely criticized for this attitude. The communist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, a in a 1916 article entitled "Marinetti the Revolutionary?", questioned the Futurists' tactics of absolute destruction, which seemed to promote annihilation without consideration for what could be preserved. Although Gramsci respected the Futurists' ideas about revolution and the dangers of bourgeois culture, he was nonetheless critical of the violent tone.[207]

Other critics have pointed out, however, that Futurist references to war were often meant metaphorically, as examples of how to eradicate and clean up certain aspects of the traditional social order. Berghaus pointed out that Marinetti's diaries, published in 1987, show his understanding of the "murderous reality of war," in disproof of many previous assumptions about the link between Futurism and violence.[208] Instead of interpreting the references to war and violence in Futurist literature as literal, Berghaus believes it is more useful to understand them figuratively.

Marinetti's writing about women and their role in art and in society also generated different interpretations on the part of literary critics. In his founding Manifesto, Marinetti commanded the reader to "scorn women." But in other tracts, Marinetti limited this scorn to women's social status. This view point is elaborated in the booklet, *La guerra, sola igiene del mondo*, where there was an essay entitled "Contro l'amore e il parlamentarismo." In the following passage, Marinetti commented upon women's right to vote:

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[207] Tisdall and Bozzolla, 201.
[208] Berghaus, p. 13, fn 8.

> È ben certo, nondimeno, che nella sua condizione attuale di schiavitù, intellettuale ed erotica, la donna, trovandosi in uno stato d'inferiorità assoluta dal punto di vista del carattere e dell'intelligenza, non può essere che un mediocre strumento legislative. Per questo, appunto, noi difendiamo col Massimo fervore il diritto delle suffragette, pur compiangendo il loro enthusiasmo infantile pel misero e ridicolo diritto di voto.[209]

Critics like Tisdall and Bozzolla argued that such statements, though seemingly destructive and chauvinistic, were actually a rejection of outdated and sexist traditions and social institutions. His blatant criticism of voting reflected the far reaching condemnation Marinetti had of society in general, and specifically, of the parliamentary institution of voting, to which women in Italy did not have access until after WWII.

The disagreement among critics concerning the place of women in Futurism is not helped by the ambiguity with which Marinetti treats the subject in his writing. For instance, in his 1917 erotic book *Comme si seducono le donne*, Marinetti objectified women and described how they served the pleasures of men. Although this text is unarguably sexist, he reprinted it in 1918, adding an appendix that included a collection of reactions written by female Futurists, among them Enif Robert and Rosa Rosà (Edyth von Haynau), both of whom contributed regularly to Futurist journals. These women had responded to Marinetti's book in the journal *l'Italia futurista* in late 1917, with criticism of Marinetti's simplistic view of female desire and sexuality. Robert and Rosà insisted that women were intelligent and had their own sexual desires, and that having a

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[209] *F.T. Marinetti Teoria e Invenzione Futurista*, 251. For translation, see Tisdall and Bozzolla p 162: "It is obvious in any case that her actual state of intellectual and erotic slavery, woman finds herself wholly inferior in character and intelligence, and can therefore be only a mediocre legislative instrument. For just this reason we most enthusiastically defend the rights of the suffragettes, at the same time as regretting their childish eagerness to have the miserable, ridiculous right to vote."

"man at their side" did not indicate that they were weak or powerless.[210] For these

female writers, women had the power to create their own realities and have everything

that men could.[211]

Marinetti's attempt to include a female discourse in the republication, however, was

rendered less effective by the order in which he chose to publish the texts in 1918. A

journalist known as Volt (Vincenzo Fani Ciotti) had originally published an essay

concerning Marinetti's *Come si seducono…* in the same journal as the women, but in

July, before they had their own articles published. Volt wrote in this open letter to Maria

Ginanni, the editor of the journal at the time, that feminine sexuality only impeded their

achieving success, and that functioned mostly as a trap for men. He concluded that

women's most basic instinct was to subjugate men with their sexuality.[212]

Although Marinetti printed both the female and male reaction to his *Comme si*

seducono…, the order in which he chose to organize their essays reveals how he

manipulated the discussion to favor the male reaction, which concluded the collection.

This example was representative of how the masculine avant-garde discourse exercised a

certain amount of control over its feminine counterpart. The Futurist women, however,

though careful not to speak out too harshly against the tenets of Futurism,[213] and often

acquiring Marinetti's official approval,[214] did have a voice within the movement. Despite

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[210] Enif Robert, "Una parola serena" *L'Italia futurista* (7 October 1917): Rpt. In Marinetti, *Come si seducono le donne*, VII-X; and Salaris, *Le Futuriste*, 108-110.
[211] For a more thorough analysis of these women's essays, see Blum chapter 5.
[212] Blum, 106.
[213] Shara Marini, "Rivendicazione," L'Italia futurista (1 July 1917): Rpt. In Marinetti, *Come si seducono...*, VII-X; and Salairs, *Le futuriste*, 117-119.
[214] See for instance the end of Enif Robert's preface to her autobiographical novel, interspersed with letters from Marinetti, *Un Ventre de Donna, Romanzo Chirugico*, where Robert's signature is followed by Marinett's words "I approve unconditionally," and his signature.

the machismo exemplified by Volt, the male Futurists often supported female Futurists and promoted their work.[215]

The writing of Valentine de Saint-Point, for example, granddaughter of Victor Hugo, was important in the history of Futurism. Valentine first appeared in Futurist circles when they first began to show their art in Paris and Brussels. She lectured at Futurist exhibits and replied to questions raised about these lectures in the form of two important manifestos: *Manifeste de la Femme Futuriste* (March 25 1912) and *Manifeste Futuriste de la Luxure* (January 11 1913). When de Saint-Point's manifestos received negative criticism from the press, the Futurist Italo Tavolato defended her work and criticized her detractors.[216]

De Saint-Point's critique of Futurist ideas on women, and their importance for European intellectuals, proved that women's voices were far from absent in Futurism. Not only did women contribute to developing Futurist ideology, they sometimes assumed positions of authority within the movement. The journal *l'Italia futurista*, for instance, was run by Maria Ginanni during the war.[217]

Another important role for women in the Futurist movement was that of patron.[218] The Marchesa Luisa Casati was a wealthy Italian art collector (until she squandered her fortune in the early 1930s) and an eccentric socialite whose large exotic eyes served as inspiration for Futurist artists such as Giacomo Balla in his "Fluidità di forze rigide della Marchesa Casati" (1918). Such powerful female patrons and muses, who were also

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[215] Blum 106-17.
[216] Blum, 192, fn. 2.
[217] Blum, 106.
[218] All of the avant-garde groups had patrons and protectors that were often part of the establishment. For example: Jacques Doucet paying Breton to correct Marcel Proust's manuscripts, Coco Chanel giving money to Picasso and providing him with a room in her apartments, Francois Mauriac publicly endorsing Philippe Sollers.

present among the Surrealists, were part of the complicated sexual politics of early

twentieth avant-garde groups.

The gender dynamics in Futurist history was only one aspect of Futurism's attempt to

modernize social relationships and bring life up to speed. *Il dinamismo universale*, or

"universal dynamism," elaborated in the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painters*, dated

April 11 1910, and signed by Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916) and Gino

Severini (1883-1966), embraced such modern aspects of life as speed, motion, and

technology in an effort to experience them fully and be able to accurately depict them in

art.[219] The manifesto stated:

> The gesture which we would reproduce on canvas shall no longer be a
> fixed moment in universal dynamism. It shall simply be the dynamic
> sensation itself….To paint a human figure you must not paint it; you must
> render the whole of its surrounding atmosphere. Space no longer exists.[220]

The Futurists believed that by appreciating the sensations of modern life and being open

to the experiences offered by the technological advancements of the twentieth century

they would be able to live life in a more meaningful way and depict these experiences in

art more accurately.

Carlo Carrà (1881-1966) exemplified the ideas put forward in the *Technical Manifesto*

of Futurist Painters in his painting *The Swimmers* (1910). In this painting he did not

show the bodies of the swimmers. He instead painted the rapidly moving splashing water

mixed with limbs and extremities surging forward. The sense of movement is juxtaposed

with a sense of stillness, rendered by the geometric shapes of the limbs and water. The

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[219] Hultén, 570-573, 427.
[220] Apollonio, 27-28.

Futurist fascination with the fast pace of modern life was evident in paintings like this one, which captured the idea of universal dynamism.

The French were also experimenting with new ways to depict reality. After a trip to Paris in November of 1911 sponsored by Marinetti, Carrà witnessed first hand the aesthetic experimentation developing in the French capital, particularly with French cubism and French cinema. A visible change occurred in Carrà's style after this trip as he incorporated cubist and collage techniques into his own work. Carrà's *Horse and Rider* (or *The Red Rider*) (1913) depicted the movement of a horse. It was different from *The Swimmers* in that the movement was less naïve and more scientific, as if one were viewing each movement in slow motion. The painting had much in common with the photography of Eadweard Muybridge who took consecutive pictures of his friend's (former Governor Leland Stanford of California) galloping horses. [221]

The significance of Muybridge's experiments in France was evident in 1895, when the Lumière Brothers, who were influenced by Muybridge, and other innovators like Jules Janssen and Etienne Marey and their concepts of photography and motion, produced and publicly showed the first motion picture with their invention, the cinematographe. [222] The Futurists were quick to point out, however, that they were not merely copying the cinema. Boccioni, who along with Luigi Russolo (1885-1947) accompanied Carrà on the Parisian trip, wrote in a new manifesto of 1913:

> Any accusations that we are merely being 'cinematographic' make us laugh – they are just vulgar idiocies. We are not trying to split each individual image – we are looking for a symbol, or better, a single form, to replace these old concepts of division with new concepts of continuity.[223]

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[221] Tisdall and Bozzolla, 37-38.
[222] Hayward, 69.
[223] Apollonio, 89.

This manifesto explained that, unlike cinematic technology, which had to combine numerous images divided into each instant of movement, Futurist painting and sculpture strove to combine many separate instances into one symbolic concept of movement.

Their desire to capture a continuum was part of the Futurists' ambition to depict the motion and speed of modern life in their art the way they themselves experienced it. Marinetti, for example, described his first flight in a monoplane in 1911 in his free verse 1912 novella *Le monoplane du pape*. The manifestos, however, in particular those authored by Boccioni, served to explain in more technical terms how everyday life should be reflected in art.

Although such Futurist artists as Boccioni, who split from the group after discovering Cézanne, or Carrà, who left for Paris with two other Futurists, Soffici and Papini, were already diverging from Marineti's leadership, it was the First World War that ultimately fragmented the Futurist movement which never again recovered its initial zany enthusiasm.

3.2   The Surrealists

The Surrealists were also deeply affected by the First World War, which brought them together, and the Second World War, which tore them apart. Aragon, Breton Éluard, Péret, and Soupault fought in the First World War and were disgusted and disillusioned by their experiences.[224] The war played a significant role in forming the young men and in creating an impetus for them to desire change and to reject militaristic ideas that some

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[224] Nadeau, 45.

of the Futurists had so heartily (and naively) espoused. From the beginning, the

Surrealist movement, defined by the goals set out in the first *Surrealist Manifesto* of

1924, was caustic and belligerent, demanding a change in the way we understood life and

art, and an increased awareness of what lay beneath the surface of reality. The art of

manifesto writing, as developed by the Futurists, became for the Surrealists an important

avenue for expressing ideas about politics and how to live.

Unlike for the Futurists, there were only two official Surrealist manifestos signed by

the leader. The first was published in 1924. It is different from its Futurist counterparts

because it was published after other Surrealist works, like the 1920 *Les Champs*

Magnetiques, by Breton and Philippe Soupault, who use Surrealist techniques such as

automatic writing for the first time. Marinetti's 1909 Futurist manifesto, as Tisdall and

Bozzolla point out, was written before the movement actually existed. The second and

last Surrealist Manifesto was published in 1929, ending what had been a tradition of

repeated manifesto publications.

In their manifestos, as in their public actions, the Surrealists were extremely active in

pushing to change society. Although the Futurists displayed interest in the Communist

movement, they never officially joined the party, choosing instead to align themselves

with Fascism. But the revolutionary ideology of Communism had a significant influence

on Surrealist artists, who supported the French Communist Party. The group officially

joined the PCF in 1926, though the relationship immediately proved problematic. In

1935, Breton vehemently rejected party policy that gave primacy to social revolution

before all else, especially intellectual or aesthetic revolution.

The conflict began during the "Naville Crisis," named after Pierre Naville, a member of the Surrealist group. In Naville's 1926 essay *La Révolution et les intellectuals (Que peuvent faire les surréalistes?*) he criticized Surrealism for being incapable of truly shocking the bourgeoisie and successfully subverting it. Due to this perceived inadequacy, the question then arose: should artists focus first on the material conditions of society before trying to free the mind through art? Naville, in line with conventional Marxism, made clear in his essay that one must first destroy the conventions of society in order to subsequently free the mind. Breton replied in the form of an essay that same year entitled *Légitime Défense* where he stated that the Surrealists supported the proletariat revolution, though until it was time to act, they would continue to change the world by altering ideas through experiments with the unconscious and the subversion of bourgeois morality. [225]

The Surrealist strategy to liberate the mind was closely linked with liberation of the imagination. Beginning in 1924 with the first manifesto, where Breton lauded Freud for his work on dreams and the unconscious, Surrealism sought to stimulate the imagination by opening all modes of mental activity, including the unconscious and the world of dreams.[226]

On way of accessing the unconscious was to be open to the possibility of random chance occurrences. The concept *hasard objectif* (objective chance) was an experience when diverse events in life seemed to become connected in unexpected ways. These connections facilitated receptivity to circumstances and events that might otherwise go

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[225] Nadeau, 127-132.
[226] Breton, *Manifeste de Surréalisme*, 20-21.

unnoticed. The Surrealists' interest in objective chance and coincidence was part of their

general interest in exploring different realities and imagining alternative states of being.

Another way of exploring the unconscious and the dream realm was through *écriture*

automatique (automatic writing). This method, which included writing whatever came to

mind while in a very relaxed semi-unconscious state, was later abandoned by the

Surrealists. It was nonetheless useful in the early stages of the movement as an exercise

aimed at eliminating the interference of rational thoughts in attempts to delve into the

unconscious. Sleep hypnosis was also used, often in conjunction with automatic writing.

The dream state was of great importance to the Surrealists because they believed that

access to dreams and the unconscious represented a realm free from the restrictions

imposed by bourgeois social laws. [227]

The Surrealists defined this combination of reality and the dream state as *surreality*.[228]

Mary Ann Caws, in her introduction to her translation of *L'Amour fou*, explained what

this new reality was supposed to look like. She wrote:

> [*Mad Love*,] like all the great monuments of Surrealism…expresses the
> entire power and hope of Surrealism to remake the world through the
> emotions and through the confidence that the relation between the exterior
> or natural world and the interior or human world can reveal more about
> both than the rational mind could possibly detect. At some moments, this
> relation takes on a political aura, at others, a purely personal one, and at
> still others, a mystical one….[229]

This attitude was part of the Surrealist agenda to transform the world. By liberating the

mind and making contact with the deeper recesses of the unconscious, the Surrealists

wished to change everyday experiences into lighter and more humorous happenings. The

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[227] Breton, *Manifeste…*, 20, 24.
[228] Breton, *Manifeste…*, 24.
[229] Caws, Introduction to *Mad Love*, xiii.

Surrealists felt that reason, rationalism and in general the bourgeois mentality and aesthetic had dampened our sensitivities to life and to art. Their hope that they could undo these confining constrictions and liberate the human mind and spirit is fundamental to Surrealist art.

Breton's lyric story *Mad Love* (*L'Amour Fou*) about his relationship with Jacqueline Lamba was an example of this optimism. In this book, Breton recounted the terrifying moments when he felt himself falling in love with Lamba, and considered what it would be like to abandon all inhibitions and love without any hesitations. He wrote, explaining his feelings and emotions during his first intimate encounter with Lamba:

> Je glisse sur les heures de tumulte qui suivirent. Il est deux heures du matin quand nous sortons du « Café des Oiseaux ». Ma confiance en moi subit une crise assez spéciale et assez grave pour qu'il me paraisse nécessaire d'en donner ici quelque idée si je persiste à vouloir faire le jour sur les suites immédiates de cette rencontre en ce qu'elles ont d'apparemment presque normal et, à la réflexion, de tout à fait inexplicagble en raison, sur un autre plan, de leur caractère rigoureusement concerté….Je vais devant moi mécaniquement….Aimer, retrouver la grâce perdue du premier instant où l'on aime….Peu sûre : c'est bien, en effet, toute l'insécurité qui est en moi dès que, cette nuit là, je me reprends à lire dans l'avenir ce qui pourrait, ce qui devrait être si le cœur *disposait*. La liberté à l'égard des autres êtres, la liberté à l'égard de celui qu'on a été semble ne se faire alors si tentante que pour mieux m'accabler de ses défis.[230]

In this monologue, Breton laid out his doubts and fears when he first fell in love with Lamba. But he was able to quell his discomfort with the thought that liberating the heart and allowing its desires to rule would ease his pain. The Surrealists believed that peace could be found in a state of complete emotional freedom.

Most Surrealist poetry is therefore filled with optimism. Even the frustrated protagonist of this poem found emotional rest when he walked to the Quai aux Fleurs in

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[230] Breton, *L'Amour Fou*, 53-54.

the middle of a summer night in time to arrive there when the flowers were being unloaded, and transform his reactions into a fragrant symbol of his encounter with Lamba.

The connection of such everyday events as the smell of the fresh flowers, with deeper emotional memories like meeting a lover, was part of the Surrealist quest to improve everyday experiences. Breton made similar connections in the final section of *Mad Love*. In a letter to his eighteen months old daughter Aube, he imagines she is sixteen year old, and gives her advice on how to live and love freely. In the letter, he connects images of her mother with the daughter, calling the latter "Ecusette de Noireuil," a play on words with "écureuil" (squirrel) and "noisette" (hazelnut), terms of endearment Breton used in the first pages of the story, when he first saw Lamba.[231]

In addition to exemplifying the Surrealist ideas of freedom and *hasard objectif*, this passage evoked another idea typical of Surrealism: that of woman as mysterious object. The tender image of an innocent forest creature looking up at the poet is a small part of Surrealism's well-known image of the "woman hidden in the forest," that was referred to in Chapter 1. In this story, Breton referred to woman's mysterious qualities as the only power to which he ever succumbed. And while such sexism prevented male Surrealists from truly considering the female psyche as an independent subject, their attitude rendered women more advanced in terms of emotional and psychological self-knowledge. This feminine advantage, Breton hoped, would enable his daughter to experience life freely, and "madly," in the Surrealist sense.

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[231] Breton, *L'Amour Fou*, 53.

Most of the Surrealist writers, especially those who remained with Breton after the Naville crisis and were not attacked in his Second Manifesto, shared his ideas about love and human relationships. There were, however, others who had different conceptions of companionship and sexuality. Although Bataille was officially excluded from the Surrealist group in 1930 and further distanced himself by signing *Un Cadavre*, a tract that violently criticized Breton and the Surrealist movement, he has come to be known, thanks in large part to the writers of *TQ*, as one of the unofficial but indispensable creators of Surrealist literature.

Bataille's *L'Histoire de L'Oeil*, was published in 1928, nine years before *L'Amour fou*. It too called for change in the way humans interacted and thought. Like *Mad Love*, *L'Histoire de l'Oeil* was about companionship and human relationships. But the similarities seem to end there.   Unlike much of the traditional Surrealist poetry published by Breton and Eluard, *L'Histoire de l'Oeil* was hopeful or optimistic. Bataille, instead, focused on the more disconcerting and disturbing aspects of love. This dark side of Surrealism, while more shocking, was in some ways more in line with the Surrealist theory of complete freedom than more "legitimate" Surrealist works.

The Story of the Eye was a tale about sex, murder, fetishes and adolescent romance. Whereas *Mad Love* described the journey of a couple through the city and at the same time laid down a certain philosophy about life and how to live it, *L'Histoire de l'Oeil*, with its scandalous and outrageous protagonists, completely jarred readers by threatening their sense of balance or normalcy. Instead of suggesting an improved way of life, Bataille's short story left readers unsettled and more confused about life.

Like Breton's characters, Bataille's characters acted according to an entirely different set of social rules. Bataille's characters, however, were destructive. In the story, for example, the protagonist and Simone, his sweetheart/adventurous sidekick, befriended Marcelle, who was eventually placed in a special "convalescent" type of chateau because of her hyperactive sex drive. With the help of the two protagonists, Marcelle escaped from the chateau, only to return to Simone's villa, experience a violent flashback of her previous institutionalization, and commit suicide.[232] This is hardly an optimistic ending.

The fates of other female characters in the short story seem to prove that absolute freedom does not lead to self-liberation, at least for women. In the final one-page chapter entitled "Plan d'une suite de l'histoire de l'oeil," the narrator explained how Simone, fifteen years after the events recounted above, had undergone a religious conversion and ended up in a "torture camp." The story of the "torture camp," whether figurative or real, had two effects. First, it revealed how living a life of absolute freedom led to failure. Second, it suggested that social institutions like an insane asylum (which is one possible explanation for what the "torture camp" might have been), were appropriate places of punishment for peripheral female characters like Nadja and Simone.

Even though Bataille suggested in his story that freedom from rationality contributed to Simone's strength as a protagonist, her tragic fate proved otherwise. Like Nadja, neither Marcelle nor Simone seemed to find any sense of satisfaction or contentment from the life they led. Although they lived free from social rules and traditional customs, they suffered from a sense of disorientation and uprootedness.

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[232] Bataille, 129-140.

Absence of a guide for what is good or evil, positive or negative, can result in complete

relativism. Some former Surrealists like Yves Bonnefoy, contemporary French poet and

Collège de France chair, have criticized the movement for its relativism. John Naughton,

who edited a collection of Bonnefoy's poetry, explained the distinguished poet's views

on Surrealism:

> But the Surrealist tendency to present things as devoid of meaningful
> context, as set off against nothingness and absence, creates, in
> [Bonnefoy's] opinion, a kind of spectral of demonic presence, a negative
> luminosity – whereas it is the richness and unity of being that true
> presence should reveal….Thus the Surrealist image, because it is offered
> in a way that seems indifferent to the realities of time, space, causality,
> and to the laws of nature and being, 'subverts the principles that allow us
> to decipher the world.'[233]

For Bonnefoy, Surrealism's failure lay in its inability to truly connect the unreal with the

real, and thus offer a better understanding of existence.

3.3   The Situationsts

   The Surrealists' attempts to imagine a surreal existence were nonetheless beneficial in

the sense that they opened a discourse about how artists might go about changing life. A

link can be made between the Surrealists' conception of a new kind of life, and that of the

Situationists. Breton's poem "Rideau Rideau" from the 1932 collection *Le Revolver à

Cheveux Blancs*, is a good illustration of this link. In the poem, the protagonist described

a dream-like sequence of events: attending a play of his life, watching the action unfold

on stage, seeing one of the characters wearing the protagonist's mask circulate in the

audience, and then witnessing another curtain being lifted on another makeshift stage

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[233] Naughton, xv.

within the existing stage.[234] Being a witness to one's own life, and being unable to

distinguish between real life and superficial appearances, was an important topic for the

Situationists also.

In *La Société du Spectacle*, published in 1967, Guy Debord explained how modern

consumer society alienated individuals from their surroundings. Sadie Plant, who

analyzed the significance of the Situationist movement, explained:

> The Society of the Spectacle painted a picture of a society which believes
> itself capable of providing everything, satisfying all desire, relieving every
> burden, and fulfilling every dream. But this is also a world which insists
> that every moment of life must be mediated by the commodity form, a
> situation which makes it impossible to provide anything for oneself or act
> without the mediation of commodities…. Bombarded by images and
> commodities which effectively represent their lives to them, people
> experience reality as second-hand…Even ways of life are marketed as
> lifestyles, and careers, opinions, theories, and desires are consumed as
> surely as bread and jam.[235]

In her analysis of the Situationist movement, Plant points out that the Situationists

believed that people were not only alienated from things and products, but from

themselves, from their own "experiences, emotions, creativity, and desires. People are

spectators of their own lives, and even the most personal gestures are experienced at one

remove."[236]

Like the narrator in Breton's poem, the modern individual, according to the

Situationists, struggled to find meaning in the modern context of everyday life. Unlike

the Surrealist poem, Situationist philosophy does not see the unconscious and the

imagination as a means of overcoming the confusion associated with modernity. Debord

was particularly sensitive to how post World War European society, weary and

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[234] Breton, *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. 2, 91.
[235] Plant 10-11.
[236] Plant, 1.

disheartened by wars, had turned to material consumption, and thus sublimated important

desires. In his 1957 presentation to the group of avant-gardistes that would decide to join

together to from the Situationniste Internationale, Debord explained how Surrealism's

greatest failure was its belief in "la richesse infine de l'imagination inconsciente."[237] In

an effort to fix Surrealim's failures, the Situationists put less focus on exploring desires

and more focus on providing real solutions to improving society.

The improvement of everyday life, for the Situationists, consisted in appropriating an

existing social situation and improving it. Like the Surrealists, who attempted to find a

middle ground between reality and the dream state, the Situationists wanted to combine

the real world with an improved conception of it. What was unique about Situationism

was that it did not call for the destruction of contemporary culture and habits, as did

Futurism and Surrealism. Debord wrote, "Nous ne devons pas refuse la culture moderne,

mais nous en emparer, pour la nier."[238] Inverting the meaning and significance of the

world allowed the Situationists to create art and build on to the existing world without

negating or abolishing it first.

In the section entitled "la négation et la consommation dans la culture," Debord

explained how détournement negated and created art at the same time. Debord wrote :

> Le dadaïsme et le surréalisme sont les deux courants qui
> marquèrent la fin de l'art moderne….Le dadaïsme a voulu
> *supprimer l'art sans le réaliser* ; et le surréalisme a voulu *réaliser
> l'art sans le supprimer*. La position critique élaborée depuis par
> les *situationnistes* a montré que la suppression et la réalisation de
> l'art sont les aspects inséparables d'un même *dépassement de
> l'art*.

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[237] Debord, "Révolution et contre-révolution dans la culture moderne," *Rapport sur la construction des situations…*, 1957, reprinted in *Oeuvres*, 312.

[238] Debord, "Révolution et contre-révolution dans la culture moderne," *Rapport sur la construction des situations…*, 1957, reprinted in *Oeuvres*, 321.

Until this point, the avant-garde had either advocated the destruction of art, or the creation of completely new criteria for it. Debord insisted that Situationism was different because it did both simultaneously. The Situationists created an entirely different meaning for an object by destroying its original meaning, in effect creating a new object with new meaning. For Debord, the new meaning improved the object's significance in the world. Far from giving the object a false or spurious meaning, détournement was "…a return to a superior fidelity of the element."[239]

Détournement was also a way of bringing lightness and originality to everyday objects. Debord wrote, "Le détournement est la prélude d'un monde parodique, où on peut concevoir des choses nouvelles"[240] To create this new world, it was necessary to make fun of the current one. As with the Futurists and the Surrealists, the *ludic* component of Situationism was a defining principal. The Situationists also believed that they could give themselves new meanings and more significant identities. In his *Thèses sur la révolution Culturelle*, Debord wrote, "il s'agit de produire nous-mêmes, et non des choses qui nous asserviseent."[241] Such a goal was typical of the Situationists' emphasis on practically and actually implementing change.

One example of how these ideas were applied to reality can be found in the Situationists' attitude toward the student revolutionary movements of the late 1960s. In 1966 in Strasbourg, Mustapha Khayati published a pamphlet *De la misère en milieu étudiant*, which was translated into several languages. Khayati's text, which advocated

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[239] Debord from *The Role of Godard*, in Knabb, 176.
[240] Debord from "Le Détournement comme Négation et comme Prélude," *Internationale Situationniste*, #3, 1959, reprinted *Œuvres*, 989.
[241] Debord from "Thèses sur la révolution culturelle," *Internationale Situationniste*, #1, 1958, reprinted *Œuvres*, 978.

student rebellion, was very important for students not only in Strasbourg, but elsewhere in Europe as well. That same year, the students at the University of Strasbourg revolted, and were followed in the coming years by students in many European countries.[242]

The Situationists also played an important role in the French student revolt of 1968. The memorable graffiti slogans, for instance, boast traces of the Situationist *détournement* of capitalistic ideology and images. Drawn with precision and efficiency, their messages are still symbols of subversive rebellion in the modern world.[243]

In addition to influencing student rebellion, the Situationists influenced other artistic movements. Greil Marcus drew a connection between the British Punk movement (sometimes referred to as neo-Dada) of the 1970s and Situationism. Two important artists associated with the Sex Pistols, one of the more successful punk-rock groups, were deeply influenced by the Situationists. Jamie Reid was the graphic artist who designed the covers for various Sex Pistols albums and singles including the one called "God Save the Queen." These words, cut out and pasted over the eyes of an image of the Queen of England, are just above the Queen's mouth, which is covered with the words "Sex Pistols." By superimposing the name of the punk-rock group over the image of the Queen, the album was proposing questions about power, culture, politics and music in a saucy and provocative way.

Malcolm McLaren, manager of the Sex Pistols, was also familiar with Situationist ideas. He had attempted to go to Paris in 1968 to take part in the demonstrations there but never made it to his desired destination. But he continued to be interested in cultural

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[242] Wollen, 71.
[243] Wollen, 71.

rebellion and in Situationist theory, eventually employing subversive tactics based on Situationist writing to promote the internationally successful punk-rock group.[244]

The example of the Sex Pistols and their success proved that Situationism could be applied effectively to real, contemporary situations. Punk-rock, which began as an underground countercultural movement that promoted individual liberties and was opposed to conformism and mainstream art, became so successful that detractors argued that it had lost its avant-garde status. The same has been said of the Surrealists, whose name has become so commonplace that it is used to describe any number of things that are somewhat removed from the ordinary.

But there are examples of Situationism maintaining its rebellious and subversive impetus. One such example is the case of 26 year-old Yacine (no last name was given), a psychology student at the University of Montpellier III, Paul Valery. In 2007, the left-leaning French newspaper *Libération* described Yacine as an isolated verbal provocateur. It is particularly interesting that the journal reported that Yacine read Guy Debord and spoke out against the media, the unions, the politicians, the police, and specifically, the CPE (*Contrat de Premier Embauche*, an employment contract proposed by the government for young people who expressed their disapproval with widespread street protests). Yacine's actions, according to the paper, caused enough controversy (without any displays of physical aggression) within the university administration to have him expelled for two years.[245] Nearly fifty years after the founding of the *Internationale*

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[244] See Marcus Greil's *Lipstick Traces* for further details on the connections between the Punk movement and Situationist and avant-garde theories.
[245] Rap, 23.

Situationniste, and forty years after the publication of *The Society of the Spectacle*,

Situationism continues to influence social agitators.

Another example of Situationist theories that continue to resonate today is Italian

Situationist Gianfranco Sanguinetti's 1978 tract entitled "Del terrorismo e dello stato"

("On Terrorism and the State"). Sanguinetti, using the example of the terrorist group The

Red Brigades, elaborated on how terrorism provided a spectacle that strengthened the

state and, as Plant explained:

> …provides a socially cohesive common enemy, legitimizes needs for
> vigilance, security, and new forms of police repression, and encourages
> the opinion that even the faultiest of democracies is superior to the reign
> of terror.[246]

Debord expressed similar ideas in his *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle* (1988),

where he wrote in chapter nine that the Spectacle of society created its own enemies:

terrorists. Some would see the repeal of civil rights such as the *writ of habeus corpus* in

order to broaden the power of the State for fighting terrorism in the aftermath of the

September 11 terrorist attack as a reflection of Situationist ideas about terrorism

reinforcing state power.

There are other critics, however, who argue that Situationism is no longer relevant.

Stéphane Spoiden wrote that Situationism's critique of bourgeois life, which

encompassed most aspects of everyday life, was largely negative and ineffective.

Furthermore, the way in which the world has evolved up until now, with the profusion of

such technological inventions such as the internet where information is easily diffused,

does not move the world towards a totalitarian and totalizing power, as the Situationists

predicted, but, on the contrary, opens and decentralizes power. Spoiden disagreed with

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[246] Plant, 128.

Debord's theory of passive reception of information in the media age and argued that the internet, for instance, was interactive and allowed one to be both the sender and the receiver of information.[247]

Another weakness in Debord's section five of *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle* is the idea of a perpetual present, constructed by the incessant circulation of information. Debord claimed that this phenomenon destroyed any sense of past or future. In a subsequent section, Debord explained that "spectacular society" abolished history. This idea predated Francis Fukuyama's, which announced the end of history because of the perpetual competition of world powers vying, as in the Cold War, for the victory of their ideologies. Most would agree today, however, that both Debord and Fukuyama were wrong.

Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle was important, no only because it revealed some weaknesses in Situationist theory, but because, as one of the later publications of the Situationist movement, it showed how the movement had evolved since the initial publication of *La Société du Spectacle* twenty years earlier. Debord's outlook in 1988 was more pessimistic, as when he elaborated in section eight that there was no more room for contradictions, for dissonant voices, for checks and balances; insinuating, moreover, that there is no more room for revolutions. This pessimism, as Plant pointed out, marked a change from the *Society of the Spectacle*.[248] The tract nevertheless continues in the same Situationist spirit to criticize the negative forces of the Spectacle in order to spur the reader to react against it and change their everyday lives.

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[247] Spoiden, 24, 27.
[248] Plant 152.

3.4   *Tel-Quel*

Whereas the Situationists focused on making change by formulating practical ideas about everyday life, *TQ* focused on making change through language and linguistic theory.   The group's concentration on language, how it was structured, and how it could be used as a political tool set it apart from the other groups discussed here. Joan Brandt explained:

> …the members of the TQ group believed that the revolutionary struggle should take place on a more fundamental level, on the level of language itself. Claiming that communicative language is a principal vehicle in the preservation of the ideological structures that dominate western culture and revealing their growing interests in Marxist theory, Kristeva and the other members of TQ attempted to formulate and put into practice a revolutionary materialist theory of language.   Their effort was to work against the traditional concept of the literary text and of language itself as predominantly meaningful structures and thus to help achieve, by indirection, a transformation of the social order and its oppressive laws as well.[249]

For the Telquelians, the structure of language harbored traditional ideologies that benefited from its protection; *TQ* set out to reveal these ideologies by experimenting with language.

For *TQ*, changing everyday life depended upon changes in the way we understood and used language. The other avant-garde groups discussed here also saw the connection between traditional language and traditional ways of thinking. But TQ writers, in addition to writing experimental fiction, also wrote theoretical explanations of the use and power of language. The idea that language could be powerful enough to instigate social and political revolution was an idea that the other avant-garde groups also entertained. All avant-garde groups discussed here applied, in one form or another,

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[249] Brandt, 25.

Marxist ideas of revolution to their theories about society and art and the relationship

between the two. The Surrealists, as we saw, made a conscious effort to link political

revolution with language. But according to Fourny, they failed to link the two

revolutions effectively, which is what *TQ* set out to do.[250]

   The Surrealists had also been criticized, as we saw in Chapter 2, for failing to reconcile

two important ideas: Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis. Here too, *TQ* seemed to

pick up where the Surrealists left off and attempted to explain, in detailed theoretical

language, how these two ideologies could be compatible and useful in promoting change.

Julia Kristeva, in her 1974 work *La Revolution du Langage Poétique*, originally her

doctoral dissertation,[251] addressed this issue. She took from Marxism the idea of the

individual and his conflicts with society and with the class system. Kristeva also

elaborated on psychoanalysis and its focus on the internal workings of the individual in

order to formulate theories on how these internal conflicts, which were linked to

language, affected the individual and her relationship to society.

   Kristeva applied her theories about the "sujet en procès" to art in order to see how the

individual subject and her inner experiences could be effectively portrayed within the

larger historical process. She concluded that the avant-garde succeeded in combining

both aspects of existence by linking poetic revolution (which paralleled the internal

experiences of the individual) with political revolution (which paralleled historical

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[250] Fourny, 230-231.
[251] She defended her dissertation on June 8 1973 at the University at Vincennes. The original title was
"Langage, sens, poésie : les transformations du langage poétique à la fin du XIXe siècle dans les œuvres de
Lautréamont et de Mallarmé." Some of those on the committee included Roland Barthes and Henri
Lefebvre.

progression). According to Kristeva, revolutionizing poetic language was the key to social revolution.

In the same vein, Philippe Forest, who wrote a history of *TQ*, points to the example of Antonin Artuaud, a writer who was revolutionary because his language "tore" the subject away from the conventional social order and encouraged him to live through a personal revolution.[252] Forest explains the importance of language in promoting revolution:

> Les vrais 'révolutionnaires' de l'écriture, les vrais matérialistes du langage, ce sont ceux qui, alors même que leurs œuvres peuvent sembler apolitiques, marquent à l'intérieur de leur texte la présence de ce 'travail producteur' que logocentrisme et capitalisme s'attachent à masquer. Du coup, un total renversement s'opère. A gauche, une spectaculaire redistribution des places s'avère nécessaire dans le Panthéon des lettres : Mallarmé remplace Zola, Roussel succède à Vallès, Joyce et Kafka s'avèrent bien plus nécessaires que tous les tenants du 'réalisme socialiste,' Eluard et Aragon doivent céder leur place à Bataille et à Artaud.[253]

For *TQ*, the real revolutionary writers were those whose works did not seem political, but whose language in fact undermined the very politics they professed to ignore.

In the early years of *TQ*, the journal avoided overt political messages. Marx-Scouras, in *The Cultural Politics of Tel Quel*, pointed out that initially the review strove to be apolitical, like its predecessor, the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. *TQ* argued for literature independent of any ideology, focusing instead on reviving the avant-garde dream of transforming literature.[254] Marx-Scouras wrote:

> With Sartrean engagement and Aragonian socialist realism as literary paradigms for left-wing culture in the 1940s and 1950s, Surrealism had never really succeeded in recovering the avant-garde dream of the 1920s

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[252] Forest, 450-451.
[253] Forest 316-317.
[254] Marx-Scouras, 27-28.

and 1930s…TQ, however, would revive the avant-garde wager left behind by Surrealism.[255]

Marx-Scouras suggested that the first few years of *TQ* picked up where Surrealism left off, attempting to change the world through literature.

By 1966, however, the *TQ* group was moving into the domain of politics. In a section entitled "Programme" from his book *Logiques*, Sollers explained the parallel between Marxist revolution and "textual rupture," hinting on what Kristeva would later elaborate upon in her doctoral dissertation. Sollers' book, written in 1967 and published in 1968, foreshadowed the highly politicized 1968 summer issue of *TQ*.

The events of May 1968 left an indelible mark on French society, as even the loftiest aesthetic intentions succumbed to the reality of the times. In the summer of 1968, *TQ* began publishing political pieces for the first time. In the past, political statements had been relegated to a few pages at the back of the review, that were completely unrelated to the literary content of the rest of the issue. The autumn 1968 Number 34 issue however, for the first time contained texts that linked the aesthetic goals of the journal with its political objectives.[256]

The issue opened with a manifesto entitled "La Révolution, ici maintenant" dated May 68. The manifesto put forward seven of the journal's present and future political goals. It insisted that revolution had to be thought out theoretically, and acted out collectively while keeping in mind the class struggle. The emphasis on theory first, then action, echoed the Surrealist position articulated by Breton in *Légitime Défense*.

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[255] Marx-Scouras, 49-50.
[256] Marx-Scouras, 143.

TQ solidified its stance on May 24th, the most violent day of the 1968 strikes. On this day, Sollers attempted to influence the writers of the "Union des Ecrivains," who took over the Hôtel de Massa, the luxurious seat of the "Société des Gens de Lettres," an organization established to preserve the rights of authors. Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas and George Sand, some of the most well respected French authors of the nineteenth century, had founded the organization in 1838. It embodied the ideas of institution, establishment, and elitism that the spirit of the May, and the avant-garde, attempted to destroy.

TQ, nonetheless, did not fully support the student strikers, or the intellectuals of the "Union des Ecrivains," who supported the students. Sollers disagreed with the Union over the role of the intellectual and the PCF in the protests. While the Union writers believed that intellectuals should participate in the protests, Sollers claimed that no revolution could take place unless it was a Marxist-Leninist one, and was thus critical of the students and of those supporting them because they had not allowed the workers to lead the movement.[257] In line with the PCF and many other French intellectuals (with Sartre a most notable exception), *TQ* judged the demonstrations rash because they lacked in any organized political or social agenda.

The strikes led to chaos and enough street violence that the more cautious intellectuals remained home. Michel Butor, considered by many to be part of the *nouveau roman* movement although he himself points out that it was never a movement and that he was never a part of whatever it was, described the atmosphere of suspicion and hesitancy on

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[257] Combes, 54-60.

the part of some intellectuals during the demonstrations.[258] Butor, husband and father of

three girls living in the southern suburb of St. Geneviéve des Bois, was invited during the

events of May by his close friend Jean François Lyotard, who was teaching at Nanterre,

the university at the heart of the student uprisings, to write some poems that would be

posted on the walls of the school.[259] Butor was ready to contribute the writings, but not

to engage in street rioting.

  On the evening of May 23rd, Butor received a call from his friend and former Telquelian

Maurice Roche, who announced that he was joining the protests the following day as part

of a group of writers, including Natalie Sarraute, with whom Butor was friends. Worried

about Sarraute in such a highly charged climate, Butor decided to join his friends at a

café near the Hôtel de Massa in front of l'Hôpital Cochin, where he could keep an eye on

Sarraute, a woman twenty-six years his senior. After waiting for some time in the café,

Butor, who was well aware that his colleagues were hesitant about going out into the

street, felt obliged to do something, and thus announced, "on y va!" Soon Butor found

himself leading the party of demonstrators down the Faubourg St. Jacques towards the

Hôtel de Massa, where they told all occupants to leave. The writers began to work on a

list of requests, which eventually led to the abolition of certain constraints exercised by

the powerful editing firms.[260]

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[258] Butor also published articles in *TQ*, as did other noueau romanistes such as Robert Pinget, Natalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Ollier, and Claude Simon. All of their publications, with the exception of one Simon text, appeared before 1965, after which date the relationship between the nouveau romanistes and *TQ* cooled. See Kauppi, 57.

[259] Butor, Personal interview. Butor said that the collection *Tourmente* was published later in 1968 by Fanta Morgana Press, and illustrated by Pierre Alechinsky, Béatrice Dufour and J. Harold. The edition is nearly impossible to find.

[260] Butor, Interview.

Unlike the reluctant participant Butor, Sollers and the other *TQ* writers refused to get involved. The Summer 68 issue had made clear that the *TQ* position remained (at least for the time being) strictly Marxist and thus granted primacy to the workers, and not the students. The Fall issue of the same year, in addition to reinforcing the journal's Marxist position, was important because it also reinforced the journal's aesthetic positions. In particular, the issue spoke highly of an ex-Surrealist who had until that point been shunned not only by the literary establishment, but by the avant-garde tradition. Denis Hollier's presentation of an unpublished Bataille text entitled "La Vieille Taupe," where Bataille criticized some of Breton's conclusions from the second manifesto, placed this peripheral Surrealist in a new position within the avant-garde lineage.

It also redefined Breton's position in this lineage, which had been established by the Surrealists themselves, and by the references made by the Situationists and *TQ* writers. Initially, Breton, like Ponge and Bataille, had been considered by *TQ* as a peripheral figure that necessitated resurrecting. Breton reciprocated the interest shown in his work and had agreed to contribute to an issue of *TQ*, but never followed through. Nonetheless, in 1963, Solers and Thibaudeau gave a radio broadcast praising Breton that was printed in nunber 13 of *TQ*.

Breton's death in 1966, however, brought about a change in how Surrealism was perceived in the literary world. After his death, the leader of the Surrealist group found a secure spot in the French literary canon. Even those whom he had ousted from the group, like Aragon, began to speak well of him, recalling their friendship and attempting to emphasize his association with the Surrealists. [261] *TQ*, however, refused to follow their

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[261] Forest, 433-434.

lead and instead moved away from Breton and the official version of Surrealism towards

Bataille and the rogue element of the avant-garde.

In addition to presenting, and thus appropriating, a peripheral avant-garde artist, the

publication of Bataille's "La Vieille Taupe" was also important in that it combined *TQ*'s

political positions (Marxism) and aesthetic ideas (Bataille and rogue Surrealism). The

topic of Surrealism and its legitimacy, both politically and aesthetically, became an

important theme. Not only did *TQ* prefer, to the detriment of mainstream Surrealism,

Bataille as a literary alternative, the journal adopted Bataille's critical approach to

Surrealism's political failures. Forest explained how Bataille's text, thirty years after

being written, still accurately revealed Surrealism's weaknesses:

> Opposant la figure de la 'taupe' révolutionnaire à celle, aérienne, de
> l'aigle, Bataille adopte une posture matérialiste et met à nu, de manière
> impitoyable, l' *'idéalisme' de fond* qui imprègne le discours surréaliste.
> Ce texte, vieux de près de trente ans, a, pour les gens de TQ, valeur de
> prise de position. Au moment même où, dans l'effervescence de 1968,
> semble renaître un certain surréalisme, Batille fournit les armes d'une
> critique sans concession. Il semble dénoncer par avances les illusions du
> discours utopique et faiblement théorique auquel les événements de Mai
> ont donné l'occasion de proliférer.[262] [my italics]

The publication of the text shortly after the May events only reinforced the *TQ* position

vis-à-vis the student strikes and Surrealist revolution; for *TQ*, both were inadequate.[263]

Despite *TQ*'s critique of Surrealism's idealistic and unrealistic outlook, Surrealism did

have a certain amount of success, as did theories of the other avant-garde movements, in

the events of May 68. The type set of the posters, the subversive and "detourné"

messages in the graffiti prove that many techniques and theories of the avant-garde, from

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[262] Forest, 335.
[263] Further proof of this attitude can be found in Sollers' 1970 preface to Jean Thibaudeau's oral play entitled "Mai 1968 en France," where he recognized the student strikes, but admitted to their limited objectives. See Forest p 336.

the Futurists, to the Dadists, to the Surrealists, to the Situationists, could be put to use in a real social rebellion.

Avant-garde experiments with politics, however, had always been difficult and inconsistent, and this was true for those of *TQ* as well. In 1971, for example, in the second issue of that year, dedicated to Barthes, *TQ* announced the official split of the journal with the PCF and the termination of the *Groupe d'Etudes Théoriques*, that had been formed in May 68 to develop political theories that would promote social revolution.[264] Instead, several *TQ* writers and other Maoist supporters formed *Le Mouvement de Juin*, a militant bulletin began in 1971 and lasted for only three issues.

Like the Surrealists, *TQ*, after a fall out with the PCF, began to turn to peripheral communism - in the case of Breton, Trotsky and in *TQ's* case, Mao.[265] The *TQ* writers, most notably Kristeva, Sollers, Pleynet, Barthes, Francois Wahl, who visited China, estranged themselves not only from some of the more moderate contributors to the journal (as is possibly the case with Derrida, who split with the group in 1972),[266] but also from those who would have liked to see the journal remain independent of any political ties.

Some critics claimed that instead of becoming more practical and pursuing realistic avenues for promoting social change, *TQ* became more entrenched in extremist political ideologies. Brandt wrote:

> …this transformation of practice into dogma exposes and dismantles one of the fundamental illusions of the entire *TQ* project, one that is derived not simply from *TQ*'s utopian vision in all its *practical* manifestations but

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[264] *TQ* n. 46 , Summer 1971.
[265] Fourny, 236.
[266] Forest, 402-405.

from a certain theoretical idealism that also structured the *TQ* enterprise.[267]

According to Brandt, *TQ*'s enthusiastic espousal of Marxism and then Maoism unmasked the group's inherent idealism, a quality that plagued all avant-garde groups. The goals of *TQ*, which had evolved over the journal's existence, but which nevertheless remained linked to a belief in change and revolution, seemed overshadowed by doctrinaire political views. The belief in the necessity for class struggle and revolution, so important to Maoism while the PCF looked towards a more peaceful transition into socialism, shaped *TQ*'s ideology, bending it more and more towards idealistic and controversial approaches to rebellion and revolution.

The development of political and social theories among the various groups of the avant-garde suggests an interesting trend. The First World War influenced the first two avant-garde movements discussed here differently. Among the Futurists, it inspired a bellicose and enthusiastic attitude that seemed to parallel the aggressive atmosphere of pre-war Europe. For the Surrealists, the devastation of the war compelled the writers to reconsider the logic of the existing system, and pushed them to incorporate ideas such as Marxism and psychoanalysis to escape from the hegemonic powers of capitalist society. By the time of Situationism in the 60s, theories of political rebellion were framed in real and immediate terms. The Situationists were able to explain the relationship between capitalism and the individual and provide solutions for ameliorating social life. The *TQ* group, in a conscious attempt to locate itself within the established avant-garde tradition, drew upon many of these rebellious themes in order to explain the connection between political rebellion and poetic language.

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[267] Brandt 29.

Politics and everyday life, along with the theme of the city, permeate avant-garde art and define it as a twentieth-century aesthetic movement that attempted to improve contemporary society. In order to understand this aspiration better, and to understand its shortcomings as well, it is important to look at an avant-garde writer who was part of this project, but was at the same time peripheral to it. Because of her position as *other*, the writer who is the focus of the final chapter of this dissertation presents a discourse of sexual politics, replacing traditional avant-garde idealism with a new vision for the future.

CHAPTER 4

JOYCE MANSOUR: WRITING FROM THE PERIPHERIES

> *"*NE JAMAIS dire son rêve
> A celui qui ne vous aime pas*"*
> *Flammes Immobiles*
> Joyce Mansour

The opening lines of an untitled poem in Joyce Mansour's penultimate poetry collection entitled *Flammes Immobiles* reminds the reader that dreams are fragile, and when revealed to an unsympathetic ear, may be betrayed. In order to protect these dreams, the poem's narrator tells the reader to "Enfouissez vos rêves dans les poches sous vos yeux, ils seront à l'abri de l'envie." *Flammes Immobiles* was the result of a collaboration between Mansour, the sculptor Nanou Vialard, and Pierre Schwartz, who photographed Vialard's sculptures. One hundred and fifty exemplars were printed on thick cream paper in Montpellier on February 14th 1985, eighteen months before Mansour would succumb to the cancer she had been battling for two years. Like the narrator of the poem, Mansour was careful about revealing her inner dream world, a unique realm whose imagery, language, and philosophy were created from a feminine avant-garde perspective.

Critics have accused Surrealism of lacking such a perspective, and thus not being truly avant-garde. Sadie Plant, for example, argues that because Surrealism was not sexually

progressive (but instead often sexist and particularly heterosexist), it did not necessarily challenge social norms.[268] The absence of a significant number of women Surrealists contributed to this weakness. This is one reason why the female Surrealist's vision is so important.

At the same time, being a woman and a member of an avant-garde group was not easy. As Susan Suleiman explains in her seminal work *Subversive Intent*, women were usually on the margins of culture, and were twice marginalized when they were part of an avant-garde group, which by definition was itself peripheral.[269] Mansour, however, had two additional qualities that further removed her from the center: her native language was not French and she was from the proche-orient. In her handwritten manuscripts, Mansour's many orthographic errors showed how much she had to struggle with a language she began to study seriously only in her early twenties, during her courtship with her second husband.[270]

Mansour was not only a stranger to the French language, but an outsider in French culture as well. Although she was born in 1928 in England to cosmopolitan Egyptian-born parents, and had studied in Switzerland as a young girl, Cairo was her home until she left it to settle permanently in Paris with her husband and children in 1956. Her upbringing among the wealthiest Cairo families facilitated her integration in Parisian social life, but remained "other" in an occidental culture.

Thus removed fourfold from the center, Mansour writes from a very different perspective than that of other writers of the historic avant-garde. Similarities with them,

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[268] Plant, 51.
[269] Suleiman, 14.
[270] Missir, 19.

however, begin to emerge as her poetry engages in a dialogue with Surrealist poetry. Mansour, for instance, reinforced the idea of the modern city, particularly Paris, as a place where Surrealist adventures unfolded. The French capital, where she and her family moved permanently in 1956, provided them with political refuge from the turmoil in Egypt. Perhaps because of this, Mansour adopted an apolitical position during the strikes of May 1968, when she stopped attending the mandatory daily café meetings at *La Promenade de Vénus*, which she felt were becoming too political in nature. Since the death in 1966 of the André Breton, one of her more intimate friends, Mansour was no inclined to leave her home in the 16th district of Paris to cross the barricades into the areas neighboring the café.[271]

Although Mansour shied away from direct participation in political affairs, her writing shed light on the politics of sexual identity. Perhaps more than that of any of her contemporaries or associates in the Surrealist circle, her brazenly sexual language broke ideological barriers that had not yet been addressed in Surrealist political discourse, which had focused instead on social and economic issues. The role of women in society was something that did not concern the core Surrealists. They, instead, clung to the traditional idea of woman as object and aesthetic muse, and never questioned this sexist ideology. Mansour's poetry, on the contrary, is imbued with provocative ideas about female sexuality. In a radio show organized by J. B. Brunius, a French actor and Surrealist, in February of 1960, she maintained that only sex can scandalize and

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[271] Missir 157-158.

provoke.[272] It is the aim of this chapter to examine how Mansour used sex to scandalize and provoke her readers, and change their perceptions about feminine identity.

Mansour's journey leading to Surrealism began long after the *First Surrealist Manifesto* was published in Paris. Joyce Patricia Ades was born in Bowden, England in 1928. Her parents, Émile and Nelly Adès, were Sephardic Jews who spoke English and a judeo-spanish dialect.[273] Her father, who ran an important textile business in Egypt with connections in Manchester, was a prominent member of Egyptian society and was often invited by the king to play bridge at the palace. Joyce, the third of five children, grew up in the embassy district of Cairo, one of the most elegant neighborhoods of the city. She received a British education from her nanny and parents, and at the age of 8 years, was sent to Hove, Switzerland, to a girls' school specializing in teaching good manners to young girls of high society. She returned to Cairo after two years and enrolled in the British School there. In the summer of 1942, Joyce, her mother, and her three youngest siblings fled to Jerusalem to avoid the Germans occupation of Egypt. Émile Adès and his eldest son David enlisted in the British forces and donated part of their fortune to help fight the war.[274]

The trauma of war, however, was just a precursor to a much greater tragedy in the life of Joyce Mansour. In 1944, when Joyce was 15 years old, her mother died of cancer. Unlike her brothers and sisters, who returned to Cambridge to continue their studies, Joyce remained with her father in Cairo where she attended the British High School of

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[272] Missir 158.
[273] In her semi autobiographical short story "illusions de Vol" in the collection Ça, Mansour refers to English as "la première langue que j'eusse comprise en dépit de l'entourage analphabète hispano-arabo-yiddish de mes jeunes années." In *Prose…*, 190.
[274] Missir, 14-16.

Cairo. In high school, she excelled in sports, especially the high jump and the 200m

sprint, where she won second place in the national championship. While still in high

school, she met Henri Naggar, a handsome young athletic student of the Italian

community attending the French Lycée. In May of 1947, the two were married according

to Jewish rites. But a few months later, Nagger, who was only twenty-one, was stricken

with cancer and on October 7th of that same year died. The death of her mother and that

of her young husband shortly thereafter marked Mansour for life. It was at this time that

she found refuge in writing poetry.[275]

In 1948, Joyce met thirty-six year old Samir Mansour at the races of the Yacht-Club in

Cairo. Mansour too was from an old Cairo textile family, but had grown up in Paris. At

the age of twenty one he had returned to Egypt to take care of the family business, and

had been doing so for fifteen years when he met Joyce. In a later interview, Joyce

recalled the time she was getting to know her future husband and his circle of friends and

the powerful experience of learning to speak in a new language. Because Samir refused

to speak anything but French, Joyce forced herself to read, think, and write in French, in

this way assuming a different identity that allowed her to escape the painful memories of

her recent past.[276] Almost all of Joyce's writing, with the exception of a few poems in

English, is in French.

After their marriage on February 7th 1949, the young couple spent several years

moving back and forth from Europe and Egypt. The break with the past was completed

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[275] Missir, 20.
[276] From a 1967 broadcast entitled "Ecrivains étrangers d'expression française : Joyce Mansour,"
reproduced in Missir, pp. 240-242.

in 1956 when Joyce and her family moved to a spacious apartment near the Bois de Boulogne, on 1 Avenue du Maréchal Maunaury; she never returned to Egypt.[277]

Before arriving in Paris, however, Mansour had exchanged letters with André Breton pertaining to her recent publications (*Cris*, *Déchirures*, and *Jules César*). They finally met on January 27th 1956, when Breton invited the Mansours to Pierre Molinier's exhibit at the *Etoile Scellée*, an art gallery the Surrealist leader was managing.[278] The two poets instantly became friends. Mansour began attending Surrealist gatherings and spent time with Breton, shopping in the Parisian flea markets to find odd items that did not necessarily have great monetary value but excited the imagination of the two Surrealists.

By this time, however, the Surrealist group was not the cohesive unit it once was, nor had it kept its former position at the cutting edge of avant-garde movements. In addition to the dispersal of many of its adherents during the Second World War,[279] consistent infighting plagued the Surrealists. This bickering was often a result of the leader's inability to compromise. The cult of personality that grew around certain avant-garde leaders was a phenomenon seemingly contradictory to the very essence of the notion of avant-garde, which lauded liberty and claimed to promote personal exploration, experimentation, and creativity. It is difficult to understand how such movements produced leaders who behaved in such a dictatorial fashion.

According to Michel Butor, who met Breton as a young student in Paris, the Surrealist leader was a kind and gentle man; Butor explained that the dynamics of the avant-garde group were such that each member, including the leader, became a prisoner to the

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[277] Missir, 44.
[278] Missir, 32-33, 35, 38.
[279] See Rosemary Sullivan's *Villa Air-Bel* for an account of the persecution of artist and their flight from France during WWII.

powerful energy that characterized its movement and its place in society. The dogmatic

disposition of the avant-garde, according to Butor, was part of the nature of the beast.[280]

Despite Breton's perceived dogmatism, he was nonetheless open at times to new and

innovative talent, especially when Mansour arrived in Paris, a moment when Surrealism

needed some wind in its sails. Alain Bosquet, a Surrealist and good friend of Mansour's,

explained that by the 1950s:

> …le surréalisme prit les apparences d'une arrière-garde querelleuse ou
> même mesquine. Son dernier sursaut lui vient avec la publication d'une
> mince plaquette de poèmes, *Cris*, en 1953.[281]

Bosquet explains how Mansour's collection of poems *Cris* impressed various members of

the Surrealist group, who were in need of fresh ideas. At that moment, the group was

reaffirming its devotion to revolution by denouncing the French incursions into Indochina

and Algeria (*Manifeste des 121*), but it was also attempting to foster an interest in

esotericism and eroticism, myths, occultism, and alchemy.[282] Mansour's writing, which

treats exactly these latter themes, fit more easily into the Surrealist context than into other

contemporary avant-garde groups such as Oulipo or the *Tel Quel* writers, who were more

with concerned technical theories of language.

Mansour was not the only foreigner to choose French as a medium for Surrealist

poetry. The young Aimé Césaire, a future Martiniquan politician whose poetry was

discovered by Breton during a trip to the former French colony, expressed his longing for

his homeland and the pride that he felt for it in a Surrealistic poem entitled *Cahier d'un

Retour au Pays Natal*. Léopold Senghor, the first president of Senegal, also wrote poetry

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[280] Butor, Personal interview.
[281] Bosquet, "Prose et Poésie…"
[282] Missir, 57.

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that some have found Surrealist. Like Césaire, Senghor was part of the Negritude movement, a group of young African francophone intellectuals in Paris in the 1930s who were greatly influenced by Surrealism and its rebellious anti-bourgeois spirit. Although a generation older than Mansour, these francophone writers wrote about their own experiences as *other*. While employing some Surrealist techniques, Césaire and Senghor explored the otherness of their race, while Mansour, on the other hand, explored her sexual otherness. All three authors were united by their determination to carve out their identities in respect to a male dominated western culture through Surrealist poetry.

When speaking about these belated francophone Surrealists, it is important, as Charles Pollard points out in his book *New World Modernisms*, not to overemphasize the influence of the original writers on the later comers. In the second chapter of his book entitled "Not Borrowers, but Bearers of a Tradition," Pollard uses the example of the idea of tradition elucidated by Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In this essay, Eliot writes that tradition is not blind adherence, but awareness of the present, and of multiple converging influences on a work of art. [283] Pollard applies this idea to the poetics of several francophone modernists by showing how influence is not a one way linear movement, dictating the rules of the game from one source to another, but that influence involves multiple levels of ideas flowing back and forth.

Within the Surrealist context, Mansour's poetry illustrates the idea of a mutually beneficial dialogue between works. Mansour's arrival and presence within the Surrealist circle increased the pertinence of Surrealism in the 1950s, and her works, which began to be published in various Surrealist journals, diversified the Surrealist discourse. Her name

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[283] Pollard, 41.

appeared early on in such well known Surrealist journals as *Le Surréalisme, Même*[284],
alongside those of Gérard Legrand, José Pierre, Jean-Louis Bédouin, Nora Mitrani,
Adrien Dax, and others. In 1958, Mansour published in another Surrealist journal called
Bief, to which, along with *La Brèche* and *Archibras,* she continued contributing during
the years to come. Jean-Louis Bédouin included her in his 1964 anthology *La Poésie
surréaliste*. Many of Mansour's poems were dedicated to Breton and other male
Surrealists. These links with the Surrealists and with their journals attest to the mutual
exchange Mansour cultivated with them and to her legitimacy as a member of the
Surrealist group.

But female membership was and always had been less significant than male
membership. Many twentieth-century avant-garde movements (Futurism, Dada,
Expressionism, etc.) were men's clubs, according to Rolf Kuenzeli, in his article on
Surrealism and misogyny.[285] Such a "man's world" is depicted in the symbolic cover of
the 1929 issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste (n. 12)*, where the photographed faces and
torsos of Surrealist members in a dream-state are organized in a rectangle around René
Magritte's painting of a nude female with the words above her "je ne vois pas la" and
below her "cachée dans la forêt." The illustration suggests that the men possess the
power to dream of or imagine the exposed woman, but that they cannot actually see her,
keeping their eyes "resolutely shut,"[286] so that she remains hidden in the forest.

This illustration recalls Freud's reference to the term the "dark continent," used by the
19th century explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley to describe the relatively unexplored sub-

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[284] Number 2, Spring 1957 and Number 3, Autumn 1957.
[285] Kuenzli, "Surrealism and Misogyny," 17-18.
[286] Suleiman, 24.

Saharan Africa. Freud's appropriation of the term to refer to female sexuality points to the largely misunderstood and "unexplored" feminine sexuality, that even Freud admitted to knowing very little about.[287] Helène Cixous, in her seminal article "Le Rire de la Méduse," provides some explanations for why so little is known about the feminine conscious. Cixous argues that writing in the west relegated the woman and her interior world to an inferior position vis-à-vis the male subject. The female remained an imagined object, cloaked in an impenetrable darkness, as if hidden in a thick forest, never fully understood because male writers did not or could not penetrate this forest.

But even female writers were guilty of relegating the feminine psyche to darker and remote places of difficult access. Jean Rhys, in her 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, points out how Charlotte Brontë, when writing about Jane Eyre, the female protagonist in her 1847 novel by the same name, overlooked important aspects of the female psyche. Rochester, the female protagonist's employer and future husband, brought his first wife Bertha from the Caribbean to England, imprisoned her in his attic and described her as a madwoman to anyone who discovered she was hidden there. Rhys, however, in her novel challenges Brontë's view of the Caribbean woman as "other", and makes Bertha a subject with her own voice.

Like Rhys, Cixous advocates clearing the mist obfuscating female identity and allowing her the agency she is denied in traditional literature. In "Le Rire," Cixous turns to the reader and addresses her by mimicking a traditionally masculine discourse:

> On peut leur apprendre, dès qu'elles commencent à parler, en même temps que leur nom, que leur région est noire : parce que tu es Afrique, tu es noire. Ton continent est noir. Le noir est dangereux. Dans le noir tu ne vois rien, tu as peur.

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[287] Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis*, 212.

> Ne bouge pas car tu risques de tomber. Surtout ne va pas dans la *forêt*. Et l'horreur du noir, nous l'avons intériorisée [my italics]. [288]

In this passage, Cixous mocks a male point of view that refuses to see or understand the female, and seems even frightened of her. The cover of *La Révolution Surréaliste* is one example of a masculine discourse that exposes the ignorance and fear that results from the "darkness" surrounding femininity. As the closed eyes of the dreaming Surrealists suggest, men cannot or will not see the female; she is not part of conscious reality, but a figment of their unconsciousness and an object of their dreams.

Although the men's eyes are closed in Magritte's cover illustration, their faces are turned so that they directly confront the viewer, and had they their eyes open, would be looking straight at the viewer. The central woman figure, however, has her face turned to her left, and she too has her eyes closed. Not only is she blind, she is not given the right to gaze brazenly ahead, like the men. Her feeble attempt to cover her naked torso with one of her arms (the other arm lies listlessly by her side) also points to her physical availability; she cannot look at the men or face the viewer, but she is offering up her body for consumption.

Much of Mansour's poetry deconstructs this masculine discourse of the sexual objectification of women shrouded in darkness. Mansour allows her female characters to be subjects in their own right. For example, in the poem "Dans la Forêt hors des Gonds de la Patrie"[289] in the collection *Carré Blanc*, the narrator of the poem declares her feminine gender when she writes "Je suis devenue," using the feminine form of the adjective. In addition to manifesting her femininity, the narrator builds a strong identity

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[288] Cixous "Rire" 41.
[289] Mansour, *Prose et Poésie*, 436.

with "Je," the first word of the poem. The narrator continues by vocalizing her desires. She writes: "J'ai envie, C'est ridicule, D'une distraction." Here, she is presenting herself as a subject that needs distraction, and not an object that distracts. The frustration associated with unsatisfied desires resonates in the repeated hard "g" sound in the words "griffonnage, glaïeul, goutte à goutte, l'orgasme granitique, egarée," all of which contribute to a frustrating guttural noise that invokes feelings of dissatisfaction. The "g" sound also can be heard as an animalistic or primordial grunt symbolizing uninhibited desires.

In addition to voicing her needs and desires, Mansour presents a more complex female subject when she compares herself to other subjects using nouns that evoke different historical and social connotations. The female narrator compares herself to a transitory princess, who becomes stuck on a "Sapphic" book page that is eventually caught in the electric field of her hair, and "falls drop by drop," into an orgasm. The evolving subjects (narrator, princess, Sapphic page, embodiment of sexual satisfaction, back to narrator) adds different dimensions to the female "I." The reference to Sappho also introduces a feminine historical element. The multiple layers and complicated desires of the female subject work against the traditional Surrealist idea of woman as an object to be gazed upon.

In voicing her desires, the female character is also hoping to fulfill them. For J.H. Matthews, Mansourian desire drives the characters to realms beyond the limitations and restrictions that keep them suffering. He writes:

> Dans ses poèmes, le désir s'affirme partout, pour combattre la condition humaine. Le désir se manifeste dans des images qui placent une charge d'irrationnel pour saper les assises du rationnel, compagnon de route de la

résignation et de l'acceptation.[290]

For Matthews, Mansour's irrational desires give hope for the human condition; they combat the resignation and acceptance typical of rational thought. Mansourian desire motivates characters to act, redefine themselves, to discover their limitations, and surpass them.

Unlike Mansour, who was able to use Surrealism to express female desire, there were female Surrealists who were unable to establish their identities and felt stifled as members of the group. Meret Oppenheim, one of the few Surrealist women artists to have exhibited with the Surrealist circle, eventually felt that she was not able, within the Surrealist context, to voice her desires and views on feminine agency. In a 1984 interview, she expressed her dissatisfaction with the traditional Surrealist view of women and said: "The [Surrealist] women were loved, but only as women."[291] It is true that early Surrealist women were often sisters (Gisèle Prassinos was the younger sister of artist Mario Prassinos), lovers, or spouses (Leonora Carrington, partner of Max Ernst, Remedios Varo, wife of Benjamin Péret, and Lee Miller, model and muse for Man Ray). In order to become artists in their own right, Surrealist women had to break out of the Surrealist circle and insist on their independence, as Lee Miller did when she abandoned her position as the object of Man Ray's photographs to become an accomplished photographer herself.[292] Oppenheim too eventually distanced herself from the

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[290] Matthews, 23.
[291] Oppenheim 66.
[292] Kuenzli, "Surrealism and Misogyny," 19-20.

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Surrealists, and was more and more critical of their oppressive dogmatism that she felt

stunted everyone's individual creativity.[293]

Because of female view's like Oppenheim's, Kuenzeli writes:

> Women are to the male Surrealists, as in the longstanding traditions of patriarchy, servants, helpers in the forms of child muse, virgin, *femme-enfant*, angel, celestial creature who is their salvation, or erotic object, model, doll – or she may be the threat of castration in the forms of the ubiquitous praying mantis and other devouring female animals.[294]

Because men were in charge, they dictated what roles women could have and rarely

allowed them to be artists in their own right. Women remained exotic others, inspirations

for the male imagination. Jean-Luc Rispail supports Kuenzeli's ideas and explains that

writing and portraying women in Surrealist art only served to further alienate the women

Surrealists. Rispail writes « …à force de dire la femme, ils oublient souvent de la

considérer comme une personne capable de penser. »[295] Male Surrealists wanted to write

about women and create images of them, but not necessarily let them speak.

There are numerous examples of Surrealist women who were deprived of a voice. One

of the most recognized is perhaps Simone Kahn, Breton's first wife. Man Ray

immortalized her in his 1924 photograph of the early group as a beautiful secretary.[296] In

the photograph, she is sitting at a typewriter, seemingly concentrated and staring

intensely at a piece of paper, while about a dozen men crouch over her. The men look

extremely thoughtful (Breton has his hand on his chin, as in Rodin's *The Thinker*).

Kahn's position is not one of a thinker or participant, but of a passive receiver recording

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[293] Oppenheim 67-68.
[294] Kuenzli, "Surrealism and Misogyny," 19.
[295] Rispail, 67.
[296] See page 18, Figure 2 of Kuenzli's article, which depicts a Man Ray photograph of Simone Breton at a typewriter surrounded by males of the group. There is also a good copy of this ubiquitous photograph in Rispail page 162.

the men's' thoughts. These images by Magritte and Man Ray both display a glamorous

woman surrounded by a group of men and illustrate that women were perhaps central to

the movement, but were not active players.

Mansour, with her seductive allure, her velvet black hair and almond Egyptian eyes

seemed to be the prototypical Surrealist muse. When she met Breton in 1956, however,

the movement (if it could still be called one) had evolved and was no longer fueled by the

same youthful energy. The Surrealists were older and so was their newest female

member, who at 28 years, was significantly more mature than Gisèle Prassinos, for

instance, who was fourteen when she captivated the Surrealists with her tender innocence

during a reading of poems from her collection *Trouver sans Chercher.*[297] Unlike other

Surrealist women, who eventually left the group, Mansour remained a loyal Surrealist

and a constant friend to Breton until his death, after which she wrote a moving eulogy in

that was broadcast on the radio by Maurice Nadeau and Jean Schuster.[298]

Mansour's loyalty to the group, however, did not curb her artistic individuality for she

was able to remain a devoted member of the group and at the same time cultivate an

independent feminine identity within the Surrealist context.

In order to understand how original and thought provoking Mansour's poetry was,

even though associated with an arguably misogynistic and outdated group, it is helpful to

analyze three facets of her writing: the female gaze, feminine writing, and resistance to

portraying women as commodities. These three factors, analyzed within the Surrealist

context, show how much Mansour's writing is distinct from that of her Surrealist

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[297] For a photograph, see Rispail 67.
[298] A copy of the text can be found in Missir 133-134, 237.

colleagues, and how much her poetry and prose contribute to improving the avant-garde discourse.

4.1 Challenging the masculine surrealist gaze

Luce Irigaray, in her book, *Ce Sexe qui n'est pas Un*, explains how a new kind of feminine writing, emanating from the female subject, can disrupt male discourses like the one dominating Surrealism. The images created by a female subject, what Irigaray calls "l'imaginaire feminine," question the centrality of the male voice and traditional male views on love and the object of desire.

Mansour's *feminine imaginary* is unique because it is the gaze of a woman in a male-dominated group. Unlike the clearly masculine imagery of traditional Surrealist poetry, this feminine imagery is often sexually ambiguous. Richard Stamelman points out how Mansour incorporates different elements, including Surrealist imagery and feminist ideology into her poetry, in order to create an ambiguous idea of femininity open to multiple interpretations. Stamelman writes:

> Or, l'érotisme de Mansour semble incarner par moments soit l'éros
> bataillien, soit l'éros irigarayien. Son œuvre est donc érotiquement
> ambivalente, à la charnière entre deux modèles : tantôt éprise de
> l'imaginaire érotique masculin de Bataille et des surréalistes, selon lequel
> la femme possède un pouvoir mythique sexuellement dangereux et une
> aura de beauté fatalement séduisante ; tantôt attirée par la jouissance
> exclusivement féminine d'Irigaray et sa remise en question de la syntaxe
> et du langage phallocentriques.[299]

The dual nature of Mansour's imagery, which incorporates elements of Irigaray's feminine vision and of the masculine-dominated Surrealist discourse, creates a female gaze and thus a new Surrealist discourse.

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[299] Stamelman, 215.

Mansour's distinct *feminine imaginary*, for example, is very different from the *male imaginary* in Breton's *Nadja*. Many Mansourian poems deconstruct traditional ideas of feminine beauty elaborated in works like *Nadja*, where the semi-fictional seductive protagonist embodies the Surrealist notion of the feminine mystique. Breton met Nadja during one of his perambulations in Paris and, inspired by her and the uprooted lifestyle she lead, wrote a story documenting the relationship that developed between them. Not only did Breton consider Nadja the epitome of feminine beauty, he also regarded her deracinated life as the ultimate Surrealist existence. Breton's heroine was a free and errant spirit; through his descriptions of her, she became the epitome of Surrealist life.

For Breton, an aimless life freed the spirit and this for the Surrealists was true beauty. In the last pages of his novel, Breton describes this idea of beauty with a metaphor that the futurists, with their interests in modern technology, would have appreciated. Breton compares ideal beauty to a train, constantly switching tracks in the Lyon train station, never going anywhere, but moving all the time.[300]

Like the train, the beautiful Nadja was always moving through Paris and shifting her trajectories, but never moving forward. While we know that Breton considered this type of life true beauty, the reader never learns how this affected the female protagonist. That Nadja ends up in a psychiatric institution, as Breton himself dispassionately acknowledges in the novel, suggests that her existence was not the romantic life glorified by Breton. An object of admiration, like the women photographed by Magritte and Man Ray, Nadja is never considered to be a subjective human being. She remains an enigma, instead, whose suffering inspired a romanticized lifestyle. For Breton, Nadja's

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[300] Breton, *Nadja* 189.

womanhood rendered her unavailable and detached from real life. His fascination with his "dream object" constituted a passive complicity in Nadja's disastrous ending. Mansour's vision, on the other hand, is unlike Breton's in that it emanates from the female herself as she brings this vision to bear on many themes that did not figure in Surrealist poetry.

4.1.1   A Feminine vision of death

One of these themes, largely absent in traditional Surrealist poetry, is death. Although various peripheral Surrealists excluded from the group by Breton, such as Georges Bataille or Antonin Artaud, treated the themes of death, torture and suffering, Mansour's poetics are different. The repeated images of death and cancer derive from the author's experiences with both. Cancer, which caused the premature death of her first husband, the loss of her mother, and eventually ended her own life, plays an important role in this writer's prose and poetry.   In the 1958 short story "Le Cancer" from the collection *Les Gisants Satisfaits*, Mansour's most well received work, the male narrator has fallen in love with the cancerous growth of a woman named Clara. The narrator, after Clara has been killed by the cancer, pierces the oversized growth it and watches it deflate.   When he sees a little crab emerge, he notices that it resembles him. The combined images of death and rebirth illustrated by the deflated cancerous growth and the emerging little crab are examples of Mansour's complex ideas about life, fatality, and illness.

4.1.2   A Feminine vision of the past

Death, however, is not always associated with cancer. In the poem "La Vérité Historique," from the collection *Carré Blanc*, the narrator associates death with memories of the past. The last line of the poem states, "Un homme est mort sous les roues de mon enfance." These wheels of childhood are a moving vehicle that rolls forward and destroys memories of the past that it encounters.

Mansour also associates the past with death and destruction in her poem "L'Autovaccin Anti-Mnémonique" from the collection *Carre Blanc*.[301] An autovaccine, which is a vaccine prepared from cultures of organisms isolated from the patient's own secretions or tissues, in this poem would protect such a patient from the ravages of memory. The poem is "anti-memory" in that it enumerates such unpleasant and discomforting memories from Mansour's past as cancer and widowhood. The last line of the poem suggests that all the narrator has left from the past are "twelve unpublished passports," not much considering all the experiences she has endured. At the same time, the passports promise escapes into numerous identities, and are tools for fleeing from the past to create a multifaceted self. By rejecting nostalgia and vaccinating herself against unpleasant past experiences, the narrator recreates herself.

This view of memory and of the past is similar to the traditional avant-garde view, which wanted to destroy the past in order to clear the way for the present and the future. While there is resistance to the past in Mansour's poetry, the characters often accept the consequences of past actions and acknowledge how important the past and memories are. Instead of ignoring the past, Mansour frequently faces it in order to obtain catharsis from its negative factors.

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[301] Mansour, *Prose et Poésie*, 434.

4.2   Feminine writing and identity

Mansour uses unique language to formulate her vision, and thus creates a distinctive female identity, or according to Helène Cixous, multiple female identities. Cixous, in "Le Rire de la Méduse," argues that female identity is multifaceted, and that the best way to uncover its multiple layers is to encourage more women to write.[302] In the same way, Mansour's language demonstrates how complex and multilayered feminine identity is.

In her short story "Illusions de Vol," published in the collection *Ça*, Mansour uses both French and English. Joyce, the narrator, tries to escape from reality, as did her deceased lover. Both the name of the narrator (which is the author's own name) and the theme of attempting escape from reality prompt the reader to question the boundary between real and ideal. The boundary between the real and the ideal is further emphasized when the narrator uses English to describe her hesitancy to take the flight. The use of English at this point in the narrative contrasts with the narrator's use of French to describe the escape into the realm of dreams and desires.

According to Denariez-Pohlman, this short story "represents one of Mansour's most thoughtful lyrical statements… [about] the irreducible dichotomy between the real and the ideal."[303] The distinction between these two worlds, highlighted by the use of the two different languages, shows how Mansour's writing allows her to broach such difficult themes as pain and anxiety by creating multiple registers of language. These multiple registers, spoken through the female voice, also give to female identity additional dimension.

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[302] Cixous, 43.
[303] Denariez-Pohlman, 150.

This short story also demonstrates how Mansour's language provides a catharsis for dealing with pain. Mansour's manuscripts demonstrate this need, especially the original notebook for *Iles Flottantes*, a short novella written between July 1971 and May 1972, and dedicated to Pierre Alechinsky.[304] The dedication, and the rest of the novella, are written in a very neat hand that remains remarkably the same throughout the entire notebook. It is only on the small sheets of paper stapled to pages where corrections or changes were needed, or in the differently color ink that covers, like a palimpsest, the original writing, that we can see a different, more rapid and less uniform handwriting. In addition to clarifying, Mansour's corrections often change words that are not powerful or shocking enough. For instance, she changes the word "dégout" into "vomis"[305] or, while describing the charcater Dr. Rosenberg, she adds to the sentence "La manière qu'il avait de vous contraindre à lui raconter vos désolantes certitudes, » the additional phrase « *tout en vous chatouillant les fesses avec sa barbe poivre et sel*."[306]

The revised version, with its allusion to "vomit" and "tickling the buttocks" is more tactile as well as employs a course sexual imagery. Mansour's writing and rewriting is part of her practice of uncovering and recording ever more controversial and shocking images. The process, displayed in this manuscript, of purging herself of these images is important because it produces a more varied and shocking use of feminine language and imagery. This kind of women-writing-about-women, according to Cixous, is the most powerful expression of the female identity.

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[304] This manuscript is available at the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet in Paris.
[305] Manuscript Ms 50640 58. The original sentence refers to the character Mr. Cooper: "Un raz-de-marée de rage de merde et de dégout"
[306] Manuscript MS 50640 64

The power of writing and of language is one of the themes of *Le Bleu des Fonds*, which, aside from *L'Ivresse Religieuse des Grandes Villes*, is the only theatrical work Mansour wrote. J.H. Matthews points out that language in this play is used for domination.[307] By narrating their reality, the father of the story controls the lives of his children. The importance and power of language is especially evident when Jérôme finally realizes that his father-in-law was inventing stories he had thought were real and that he had believed. From this, he learned that language can create reality, and can have significant consequences for those defined by that reality.

This realization parallels Cixous' in "Le Rire de la Meduse," when she argues that writing has the power to create women.[308] In creating and redefining women, writing thus has the ability to change society and culture. Poetry, especially, is the most appropriate form of writing, according to Cixous, because, unlike prose, it resembles the unconscious in that it has no limits.[309]

4.2.1   Writing the female body

Mansour's poetic images reshape the traditional idea of the female body. Susan Suleiman has attempted to discover how discourse by women writers about the female body differs from that by comparable male artists, and how the gender of the author is important in all discourses about the female body.[310] In Mansour's writing, we find a feminist Surrealist counter discourse that changes the perceptions of the female body in three notable ways.

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[307] Matthews, 67-69.
[308] Cixous, 54.
[309] Cixous, 42-43.
[310] Sulieman, *Subversive Intent*, 13-14.

First, this counter discourse redefines the female body as an organic living thing, as opposed to an ethereal, perfectly beautiful, and desirable object. Marie-Claire Barnet argues that women Surrealists like Mansour subvert the Surrealist idea of beauty with « des images inattendues du corps féminin, sénile ou malade. »[311] An example of this can be found in the poem "L'Horizon de l'Aveugle" in the collection *Faire signe au machiniste*,[312] where Mansour demystifies the female body. She writes, "L'enfer des femmes prend naissance dans leur corps, Et finit sans maquillage, A la morgue." The woman's body in this poem evokes fear of an inexorable death. Mansour uses words that describe the body as it is, without any accoutrements, decoration, or disguise. Women's "hell" is the inability to transform the body, and thus transcend death.

In "Bronze comme la nuit tombée" in the collection *Carré Blanc*, Mansour describes the female body as earthly and mortal.[313] When the poet begins to contemplate living without the lover she strongly desires, she employs such vocabulary associated with the inside of the body as "blood" and "vomit." In this poem as in the previous ones, the body and bodily functions represent reality and the limits of the female body. As Barnet points out, women Surrealists like Mansour, and her predecessor Gisèle Prassinos, question traditional ideas of beauty through unexpected images of the unadorned and sometimes old, senile or ill female body.[314]

Although Mansour's poems deconstruct the romantic mystique of the female body, they reconstruct a stronger female identity that enables women characters to take control of their bodies and act on their own wills. Mansour actually employs the word

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[311] Barnet, 33.
[312] Mansour, *Prose…*, 529.
[313] Mansour, *Prose…*, 462.
[314] Barnet, 33.

"construct" at the end of the poem "Bronze comme la nuit tombée," where the narrator, rebelling against her body and the fear of being alone, proclaims, "Je construirai des sexes à secret." The poetics of the female body in Mansour's oeuvre, which reconsiders the notion of the female body as purely ethereal, symbolic of the ideal, and powerless, add important additional dimensions to traditional Surrealism.

4.2.2 Writing female violence

Traditional Surrealist art, in addition to considering the female body as something ideal and unreal, sometimes promoted violence towards it. Even such Surrealists contemporary with Mansour as Hans Bellmer, a personal friend of hers who illustrated her first short story *Jules César* in 1956, is sometimes criticized for his violent treatment of the female body.[315] Bellmer's chopped and disfigured dolls are perhaps his signature trademark. Though initially created to counter the Nazi cult of the perfect body, these dolls are controversial because of their depictions of the young female body.

Violence, as we have seen with the manifestos, was from the beginning, an essential part of the avant-garde. In his first *Surrealist Manifesto* published in 1924, Breton stated, "l'acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolver au poing, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu'on peut, dans la foule." The idea of random violence is illustrated in Jean-Paul Sartre's 1939 short story entitled *Erostate*, where the narrator describes his irrational urges to arbitrarily kill the people whom he encounters in the streets of Paris. Despite such graphic descriptions of haphazard killing, these avant-garde writers were not criminals, or at least they were never convicted of such crimes. As early as 1928, in

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[315] Missir, 35-36.

Aragon's *Traité du Style*, the Surrealists made clear that violent words did not necessarily necessitate violent actions. Their violent statements and descriptions were not literal commands, but a reminder of how the avant-garde fostered shock and change. Mansour also used violent images to shock her audience and change perceptions.

Her short story "Marie, ou l'honneur de servir" in the collection *Les Gisants Satisfaits* deals with male violence and anger toward women. Images of dead meat and carcasses figure in for a macabre relationship between Marie and the Assassin, who threatens again and again to kill her until she obsequiously agrees to be murdered by her tormentor. The power the Assassin exercises forces Marie to run away, but when she attempts to do so, she regrets her decision and returns home. The Assassin can think of nothing but vengeance, and begins to torture Marie by poking her stomach with a safety pin, strangling her, raping her grandfather, and finally killing her.

Perhaps the most striking element of "Marie, ou l'honneur de servir" is that, despite the violence and horrors, it is a love story. Just as Marie decides to return home to the Assassin after her attempted escape, she concludes that being with the person she loves means giving up all of her liberties, and decides she is prepared to do just that. This poem not only deals with physical violence, it also describes emotional violence. In most of Mansour's poetry and prose, love involves an abuse of power that leads to painful and violent situations.

At the same time, Mansour gives examples where Marie actually benefits from the violent relationship. In one particular dream-like sequence, Marie is floating in the ocean with her clothes billowing around her. For Mansour, she is a medusa, the female character from Greek mythology, whose gaze turned people into stone. The Assassin

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arrives as Marie begins to drown, but instead of turning to stone, he causes Marie's

jouissance. Like Cixous' medusa, Marie has had the last laugh, since her near death

experience is transformed into an orgasm.

Another example of the violence associated with sex can be found in Mansour's

collection "Rapaces,"[316] the title of which has both sexual and violent connotations.

Marilyn Gladdis Rose writes,

> 'Rapaces' is more than "birds of prey"…It is a word that always signifies 'taken by force.' Mansour adds what readers now consider a male chauvinist accretion: 'being taken by force with complicity.' The persona takes the initiative in rape often enough to enjoy being raped in return. This is probably why feminist readers, initially attracted by her excoriations of man the artichoke, realize that she is not one of them.[317]

Rose points out a troubling aspect of Mansour's poetry: acts of sex are confusing and

often juxtaposed with opposing emotions such as pain and ecstasy, power and

powerlessness, comfort and torture. For example, in the poem "L'Horizon de

L'Aveugle" in the collection *Faire signe au machiniste*[318], the sexual references are

explicit and rampant, painting horrible and at the same time fascinating images of

sexuality.

The contrast between sex and death, pleasure and fear, is typical of the conflicts

surrounding amorous relationships in Mansour's oeuvre. The subjects often struggle to

attain equilibrium and independence. According to Bjørsnøs, this conflict keeps the

protagonist in a constant state of revolution. She writes:

> La femme sujet mansourien est captivée dans un conflit insurmontable qui fonde son état de révolte permanent. Ce conflit oppose son désir sexuel à

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[316] Can be translated as "birds of prey," or can also be an adjective meaning predatory, greedy, or rapacious.
[317] Marilyn Gaddis Rose, Intro for "Rapaces," ix.
[318] Mansour, *Prose…*, 529.

> la dépendance de l'amant mais paradoxalement, il conditionne en même temps sa jouissance et par conséquent fait retomber dans le vide ses pratiques transgressives.[319]

The frustration that results from the conflict between desire and dependence often leads to violence.

Although the male characters in Mansour's poetry can be violent and sexually dominating, many female characters also commit acts of violence. For example, in "Marie, ou l'honneur de servir", Marie acts out brutal schemes, helping the Assassin to put abducted children into a sack, kicking the captive children to quiet their cries, dragging the sack to the olive trees and burying the children alive.

Another example of a violent female protagonist can be found in the long poem *Le Grand Jamais* published in 1981. The seventh stanza from the end begins with the following lines:

> Donnez-moi un morceau de charbon
> J'en ferai un aveugle
> Donnez-moi un crâne épars sur le parquet
> J'en ferai une descente aux flambeaux…
> Donnez-moi un grain de poussière
> J'en ferai une montagne de haine…[320]

The poet implicates the reader by commanding her to help her act out her anger and frustration. The intensity of violence is also demonstrated in the repeated phrase, "give me 'x,' and I will make it much worse."

Although this particular poem gives in to feelings of pain and frustration, other poems in Mansour's oeuvre attempt to assuage and reduce pain and violence. For instance, in "Caresser une plaie" from *Faire signe au machineiste* (1977) images of extreme

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[319] Bjørsnøs, 159-160.
[320] Mansour, *Prose…*, 574.

discomfort are tempered with attempts to ease and settle the emotions – the opposite of what happened in the previous poem, where they spiraled into a mounting tension.[321] "Caresser une plaie" is about acknowledging pain and healing tender wounds.

4.2.3   Writing female madness

Writing in order to heal and purge, as Mansour herself admitted, is an important part of her strategy. In addition to writing about violence and women, Mansour also deals with female madness. Although male Surrealists, such as Breton, had written about female dementia and insanity, it was usually from a curious but unsympathetic perspective. In *Nadja*, for example, the female protagonist's progression into mental darkness and isolation is narrated by an outsider who does not seem to empathize with her fragile condition.

Mansour was not the first woman to provide a counter discourse to Nadja's journey into madness. Leonora Carrington's autobiography *Notes from Down Below*,[322] is a first person narrative of depression, madness, and the treatment for it. It is an excellent example of a Surrealist's experience with mental instability. Unlike the reader of *Nadja*, the reader of Carrington's story sees through the eyes of the female protagonist and experiences her grandiose hallucinations in detail. Much like Sylvia Plath's recounting of a similar experience in *The Bell Jar*, Carrington attempts to guide the readers "down below," through the underworld of her hellish nightmare. Carrington experiments with

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[321] Mansour, *Prose…*, 556.
[322] Carrington's original text (now lost) was written in English, dictated in French to a friend Jeanne Megnen in 1943, and first published in English translation (by Victor Llona) in *VVV*, no. 4, February 1944. The original French dictation was published by Editions Fontaine Paris 1946. This version was edited by Marina Warner, using both the English and the French versions, and having Leonora Carrington's approval, and adding her Postscript. See Carrington, *The House of Fear….,* 216.

language and narration, addressing the reader directly by asking at certain moments "How can I write this when I'm afraid to think about it?"[323] Such postmodernist narrative techniques attest to Carrington's creativity and precocious writing style. The manner in which she relates her horrific experiences also illustrates her deep sensitivity vis-à-vis the world around her.

Her surrounding environment, at the time of her mental collapse, was linked to events unfolding during the Second World War. Like many Surrealists, Carrington was deeply affected by the war, and during her worst moments of hallucination and grandeur, believed that she was a key diplomat with the power to end the horrors of combat. To subdue her mounting agitation, her family decided to send her to an institution in Spain where she was treated with Cardiazol, a drug that induced seizures and was used as a type of shock therapy.[324]

For Carrington, writing her madness was a way of purging it from her system and putting it behind her. The narration, written like a diary with chronologically progressive entries, is like therapy for the narrator. She writes, "I know that once I have written it down, I shall be delivered."[325] Although Carrington claims to benefit from the recording of her experiences, Marina Warner, in her introduction to Leonora Carrington's *The House of Fear*, claims that the personal experiences of the women Surrealists were exploited by men who wanted to gain access to a world they dared not enter themselves. Warner refers to:

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[323] Carrington, 191.
[324] Carrington, 191-192, 195, 196, 207.
[325] Carrington, 191.

> Surrealism's cult of madness, especially female madness, as another conductor to
> the invisible world… Leonora's descent into madness consecrated her as a
> Surrealist heroine, regardless of the cost to her of her sufferings.[326]

For Warner, Surrealist women were the ones who had to experience insanity for the

group to be able to tap vicariously into a world beyond their reach.

Elisabeth Roudinesco, in her study of psychoanalysis in France entitled *La bataille de*

cent ans, has pointed out how the Surrealists, in *La révolution surréaliste* in 1927 and

1928, expressed a fascination with Freud and Jean Martin Charcot's studies of hysteria.

Instead of understanding hysteria as a pathological disease, they considered it an

alternative state of being that could stimulate creative productivity. Roudinesco writes :

> Pour les surréalistes, l'hystérie est un langage, un mode d'expression, une
> œuvre poétique dont la forme subversive doit être revendiquée contre l'art
> lui-même, contre la littérature… pour les surréalistes, l'acte individuel est
> toujours une folie et le fou un créateur au même titre que le rêveur ou
> l'hystérique.[327]

Aragon, Breton and Robert Desnos, who contributed to this idea of madness as a creative

state similar to Surrealism, were influenced by the experiences of their friend Antonin

Artaud, who suffered from mental illness, was eventually institutionalized in the late

nineteen thirties and forties, undergoing electroshock treatment which improved his

condition enough for him to begin writing again. Artaud did not recount his experiences

in an autobiographical format, as did Carrington. Nor did it result in any clear

understanding on the part of his Surrealist colleagues of the disease.

Although Mansour's tormented ideas did not result in a stay at an insane asylum, as it

did for Artaud, Nadja or Carrington, she documented them. Unlike Nadja, Mansour was

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[326] Warner, 18.
[327] Roudinesco, Volume 2, p. 23, 24.

able to give voice to her madness, something that maybe saved her from Nadja's fate. And unlike Carrington, she wrote about female madness in the form of fiction.

In the short story "Les Spasmes du dimanche" in the collection *Les Gisants Satisfaits*, Mansour describes the experiences of an insane man. Job, the protagonist, is described as a crazy person who loves animals and sex with women. The community in which he lives, however, does not tolerate people like Job and one day a year in November, the members of the community go out and hunt down the "crazy people," circumcise them and chop them up. Job tries to escape persecution and hides in a trash can, but after two days, a "negre" discovers him and stabs him with a knife. As the citizens return to their homes, Job takes the knife out and gets up and walks away, or at least apparently this is what happens since it is unclear whether he actually does so, or if he has died and is walking away in an afterlife dream.

The tone of the short story, which describes a cruel and ruthless community and a misunderstood individual, is cold and detached. The narrator remains objective and non-judgmental, leaving the reader at times dissatisfied at the lack of detail and analysis. Yet Mansour treats the theme of madness in a delicate and sensitive way. The ending of "Les Spasmes du dimanche" presents a particularly empathetic view of Job, who survives the lynching and walks away from the violence as if to begin anew. Mansour shows that madness, despite society's view of it, does not weaken people or reduce their personal liberties. It is interesting that Mansour chose a male as her victim. Perhaps she wanted to show that the disease, which in the Surrealist context had heretofore been relegated to females, could also attack males. As with other female examples of Surrealist madness, mental illness had made the suffering person a pariah, and at the same time a spectacle.

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Georges Bataille also treats themes of madness and death, and for this reason he has been compared to Mansour. Both authors break taboos, especially in their treatment of sexually explicit experiences. In Bataille's *L'Histoire de l'oeil*, the male protagonist describes his mad sexual rampages with his childhood sweetheart Simone in a tone that, despite the shocking subject matter, is always tightly controlled. The feelings and thoughts of Simone, however, are not fully revealed, nor are those of another important and more deeply troubled female character, Marcelle. The fact that both women end up in mental institutions illustrates a latent but deliberate victimization of female sexual desire in Bataille's short story.

For Mansour, by contrast, female sexual desire, even when extreme or pathological, might warrant social ostracism but does not lead to institutionalization and the loss of personal liberty. Unlike Bataille, Mansour accepts her female characters, their sexuality, and their "madness" by giving them a voice.

Mansour sheds light on the female as well as the male experience of hysteria, two matters the Surrealists had largely avoided, except in order to gaze at from a distance. By writing about hysteria, and by allowing the person considered mad to speak, Mansour brings women out of the darkness and empowers them.[328]

4.3   Resistance to the portrayal of women as commodities

Writing, in Mansour's poetry, becomes a way to deconstruct female powerlessness and of make women actors and not passive observers of their lives. In much male authored

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[328] For a detailed account of how female madness, particularly hysteria, became documented in France, see Roudinesco's *l'Histoire de la pschanalyse en France*, particularly the first part entitled "La découverte de l'hystérie."

fiction, the female characters remain opaque objects of desire, exchangeable commodities in the masculine discourse of western literature. In her book *Women on the Market*, Luce Irigaray, writes:

> Socially, [women] are 'objects' for and among men and furthermore they cannot do anything but mimic a 'language' that they have not produced; naturally, they remain amorphous, suffering from drives without any possible representatives or representations. For them, the transformation of the natural into the social does not take place, except to the extent that they function as components of private property, or as commodities."[329]

The role of women in literature, just like their position in society in regard to men, is still misunderstood and understudied. Poetry like Mansour's, however, through its exploration of the position of women in society, helps redefine their traditional roles.

In her collection of short stories entitled *Ça*, Mansour delves into the complicated social relationships that make up modern society, particularly the relationships among family members. The story "Napoléon" takes a critical look at the constricting family milieu and how it can use and abuse the mother figure. Julie, the mother, is overwhelmed by her own sexuality and by her twin sons, whom she contemplates killing. Her husband Napoleon and their two children show no affection for her, nor does the third person omniscient narrator, who describes her pathetic situation with sang-froid. Paragraphs of Surrealistic images in this story are disjointed, just as are the disconnected family members.

The second part of the short story is entitled "Extrait du journal de Julie" and is narrated from Julie's first-person perspective. The abrupt change to a first person narrator, which comes after the cold and objective third person descriptions, places a new

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[329] Oliver, 224.

emphasis on Julie's inner world, previously inaccessible to the reader. Julie's narration

takes the form of diary entries addressed to her husband Napoleon. She describes her

sexual desires and her nostalgia for certain happy moments at the beach with her family.

But this brief interlude of self affirmation ends abruptly with a few lines in italics that

signal the return of the third person narrator: "*Les jumeaux interceptèrent cette missive.*

Napoléon ignora tout des projets balnéaires de Julie. Le monstre avait horreur des repas

en plein air."[330] The narrator concludes on a pessimistic note, calling Napoleon a

monster, and indicating his lack of respect for his wife.

The role of the mother is an important theme in the poetry of Mansour. In another

short story in the same collection, "Infiniement sur le gazon," the mother does exercise

more power, but cruelly, ruining her daughter's relationship with her lover. This story is

written from the perspective of the daughter, and treats an underlying hostility between

the two women that eventually drives the daughter to kill her mother with a machete in

order to an end the affair between her mother and her lover Arnaud. Mansour contrasts

the stressful days following the discovery of the amorous relationship between her

mother and Arnaud with smooth soft images like "grey silk."[331] In Surrealist fashion, she

paints a painful picture of maternal and filial love with violent and dream-like imagery.[332]

The same kind of imagery is used to describe the mother/daughter relationship in the

poem "Crème Fraîche" from the collection *Carré Blanc*. In this poem too, the mother

acts violently. For instance, the daughter-narrator employs the word "mange" twice and

uses other words associated with the mouth ("crache…dentifrice") that suggest a search

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[330] Mansour, *Prose…*, 216.
[331] Mansour, *Prose…*, 172.
[332] Various contemporary francophone women writers, such as Leïla Marouane, have also chosen to address this complex bond. See Marouane's *La Fille et la Mère* and *La Fille de la Casbah*.

for purification through devouring and aggression. The poem begins with the lines, "Ma mère me mange, Me torture, Et pour m'empêcher de la suivre, Elle m'enterre, Je mange ma famille, Je crache sur leurs débris…" The alliteration of the "m" sound, which is smooth and soft, contrasts with the angry, harsh images of the poem. This difference, similar to that between the diverging sentiments of anger and love, illustrates how the narrator must struggle to come to terms with painful family relationships.

Mansour's writing explores the female role in the amorous relationship. In the short story "Dolman le Maléfique," in the collection *Ça*,[333] the protagonist Dolman changes into a woman at the behest of a strange Devil who arrives one day into his life. As part of a twisted plot meant to cause Dolman eternal suffering, the Devil announces he wishes to be a father, and wants Dolman to become his female lover and eventual mother of his child. Here, Dolman's plight is that of the female in human society. In this short story, as in society, humans cannot choose who is to be a mother; nature dictates these roles, making only females biologically capable of carrying a child.

The final words of the story show that the Devil has won by announcing that the struggle between Dolman and the Devil has evolved into a war. This war can be seen as women's struggle to come to terms with their maternal role in society. It is also symbolic, according to Denariez Pohlmann, of the never-ending search for self-definition. She writes:

> The term "war" must also be understood at the figurative level for it represents the inner struggle of the individual with himself, with his aspirations, desires and dreams, in short all that he cannot realize in the real world, and the war which in the process of search can even destroy the very person who falls prey to it.[334]

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[333] Mansour, *Prose…*, 175.
[334] Denariez Pohlmann 150.

Dolman's struggle with his fate, personified by the devil, demonstrates that self definition, especially in terms of gender, can be a frustrating and ongoing effort. Internal struggle in this story also demystifies feminine sexuality by showing how the female character thinks about and suffers because of her sexual identity, something missing in other Surrealist pieces like *Nadja*.

With Mansour, sexuality is malleable and traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity are called into question. Her writing also works against the idea of a strict dichotomy along gender lines. The story *L'Ivresse religieuse des grandes villes*, which Mansour originally published as a playlet, explores the impossible relationship between *Elle* and *Lui*. The protagonists, whose ambiguous names accentuate the universality of their dilemma, are completely attached and dependent upon one another, psychologically as well as physically. This is underscored in the title of the second part of the story: "Un homme est allongé sur une femme." Although this title portrays the male physically dominating the female, as Pohlmann points out, in the course of the story, power changes hands and is in continuous play.[335]

Richard Stamelman, in an essay on eroticism in Mansour's oeuvre, contrasts the descriptions of gender roles in Mansour's poetry with those of a more typical Surrealist, Paul Eluard. Eluard's poems are full of desire and longing for the mythical female. Both Eluard and Breton articulate a masculine eros, or desire expressed in the masculine language and images typical of Surrealist and romantic poetry. Characteristics of this kind of masculine eros include a clear separation of femininity from masculinity, desire for the object, and suffering because of lack.

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[335] Denariez Pohlmann 157-161.

The poem "L'Horizon de L'Aveugle," in the collection *Faire Signe au Machiniste*,[336] provides a good example of how Mansour counters the tradition Surrealist concept of eros. At a certain point in the poem, two shadows appear before the poet, who wonders who the shadows are. Mansour lists the possible suspects, "Mon frère mon cousin mon amant ou encore, L'homme que je suis entre les lignes, Poésie." In addition to representing the men in her life, the shadows could represent the man within her own poetic self. The narrator of the poem thus identifies herself with males and demonstrates how gender identity in Mansour's oeuvre is always shifting and moving, like Breton's metaphor of the train constantly shifting tracks in the train station.

This fluid identity is similar to that promoted by Edouard Glissant in his seminal text *Caribbean Discourse*. For Glissant, a writer who explores the complexities of racial and cultural identity in Caribbean literature, identity is constantly changing; it has no boundaries and no limits. Both Glissant and Mansour question the idea of a monolithic identity. For both authors, search for self and the desire to be whole means confronting all complexities of the human psyche.

The theories of Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst whose lectures Mansour attended in Paris, shed light on the complexity of Mansour's characters. The literary critic Annlaug Bjørsnøs believes that Mansour's search for identity is based on Lacan's mirror and symbolic stages, experiences that destroy the self's coherent image of itself and lead to a person's intense desire to recover what is lost and missing.[337] The search for identity and for meaning that is lost as the psyche develops in the socialized world is driven by a desire to be whole.

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[336] Mansour, *Prose…*, 529.
[337] Bjørsnøs 15, 32.

The poem "Rêve hérissé de nudités tenaces" illustrates such a loss of identity and desire for wholeness. In this poem, from the collection *Carré Blanc*,[338] the narrator longs for her lover, a desire frustrated throughout the poem, since she never seems to focus on him, especially on his eyes, which are hidden: "Une main aux doigts levés, Cachait sa déraison." Like a child searching for the continuous image in the mirrored reflection, the narrator is searching for an integrated and whole reflection of herself in the face of her lover. But the evasive image never materializes; the narrator never views the image whole and thus does not gain insight into who she is.

Instead, the narrator chooses to gaze inward, and discovers that the object of her desire is herself. She states at the end of the poem that if indeed the lover would materialize, she would not be able to embrace him because she is in love with herself. Not only does the poem not follow the romantic tradition of loving the other, it eliminates the male gaze altogether. The female gaze inward allows the narrator to explore her own identity without being associated or defined by another.

This inward gaze is also important because it contributes to the creation of a more complex gender discourse. Mansour does not take the female object, for instance, and replace her with the male object. In her poetry, both male and female are object and subject, vice versa, and sometimes play two roles within the same poem. Marilyn Gaddis Rose, in her article "Joyce Mansour's Bestiary," points out that Mansour's characters are in a state of flux (man, woman, beast) and what is most shocking is not the horrible crimes they commit, but the fact that they are always changing identities. One advantage of such metamorphosis is that it gives one the liberty to choose one's own identity, to

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[338] Mansour, *Prose…*, 431.

lead double or multiple lives, and to redefine sexuality. All of these poetic tactics

challenge the typically masculine notion of the female as an exchangeable object and

valuable commodity.

4.4   Conclusion

For Bosquet, the editor of her collected works, the flame of Surrealism was

extinguished with Mansour's death.[339] Whether or not Mansour was the last Surrealist,

her poetry and prose made important contributions to Surrealism during its later years.

The poetics of Mansour present a female gaze, a feminine writing, and a counter

discourse opposed to male, occidental Surrealism. This alternative perspective, removed

from the center, redefines traditional ideas about sexual identity, desire, and self-

definition, as well as establishes a new role for the female in western society. All these

things allow the reader to explore and gain a deeper understanding of Surrealism and the

world in which it existed.

Another distinguishing aspect of Mansour's writing is the ever present theme of

suffering and pain that plague most of her characters. Mansour's poems are careful to

leave room for questions and ambiguity. But it is through painful experiences that her

characters find freedom.   Denariez Pohmann concludes:

> The world evoked by Mansour is not a picture of well-defined and
> neatly drawn contours; indeed the reader is only sure of an
> incontrovertible reality: the characters suffer deeply.[340]

Her characters' suffering and struggle often lead to a cathartic moment, and thus allow

the characters to reinvent themselves.

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[339] Bosquet, "Prose et Poésie"
[340] Denariez Pohlmann 142.

In reinventing themselves, the characters also transform their relationships with others. The narrator's efforts to understand her connection with others inevitably helps her to understand herself as well. The search for self and for personal fulfillment is another theme that flows through Mansour's writing. Her characters question the logic of the world, and the meaning of their existence. But instead of arriving at neat conclusions, the questions posed lead to more questions about identity and meaning in the universe. Like the secret whispered in the opening quote, Mansour's poetry and prose reveal dreams to a reader made intimate by its inclusiveness, nonjudgmental, and cathartic character.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

WHITHER THE AVANT-GARDE?

The twentieth century avant-garde was a movement that comprised a series of artistic groups wishing to change the status of art in society. In their manifestos and in their aesthetic works, they consciously created a movement in which they placed themselves and linked themselves to one another. In their treatment of certain themes, particularly the city and politics, the avant-garde proposed an alternative to the way of understanding modern life and art. Although seldom, peripheral artists like Joyce Mansour were able to penetrate these groups and voice an alternative avant-garde message. This conclusion aims to consider the avant-garde message in a contemporary context, to decide whether it has any relevance today, and to assess the possibility of an avant-garde in the twenty-first century.

Although Bürger's analysis of the avant-garde has been very useful for the purposes of identifying and analyzing the four groups of this dissertation, it is also limiting because it does not allow for the existence of an avant-garde outside of a specific historical context. According to Bürger, the avant-garde is part of the modernist movement, which was a reaction to bourgeois culture. But theorists like Jean-François Lyotard, who as early as 1979 announced the arrival of the postmodernist period in his book *La Condition Postmoderne*, suggest that modernism is over, and thus too is the avant-garde.

In order to consider the possibility of the avant-garde today, we must put Bürger's

socio-historical analysis aside, and take a deeper look at the current paradigm of

postmodernism. According to Lyotard's study, postmodernism is defined by skepticism

towards the "grand narratives" that defined the modernist period. Grand narratives like

Marxism, capitalism, science, and religion, were encompassing (hi)stories that colored

one's understanding of the world. One of the most defining features of our current

postmodern condition is a disenchantment with the modernists' attempt to understand the

world in terms of these grand narratives.

As we have seen in the third chapter of this dissertation, Marxism and psychoanalysis,

two influential grand narratives, played an important role in the development of the

avant-garde. Sollers was aware of this and explained in a 1978 lecture that both were

necessary for the existence of the avant-garde:

> … il n'y a 'avant-garde' que tant que l'espace d'interprétation
> marxo-psychanalytique constitue l'horizon rationnel de la pensée,
> et en réaction contre cet horizon (comme manifestation d'un 'reste'
> irrationnel inassimilable). La saturation actuelle de l'espace
> 'avant-gardiste' – qui est transformé très rapidement en
> académisme stéréotypé limité signifie du même coup la fin de cet
> horizon rationaliste. La 'fin' du marxisme est en vue. Celle de la
> psychanalyse, en revanche, est moins perçue mais n'en est pas
> moins là – et c'est ce qui explique à mon avis le relâchement de la
> production avant-gardiste (qui, massivement, n'est plus qu'une
> 'résistance' le plus souvent dérisoire et de plus en plus locale et
> régionale à l'interprétation analytique).[341]

In line with Lyotard, Sollers acknowledged that Marxism and psychoanalysis were no

longer as valid as they once were. As a result, the "avant-garde" defined along Marxist

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[341] This lecture was given at Beaubourg on December 12 1977; entitled "Crise de l'avant-garde?" it was
published in *Art Press* in March 1978. This excerpt can be found in Forest, 510.

lines was no longer possible. Nearly thirty years ago, Sollers seemed to be in accordance with Bürger.

Another aspect of the postmodern age that precludes the existence of the avant-garde is the idea that it was ahead of other aesthetic movements. The idea that the avant-garde was the beginning of art and that it remained ahead of the rest, only reinforced the binary opposition of in front and behind, forward moving and backward looking.

Postmodern artists rejected this understanding of the world in terms of binary oppositions. They attempted to portray it as a more multifaceted multidimensional place, where notions such as progress and decline, or future and past, were not necessarily contrary or opposing terms. According to Frederic Jameson in his 1991 book *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, some of the features of the postmodern era are the fading of boundaries, the collapse of ideological oppositions, and the awareness of chaos and acceptance of it. Jameson gives the example of Disney-Epcot Center, which displays modern aesthetic and technological ideas (the rides, spaceship earth housed in the iconic silver ball, the eponym that stands for Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow) while making references to the past (the fabricated countries and their buildings referring to historical and stereotypical lifestyles). Whereas modernist works were permeated with a need to find meaning and wholeness amidst chaos, postmodernist works embrace the confusion and disorder of contemporary times.[342]

Epcot Center is just one example of how diverging cultural elements can exist together. It also demonstrates how kitsch is no longer discernable from culture (is the phony Eiffel Tower a caricature or a history lesson?), and how high art is no longer discernable from

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[342] Jameson, 21-25.

low art (to what degree were Walt Disney's visionary plans for Epcot aesthetic and to what extent were they commercial?). Jameson argues that the postmodern era is defined by a blurring of traditional boundaries so that culture and art are no longer clearly defined terms. Because of the obfuscation of limits, boundaries, and oppositions, the notion of art itself becomes more ambiguous, making it difficult to understand where art begins and where it ends. This is why Jameson claims that culture has swelled and "exploded" and now touches almost all aspects of life.[343] Such a statement implies that art is no longer isolated and independent, as Peter Bürger implied in his study of the avant-garde.

But Jameson and other literary critics do not credit the avant-garde with having transformed the role of art in society. For example, Tony Pinkney, in an introduction to Raymond William's *Politics of Modernism*, writes:

> It was capitalism, not Futurism or Surrealism, that successfully integrated life and art in a new phase in which the commodity no longer feared culture because it had already incorporated it, was more aesthetic signifier than humdrum use-value.[344]

Critics such as Pinkney consider the avant-garde a side-effect of capitalism, which was the more powerful and driving force in cultural production. Paul Mann explains the importance of capitalism by revealing how western capitalism facilitated recuperation, acceptance, and inclusion of the margins, unlike post-revolutionary Russia, which suppressed and thus put out of existence its marginal avant-garde groups.[345]

Although capitalism facilitated cultural growth and expansion, it also dictated its development. According to Raymond Williams in his 1989 book *The Politics of Modernism*, the late capitalist phase, because of its all-inclusiveness and acceptance of

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[343] Jameson, 48-49.
[344] Pinkny, 18.
[345] Mann, 15.

even the seditious margins, resulted in a leveling out, so that extreme elements coexisted

with conventional elements, and absolute relativity quelled rebellion. Williams writes:

> …Modernism quickly lost its anti-bourgeois stance, and achieved
> comfortable integration into the new international capitalism. Its attempt
> at a universal market, transfrontier and transclass, turned out to be
> spurious…the innovations of what is called Modernism have become the
> new but fixed forms of our present moment.[346]

Williams argues that the avant-garde, incorporated into the system, could no longer fight

against it. The failure of modernism, according to critics like Williams, was that it

allowed itself to be accepted by capitalism and bourgeois culture. The resulting

postmodern age is defined by a void in terms of history and individual identity. Williams

writes:

> If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of *post*-modernism, then
> we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the
> neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition which
> may address itself not to this by now exploitable because quite inhuman
> rewriting of the past but, for all our sakes, to a modern *future* in which
> community may be imagined again.[347]

Williams suggests rethinking the modernist tradition by looking again to the margins.

Although the avant-garde had looked to peripheral artists and incorporated them,

Williams argues that this must be done continuously. Otherwise, the system will

eventually absorb the artists and diminish the margins. In order to maintain the margins,

artists must constantly be looking to them and thus reinforcing them. For Williams,

focusing on maintaining marginal artists is one way for the avant-garde to continue to

exist in the postmodern age.

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[346] Williams, Politics, 35.
[347] Williams, Politics, 35.

For critic Paul Mann, another way for the avant-garde to exist in the postmodern age is

for critics to write about it. In his 1991 book entitled *The Theory-Death of the Avant-*

Garde, he argues that merely having a discussion about the avant-garde, as we are doing

here, keeps it alive. He argues that art *is* discourse and that no aesthetic movement exists

without a surrounding discussion about its existence. Mann gives the example of

Marinetti's 1909 Futurist Manifesto being printed before the group officially existed,

exemplifying how discourse can precede and even spur the formation of an aesthetic

movement.[348]

Similarly, discussions about the death of the avant-garde began in the nineteen

seventies, at a time when avant-garde art and literature was still being produced. Robert

Hughes published an essay in 1973 entitled "The Decline and Fall of the Avant-Garde."

Philippe Sollers, a self-avowed member of the avant-garde, alluded to the vulnerability of

the movement in a lecture at Beaubourg on December 12 1977 entitled "Crise de l'avant-

garde?" published in *Art Press* in March, 1978.

These discussions about the death of the avant-garde, before it had officially "died,"

produce and reproduce its death, prolonging it, reinventing it, and ensuring its survival.

They also suggest that death, as a lingering state, is actually part of the life of the avant-

garde. Or perhaps it is part of a new life, or reincarnation of the movement. In 1990,

critic Leslie Hill, when writing about three novels Philippe Sollers published in the 80s,

wrote:

> In novelistic terms they [*Femmes* (1983), *Portrait du joueur* (1984)
> and *Le Coeur absolu* (1987)] … belong to…a different avant-
> garde, if in the 1980s the word can be maintained with any

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[348] Mann, 6-7.

conviction.[349]

Hill's reference to a possible "other" avant-garde leads to the question: if there is another avant-garde today, how is it different from the historic avant-garde discussed in this dissertation?

One might look to Philippe Sollers' last novel *Un Vrai Roman*, discussed in some detail in the second chapter of this dissertation, in an attempt to answer this question. In comparing the discussion of the city in Sollers' novel with that in other historic avant-garde works, we saw how Sollers' urban vision and style had evolved. Particularly in his treatment of the Spectacle, we saw how his ideas incorporate but also change traditional avant-garde theories.

Like the Situationists, Sollers understood the dangers of the Spectacle. Instead of formulating a new plan to resist it, however, he seemed to acknowledge and accept it. In the same vein as postmodern theory, Sollers does not react against it or rebel; he incorporates the Spectacle and accepts it as part of his life. The fact that Sollers has a Myspace account[350], which is an online social networking site that allows people to present themselves, their interests, their pictures, their friends and family, and almost anything else they wish to display, further testifies to Sollers' acceptance of the Spectacle and its power to define and reinvent the individual.

Literary and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard describes this phenomenon of the simulation of identity. He explains in his 1976 book *Simulacres et Simulation* that western society has gone through a process where the end result is the simulation of reality, so that the simulation or copy replaces reality. Baudrillard also has a Myspace

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[349] Hill, 120.
[350] http://www.myspace.com/philippe_sollers.

account, which is currently being maintained despite his death in March of 2007. His internet page, just like Sollers', displays the interests, writings, and pictures that one would expect him to promote. So the simulacrum seems to be the real. The simulated Myspace-Baudrillard even ecplises the real Baudrillard, who is less accessible, especially now that he is deceased, than his online persona. This is exactly the kind of process that Baudrillard explains in his book.

According to Baudrillard, who sees the development of the simulacra into the real as a fours step process, the Spectacle would fall into the category preceding the final phase of simulacra turned real. Debord, however, had not envisioned anything beyond the Spectacle, which he described as having penetrated all aspects of society. For Debord, there was still a difference between false society and reality, and he advocated resisting the Spectacle in order to recover the real. Baudrillard, however, argues that there is no longer a difference between the Spectacle, or what he calls simulacrum, and the real.

The difference between real and false is played out on the cover of *Un Vrai Roman*, with the word "vrai." But the novel does not resemble a "real" or traditional novel in its form or style. It is not a real novel in the sense that it is practically an autobiography, as its subtitle, *Mémoires*, indicates. Like the viewer of Sollers' Myspace page, the reader of his novel is unsure of what is real and what is not, or if there is in fact any difference between the two.

This leads one to question whether there is a difference between Sollers' online space and the real spaces that are part of his everyday habits. Myspace, like the city space Sollers writes about, is a "place" where Sollers can meet people who have the same

interests. Is Myspace the new avant-garde city? Is the social-networking surfer the new avant-garde *flâneur*?

In a March 2007 *New York Times* article, entitled "The Professor as Open Book," Stephanie Rosenbloom, concludes that the spaces Myspace attempts to simulate are not much different from real spaces. In her article, she looks at the phenomenon of American intellectuals and professors opening Myspace and Facebook accounts in order to connect with fans and students. She concludes that such an online teacher-student relationship is not much different than those that traditionally took place in a professor's office. Like a professor's office, the Myspace page displays the professor's pictures and books.[351]

If Myspace can simulate a professor's office, it also can simulate the city. One of the professors interviewed in Rosenbloom's article, William Irwin, compares Myspace to the Las Vegas of on-line networking sites. Irwin, who terminated his Myspace page, which boasted some ten thousand friends, says "There were all kinds of people I was meeting. It was kind of an exciting alternate universe to be a part of."[352] Jameson would agree with the exciting and inclusive nature of Las Vegas, a city he considers quintessentially postmodern. The fact that Sollers uses Myspace in the same way that the historic avant-garde used the city points to the possibility of a contemporary avant-garde existing in the postmodern age.

The avant-garde's vision of the city is echoed in the work of another contemporary group called Parkour. Although the group does not claim to be inspired by Situationist theory, they call their activities "l'art du deplacement," a term that resonates with the

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[351] Rosenbloom.
[352] Rosenbloom.

Situationist idea of détournement.[353] For the *traceurs* of Parkour, city structures and

spaces should not limit an individual's movement through them. The *traceur*, instead of

going through a passage, would climb or jump over the wall around the passage.

Evidently, the *traceur* must be in excellent physical condition, and not everybody can

participate in the use of the city in this way. But the ideas of the Parkour movement

parallel Situationist ideas about subverting the meaning and significance of city spaces

and structures.

   One possibility for the future direction of this research is an inquiry into contemporary

movements like Parkour and contemporary artists like Sollers in order to see how

Situationism and avant-garde ideas about subverting city space continue to exist. It

would be interesting to consider other French authors, like Michel Houellebecq and in

particular his latest novel *La Possibilité d'une île*, where he mentions Sollers and Breton,

references that suggest that he too wants to insert himself into the avant-garde

tradition.[354]

   Many critics see Sollers as a public persona who will do anything to attract attention.

His latest novel boasts numerous examples of self-aggrandizement. His Myspace page

can also be considered a form of self-advertisement. Although this behavior can be

considered as capricious or not serious, in some ways it resembles the leaders of the

historic avant-garde, whose oftentimes flamboyant behavior attracted attention.

   Another issue this dissertation did not address in any detail is the sexism evident in

Sollers' work, including his latest novel and his Myspace page. Aside from a few

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[353] All information on Parkour is from their official site: www.parkourfrance.com. Demonstrative videos are also available on Youtube, searching under "parkour." For example: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jquXcwooV6A.
[354] Houellebecq, 315, 316.

references to female theorists like de Beauvoir and Kristeva under his favorite book list, Sollers' Myspace also displays pictures and videos of half-naked objectified women. In line with the historic avant-garde, Sollers is not able to escape from his own machismo, even in a space where he is allowed to chose who he is.

While Sollers' most recent work shows signs of moving out of the modernist paradigm and into something that might be considered a new avant-garde, it also maintains some of the most troubling characteristics of the avant-garde. But like a true postmodernist persona, he is not consistently misogynistic. He accepts being addressed as Monsieur Kristeva,[355] and while he often praises his wife for her beauty, he also praises her as the most intelligent woman he ever met.[356]

One consistency in Sollers' work, and in the work of avant-garde artists in general, however, is its shocking nature. As Sollers quotes Picasso in his last novel: "art is not art if it is chaste."[357] The definition of "chaste" in the postmodern age is more ambiguous than ever, which complicates the avant-garde goal of shocking and subverting. As we have seen in the previous chapters, some of last historic avant-garde works still surprise, challenge, and raise questions. And the artists listed in this conclusion suggest that there are contemporary movements that produce the same effects. Both these examples underscore the poignancy of the twentieth century avant-garde, and the possibility of a twenty-first century avant-garde.

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[355] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 144.
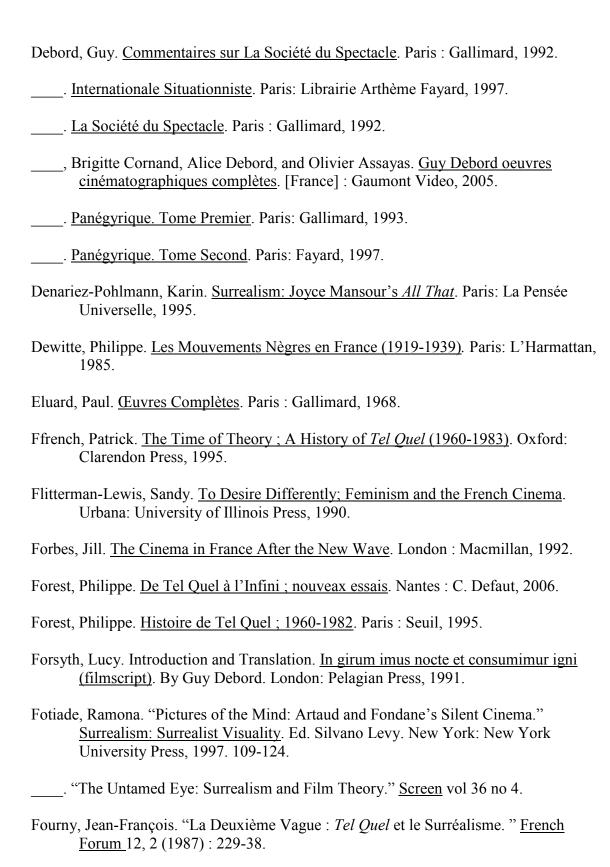[356] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 102.
[357] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 157.

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