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Surrealism, Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Crisis of Representation in the Work of Leonora Carrington, Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman

Natalya Lusty

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To Saro Lusty-Cavallari

(whose own obsessions have proved a delightful distraction)

and in loving memory of my mother, Margot Belle Renwick Lusty
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Chapter One

Surrealism, Feminism and Psychoanalysis: From Modernist Representation to Postmodernist Theorisation

The arts in which Surrealism has come into its own are prose fiction... theatre, the arts of assemblage, and - most triumphantly - photography.

Susan Sontag, On Photography

For Walter Benjamin Surrealism embodied the radical possibilities of modernism and in his famous 1929 essay on Surrealism he locates the energies of Surrealist poetic practice within a rhetoric of civil rebellion at a point of historical crisis. In "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" Benjamin invokes the motif of "the snapshot", that ubiquitous mode of recording everyday life, in order to define the movement's relationship to modernism: "fed on the damp boredom of postwar Europe and the last trickle of French decadence" (1978: 177) Surrealism occupies a position, Benjamin argues, that is at once "anarchistic fronde" and "revolutionary discipline", a position that attempts to push "poetic life' to the utmost limits of possibility"(178). But here "anarchistic fronde" becomes as much a description of Benjamin's own methodological approach and eclectic interests - as one who could never conform to the "revolutionary discipline" of the communist party, a movement he sympathised with but would never join - as it is of Surrealist literary and visual production. Benjamin writes himself into this piece as the German observer who understands and is sympathetic to the intellectual crisis of modern Europe and the revolutionary spirit of Surrealism:

The German observer is not standing at the head of the stream. That is his opportunity. He is in the valley. He can gauge the energies of the movement. As a German he is long acquainted with the crisis of the intelligentsia, or more precisely, with that of the humanistic concept of freedom ...(177)
Benjamin’s insight into Surrealism is predicated upon his position as an outsider. As someone who shares the movement’s spirit of rebellion but can critically examine its effects from a distance, or from below, as his anti-transcendent metaphor suggests. Later in his Surrealist inspired work One Way Street Benjamin will use a Bretonian polemic on Surrealism, creating short, poetic snapshots of his own. These pieces explicitly turn away from the transcendent nature of Surrealist poetic imagery for a materialism founded upon the paradoxes of everyday life. Reading this work, Cohen suggests that Benjamin "consistently turns an ironic discourse valorising askesis and reason against Breton’s capricious and elusive praise of unconscious inspiration" (1993:178). In essence One Way Street establishes Benjamin’s dialogic relation with Surrealism.

It is in the paradox of the participant/observer (rhetorically elaborated here as anarchistic fronde and revolutionary discipline) that I want to locate the work of Leonora Carrington and Claude Cahun. Like the Benjamin of One Way Street, their work reflects a dynamic of complicity and resistance, of homage and celebration as well as insightful critique in relation to Surrealism. Although this kind of relationship is in many ways inimical to the movement, their affiliation entails a critical distance that elaborates and expands many of the ideas and practices by which the movement conceives of itself, and in ways that go beyond the materialist/idealist dialectic of the Bataille/Breton impasse. Having located the movement’s historical and critical position at a point of crisis within a European intellectual tradition, Benjamin goes on to reflect on how Nadja principally informs this critical turning point. In Benjamin’s astute observation of the nature of Breton’s fascination with Nadja and its importance for Surrealism’s aesthetic practice, lies the central paradox of woman within the movement. Defining the relationship between Breton and Nadja as akin to the relationship of the gentleman and his beloved in courtly love poetry, Benjamin observes that “The Lady, in esoteric love, matters least. So too for Breton. He is closer to the things that Nadja is close to than to her” (1978: 181). It is this tension between Nadja as inspired crazy muse and real life embodied subject that has come to haunt a feminist reading of Surrealism. While this tension stages both the fantasy and erasure of the female subject, it also opens up a debate — central to both Surrealism and feminist theory — between experience and theory. In Nadja, Breton’s self-interrogation, “Who am I?” unfolds within the context of time and place (what he has been and will be as well as who he haunts). While time and place are central to Breton’s epistemological inquiries about identity, the representation of the self elaborates the tension between the experiential and the theoretical, the everyday and the intellectual.
If Breton poses the question “Who am I?” as central to the subject’s crisis of representation – it is this question, above all, that is pivotal to Carrington’s writing. Part One of this thesis, Chapters 2-4 explore a range of Carrington’s literary production, from the early story, “The Debutante”, and the autobiographical narrative, Down Below, through to her late feminist/Surrealist novel, The Hearing Trumpet. I have focused almost exclusively on Carrington’s writing from this period – from her debut into the Surrealist movement in the late 1930’s to her settlement in Mexico City in the 1940’s – because it reflects a complicated series of manoeuvres which disclose her ambivalent and changing relationship to the movement and the development of her own artistic authority in the context of social, political and personal upheaval. These texts emerge out of the profoundly disturbing contexts of war, emotional and psychic crisis, and emigration, and reveal a series of revisions to the construction and representation of the self in narrative form. Although I focus on Carrington’s writing, the fact that she is also a visual artist bears strikingly on the written work, in particular the way in which visual forms and techniques are often transformed into writing effects. Of course this is significant within much Surrealist aesthetic practice where the interplay between visual and verbal language is central to its project of aesthetic innovation. In her writing, however, Carrington takes up a Bretonian interrogation of the self, increasingly expanding its terms of reference within and against the grain of a Surrealist aesthetic practice.

Reading “The Debutante”, Down Below and The Hearing Trumpet sequentially I have tried to show the development of Carrington’s writing and the various transformations that the representation of the self has undergone over that period. But more insistently I have sought to provide a number of contextual and appositional readings that situate these works within a complex discursive and cultural field. As I argue, all too often Carrington’s work is disengaged from the larger debates within modernism: debates about genre, gender, class, race and politics which are invariably drawn out in readings of more canonical work. Hence in Chapter Two I read “The Debutante’s” thematic development of the cross-cultural exchange and commodification of women’s bodies alongside Riviere’s psychoanalytic examination of the newly professional intellectual woman’s negotiation of the public sphere, outlined in her essay, “Womanliness as a Masquerade”(1928). The autobiographical context implicit in both these pieces unfolds what I call a complex dynamic of resistance and complicity formed in relation to their respective negotiations of the Surrealist and Psychoanalytic movements. A feminist “discovery” of Carrington’s writing and Riviere’s essay in the 1980’s and 1990’s reflects the degree to which the themes taken up in their work had become important to feminist hermeneutics and theory during
this period. In Chapter Three I read Carrington's narrative on madness, Down Below within the context of its implied critique of a Surrealist investment in madness and the aestheticisation of the madwoman in Nadja. Central to my argument is the relationship between the canonical and noncanonical text, which unfolds an uncanny intertextuality operating in and between these texts. Chapter Four examines transgression and subversion in Carrington's The Hearing Trumpet and Bataille's Story of the Eye. Reading parody as a form of literary transgression, this chapter explores The Hearing Trumpet's relationship to feminism and Surrealism in the context of Bataille's repudiation of a Bretonian transcendence. In their parody of the quest narrative, Carrington and Bataille reveal a critical engagement with Surrealism that complicates our reading of these texts and their location in the Surrealist canon.

Part Two of this thesis shifts the focus from Surrealist writing to the photographs of Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman. In Cahun's photographic self-portraits the question "Who am I?" underpins the indeterminacy of gendered and sexual identity represented in these works. In fashioning the lesbian subject of Surrealism, Cahun takes up the question in terms of the crisis of sexual identity within the work of art, critiquing Breton's homophobic idealisation of heterosexuality. Her "ways of looking" (at us and to us) reflect Susan Sontag's explication of photography's innately surreal quality, its combination of a Surrealist love of the "emotional weight" of the accidental with its "fantastic disclosures" of the subject (1977: 52-3). Primarily producing photographic self-portraits, Cahun embodies the paradox of the participant/observer outlined in Benjamin's essay.

If, as Benjamin suggests, Surrealism functioned as the radical other of modernism, then within Surrealism itself there were a set of inclusive and exclusive practices that moulded and split the movement. The problem of definition and categorisation plagues the movement as it has troubled this thesis. My use of the term "Surrealist" changes as the context in which it is employed necessarily shifts. As such I endeavour to specify and qualify my use of terminology wherever possible. But I also want to suggest that what is perhaps most prescient about the work of Carrington and Cahun is their interrogation and critical reflection on what was proper and not proper to Surrealist ideology and practice, mining these tensions for aesthetic and political effect.

In her Introduction to the second edition of Between Men, Eve Sedgwick, in her indomitable fashion, writes: "Obsessions are the most durable form of intellectual capital." Taking
my cue from Sedgwick I want to reflect on my own obsession with Surrealism within the context of what I and others have noted as feminism's compelling fascination with the Surrealists. My own obsession can be traced to a visit one rainy afternoon to a women's bookshop in Amsterdam, a frequent pit stop between the library and my apartment. It was here that I first came across the work of Leonora Carrington and other women Surrealists in Chadwick's *Women and the Surrealist Movement*. Unable to buy the book, I spent an entire afternoon reading it from start to finish under the congenial gaze of the bookshop owner. After I had finished I felt compelled to buy *something*, as a gesture of gratitude. As if to accommodate the financial reality of its customers, at the back of the shop, behind the glossy art books and pristine anthologies, were row upon row of second hand books for sale. After a quick search of the shelves I came across a very battered 1970's paperback copy of Phyllys Chesler's *Women and Madness*. Like the found object, which forms a new life out of the very obsolescence of its old one, Chesler's book, in the ensuing years, came to invoke the uncanniness of that afternoon since it served as a reminder of Surrealism's own obsession with both women and madness.

To gauge feminism's obsession with Surrealism, however, is a much more complicated affair. In her introduction to *Women and the Surrealist Movement*, Whitney Chadwick draws our attention to one of the defining paradoxes of Surrealism:

"The problem of woman," André Breton wrote in 1929, "is the most marvellous and disturbing problem in all the world." No artistic movement since Romanticism has elevated the image of woman to as significant a role in the creative life of man as Surrealism did; no group or movement has ever defined such a revolutionary role for her. And no other movement has had such a large number of active participants, their presence recorded in the poetry and art of male Surrealists, and in the catalogues of the international Surrealist exhibitions of 1935 (Copenhagen and Prague), 1936 (London and New York), 1938 (Paris), 1940 (Mexico City), and 1947 (Paris). Yet the actual role, or roles played by women artists in the Surrealist movement has been more difficult to evaluate, for their own histories have often remained buried under those of male Surrealists who have gained wider public recognition. (1985: 7)" 

The paradox defined by Chadwick is the simultaneous absence and presence of "woman" within Surrealism. That is, her historical absence from overviews and accounts of the movement despite her heightened visibility as a subject of desire, indeed as the very
emblem of Surrealist revolutionary practice. Since the publication of Chadwick's early survey of women Surrealists, this absence has been considerably modified, with an increasing number of important interventions, restoring the availability of the work of women Surrealists and providing critical responses to them. However, the central paradox of women's metaphorical presence and historical absence still seems to haunt many of these recent critical reflections. While women functioned as muses, scribes and emblems of and for its revolutionary cause in the early part of the movement, the large numbers of women writers, artists, intellectuals and political activists who became associated with the movement during the 1930's and 40's, and who have only more recently become subjects of intellectual inquiry and evaluation, have inevitably shifted the contours of the movement and its relationship to the wider cultural and historical zone of modernism.

If, as Walter Benjamin suggests, Surrealism functioned as the radical other of modernism, women were the figurative and literal embodiment of that alterity. But given the concentration of women flocking to the movement in its later stages, one can only surmise that their presence has also imbued the movement with a certain tension and self-reflexivity. Benjamin's analysis draws attention to the conservative nature of Breton's emancipatory vocabulary, reminding us of the problematic tension between Nadja as the aestheticised subject of Breton's narrative and her own experience of mental illness, poverty, and eventual institutionalisation. Benjamin's comment astutely reminds us of the high value accorded to the experience of modernism's others - women, children, the mad, the exotic primitive - as a way in which to guarantee the movement's continuation and authenticity. Similarly, feminist readings of Surrealism have endeavoured to illustrate how the transgressive function of Surrealism as the radical other of modernism, has rested on its appropriation of the disturbed female psyche and the violated female body as a metaphor for its revolutionary aesthetic and political practice. In light of this, women such as Cahun and Carrington have produced work that reflects the tension between experience and representation, or what today is seen as the very crux of a contemporary feminist political and social ethic - the tension between theory and practice.

While the problem of definition plagues a critical evaluation of the disciplinary codes of Surrealism, feminist and other critical readings of the women Surrealists reveal their own contrary views. Some critics read the work of the women Surrealists as apolitical and isolated responses rather than direct engagements with the work of their male colleagues. What troubles me about much of the work on women Surrealists is it has a tendency to
disengage their cultural and political context and often sustained response to Surrealist aesthetic and ideological practice. Invariably women Surrealists are portrayed as apolitical, attracted to the formal properties of a Surrealist aesthetic rather than engaged with the political and cultural context of the movement. Or, similarly, it is suggested that, because they were not seen to be direct participants in the political aspects of the movement, their work lacks a political and cultural context. Too often the women Surrealists are represented as politically naive or disinterested in the political and aesthetic debates of the movement, in contrast to their work, which is interpreted as exhibiting a "natural" affinity with Surrealist ideas and themes. An example of this response is Chadwick's own reading of the work of Lee Miller:

Like many of the women artists who came to surrealism in increasing numbers during the 1930's, she [Lee Miller] had no interest in theory or politics, and no commitment to Surrealism's collective goals ... Her connections with the group were entirely personal rather than formal and she is closer to the newly liberated woman of the 1920's than to Breton's etherealised vision of the Surrealist woman (1985: 39-42).

What I find problematic here is Chadwick's implicit refusal to grant a political or theoretical voice to Miller's work despite the fact that works such as "Revenge on Culture" (1940) (see fig. 1) reverberate with overt political and cultural themes about the construction of the "ruinous" female body within modernist aesthetics. If anything, Miller's photographs have constructed an important visual and historical narrative of those involved with the Surrealist group over a twenty year period, one which reflects a quite different narrative to the one left by Man Ray. Miller often incorporated into her work a particular kind of "Surrealist" irony as a way to reflect the interrelation of the personal and political, and frequently along gendered lines. One obvious example is her portrait of the famous Surrealist couple, Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning (see fig. 2) in the Arizona desert, which wryly comments on the public/private stature of each artist. While Man Ray is noted for his highly stylised portraits of famous modernist figures, Lee Miller, by contrast, invariably captures the collective and collaborative spirit of those in and around the Surrealist group, choosing the group portrait or the Surrealist couple, over the often highly-fetishised individual portrait. Although Miller was not a formal member of the group, her work critically engages with the gender politics of the movement. Moreover, her later war photographs seem to shift the focus of the gaze from the violently erotic female body of Surrealist aesthetics to the fragile masculine body of war, and the
1. Lee Miller, *Revenge on Culture*, 1940

2. Lee Miller *Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning, Cedona, Arizona, 1946*
monumental destruction of “culture” that war brought. Miller’s powerfully evocative war photograph, *Revenge of Culture* addresses the cultural violence endemic to the representation of femininity at the same time that it reveals a loss of innocence brought about by war. Culture, represented as woman, has been broken and ruined alongside the aesthetic ideology that constructs her as such.

In his essay on Carrington, Peter G. Christensen argues that her work is “inherently ahistorical and that it lacks a sense of the role that women have played in society” (1991: 149). Christensen goes on to suggest that “Carrington does not depict the relationships of women and men as the products of complex social and economic forces” (149). What Christensen’s essay seems to imply is that Carrington does not depict the realities of men’s and women’s lives in a mimetic genre, which, given Carrington’s allegiance to Surrealism, seems quite absurd. Moreover this argument is used to question the “feminist” nature of her work, especially the early fiction. Again what I find reductive about this kind of reading is that it draws the entirety of Carrington’s work into a single line of argument, blind to its developmental nature and its systematic critique of social institutions.

Although women Surrealists such as Miller and Carrington certainly played little part in the Marxist debates that formed a part of the movement’s ideological base, neither did many of the men. Attempts to read the political nature of the movement along gendered lines also tend to overlook key figures such as Cahun. Strongly committed to the Surrealist project of combining Freud and Marx, and as a member of the Association of Revolutionary Artists and Writers, along with Breton, Cahun played a significant role in the political side of the movement, for which she was acknowledged. One of the points that I emphasise throughout this thesis is that the aesthetic interventions and practices of women such as Carrington and Cahun cannot be divorced from their political or cultural meaning.

In her introduction to *Surrealism and Women*, Gwen Raaberg notes that despite the large numbers of women attracted to the Surrealist movement, the marginal roles assigned to women in society were often replicated within the movement: “Woman functioned... as an idealised Other, ... as an object for the projection of unresolved anxieties, and continued to be identified in traditional terms of body, irrationality, and nature” (1991: 8). In Carolyn Dean’s work on Claude Cahun, she argues that “the surrealists’ anti-bourgeois sentiments – at least in the realm of gender and sexuality – sustained the dichotomies between heterosexuality and homosexuality, pure and impure” (1996: 78). While Dean is careful not to completely expunge the undeniably radical elements of the movement, her
argument illustrates how the oppositional categories of Surrealism – the pure and the impure – often produced their own prescribed and entrenched hierarchies. Shaped by and largely challenging a pervasive Catholic morality, Surrealism sought to mine female sexuality for its libidinous transgressive qualities. However, as Raaberg and Dean acknowledge, Breton’s theoretical concerns were themselves shaped by particular moral and sexual prejudices of his own (Polizzotti, 1997: 524). Dean has thus usefully illustrated the conservative idealism embedded within Breton’s Surrealist frame of reference:

[Breton’s] problem with bourgeois morality was that it was not moral or pure enough, and he countered it with an idealised, liberated, natural heterosexuality purged of the tainted, repressed, and hence compromised bourgeois ideal of love that produced adultery, treachery and presumably, homosexuality. (1996: 78)

Chadwick’s identification of the simultaneous absence and presence of women within Surrealism as well as Dean’s critique of the paradoxical function of categories such as the pure and impure reveals what Matei Calinescu defines as the paradox of avant-garde politics itself, its “elitist-antielitist approach”: the formation of an elite committed to an anti-elitist aesthetic and political program (1987:104). The founding conception of Surrealism in terms of a rhetorical device – as revolution – discloses its proximity to an already established avant-garde nomenclature and its allegiance to a French historical tradition of revolutionary civil war, one which importantly for Surrealism takes place in the urban street. The rhetorical emphasis on revolution together with the championing of the street as the locus of a Surrealist urban reflects its origins in “romantic utopianism” (Calinescu, 1987:96) and hence the movement’s attempts to open up aesthetic inquiry and practice to marginal experience; to include the effects of chance, irrationality, the unconscious and the everyday. This was often achieved, as I have suggested, through the promotion and mimicry of the marginalised voices of modernism’s others: women, hysterics, children or adolescents, the criminally insane and nonwestern cultures. Such a strategy was invariably cannibalistic in that it subsumed, often unproblematically, the voice and identity of the other as part of its own supposedly radical position. In arguing that self-consciousness was crucial to the very concept of the avant-garde, Calinescu suggests that the notion of the avant-garde borrows from “the language, theory and practice of a comparatively recent kind of warfare, the revolutionary civil war”(100-101). Surrealism, like other avant-garde movements, wedded radical politics to the pursuit of new forms of creative expression, so that political and aesthetic change were congruous.14
In establishing art and life as part of the same radical drive, Surrealism unfolds the importance of psychoanalysis to its conception. If the paradoxical role and representation of women within the Surrealist movement has continued to be one of the most contested and difficult sites of modernism, it is precisely because Surrealism itself has proved to be a nodal point from which the disciplines of feminism and psychoanalysis have generated difficult questions about the construction and representation of female subjectivity. While Kevin Brophy argues that Surrealism could not have been conceived without the advent of psychoanalysis, the relationship between the two was as troubled as has been the relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis. Breton's formulation of woman as "the most marvellous and disturbing question in all the world" echoes Freud's own puzzled inquiry, "What does woman want?" The relationship between Breton and Freud poses some interesting questions in the context of women's role in both the Surrealist movement and within psychoanalysis. Moreover, Freud's muted response to Breton's flattering and enthusiastic letters and his failure to understand Breton's aesthetic interest in psychoanalysis ("I am afraid it is unclear to me what surrealism is and what it wants.") (Cited in Conley, 1996: 6), strangely rehearse his rhetorical statement on women. The return of Freud's question uncannily collapses the troubled relationship between subjectivity, desire and femininity in Freudian psychoanalysis onto Surrealism's own troubling appropriation of the female other. The simultaneous erasure and fantasy of woman as other within Surrealism and Freudian psychoanalysis is indicative of a long and troubled representation of femininity within Western aesthetic and philosophical systems and is taken up directly and indirectly, and differently, in the work of Carrington, Cahun and Sherman. Modernist movements such as Surrealism and psychoanalysis, however, have provided enabling strategies for women artists and feminist theorists grappling with issues of representation and agency. It therefore seems important to keep in mind the sense of transformation and liberation that embodied many of the principles of Surrealism, at the same time providing critical readings of the import of their political and aesthetic ideologies. The discursive and aesthetic parameters of both Surrealism and psychoanalysis were irrevocably altered by the participation of women, even if these effects were only recognisable decades after their participation in these movements – as is the case with Cahun and Riviere.

Breton's early training in psychiatry and his subsequent interest in the ideas of Freud came to bear significantly on the movement and formed part of its systematic opposition to the world of the rational and the logical. Like psychoanalysis, Surrealism provided a key to
the subconscious, to an area of the psyche that could only be accessed in ways other than through rational or conscious states, such as dreaming and creative acts. Although automatism was extremely important in the early years of Surrealism, this was gradually replaced by the category of the marvellous, often represented through the metaphor of the enigmatic woman. Having absorbed much of Freud and psychoanalysis by the 1930's, the Surrealists became increasingly preoccupied with the enigma of feminine sexuality. But Surrealism's interest in psychoanalysis was also indicative of its program of modernisation and the scientific status that Freud had attempted to imbue in the discipline. Calinescu argues that the myth of science is in a sense foundational to all avant-garde movements: "The scientifism cultivated by the avant-garde for the sake of its antiartistic and antihumanistic metaphoric potential is both philosophically and aesthetically adapted to the strategy of dehumanisation" (131). Here it is not science itself that is important but the opposition science establishes in its relation to a Romantic investment in theories of organic development. Thus Roudinesco concludes that "Surrealism bore the blazon of romanticism turned scientific" (1990: 12).

If the scientific turn in Surrealism was founded on its connection to psychoanalysis, how did this come to bear on the work of Cahun and Carrington? It is precisely the historical links between psychoanalysis and Surrealism that have produced an analysis of perversion within the context of aesthetic form and which is significant in the work of Carrington, Cahun and Sherman, as well as Bataille and Bellmer. As such Surrealism - if only because it conceives the artist as a perverse outsider challenging pervasive cultural norms - becomes a rich area for an analysis of the construction of the feminine and of heterosexuality within avant-garde aesthetics. Carrington and Cahun explicitly take up Freud's perplexed, and Breton's enchanted, response to the question of woman. Central to their work are themes of cultural and self-identity and the commodification of women. Similarly, they both utilise the trope of the mask - with all its Freudian possibilities and problematics - as a way to critically reflect on the nexus between subject and object, agency and desire. While Cahun was certainly immersed in debates about sexual identity and psychoanalysis, her translation of Havelock Ellis's work suggests a turn to the science of sexology as a way in which to modify a psychoanalytic reading of lesbian desire and sexuality.

The importance of the female subject to the disciplines of Surrealism, psychoanalysis and feminism perhaps accounts for the attraction of feminist academics to the Surrealist movement. While feminism is a political project centred on and around the constitution of
subjectivity, psychoanalysis frames itself as a revolutionary science of subjectivity, a science that Surrealism incorporated into its disciplinary fold. This thesis explores the interconnection between Surrealism, feminism and psychoanalysis as it unfolds in a series of close critical readings of work by Carrington, Cahun, Riviere, Sherman, Breton, Bataille and Bellmer. In utilising themes of fantasy, the double, the uncanny, masquerade, narcissism, fetishism and psychosis, their work generates a critical dialogue around constructions and representations of gender, sexuality and identity within these disciplines. I argue that Carrington's, Cahun's and Sherman's work stages a shifting and often paradoxical exploration of the female subject which is pivotal to feminist and psychoanalytic analyses of subject formation. Benjamin's location of Surrealism as - and at - a point of crisis within a European intellectual tradition also suggests the crisis of representation imbued by Surrealism's incorporation of psychoanalysis into its aesthetic fold. The notion of "the double", so central in much of this work, reflects a general aura of ambiguity and duplicity characterising Surrealist cultural production. Moreover, Nadja, Story of the Eye and Down Below are all fictional expositions of the psychoanalytic case history; a fusion of literature and case history. While Surrealist work reveals a certain amount of awareness about what psychoanalysis had to offer the discursive subject, it also reveals the degree to which psychoanalysis itself rested on literary narrative possibilities, on rhetorical strategies and interpretations.

Recently Alice Gambrell has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the influence of modernist women's intellectual and aesthetic practice on contemporary feminist theory. Gambrell's work highlights the complex and paradoxical nature of women's disciplinary affiliations, both past and present, and which have been important in my own analysis of Carrington, Cahun and Sherman. Gambrell's reading of modernist women's work provides an important intervention in how to theorise the work of more minor literary and intellectual figures. Reading modernist women's work as a critical genealogy of contemporary debates about the competing values of "experience" and "theory", Gambrell uncovers academic feminism's own troubled and troubling paradoxes: the way in which feminism itself has "enabled and excluded certain kinds of discussions" (1997:6). Gambrell's work is particularly useful because it acknowledges a contemporary frame of reference and a new kind of perspective in its analysis of modernist practitioners, at the same time providing a context for understanding contemporary debates about theory and praxis.
My own fascination with the work of Carrington and Cahun rests on the startling way in which it pre-empt many of the critical concerns of contemporary feminist theory and art practice. In moving from the modernist work of Carrington and Cahun to the postmodern work of Sherman, I hope to reflect how the past unfolds itself in the present as well as how the present itself informs a critical reflection on the past. As such this thesis is imbued with what Derrida calls the “anachronistic projection” of contemporary obsessions (1982:74). In Part Two I attempt to draw out the prescient nature of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism by situating Cahun’s work alongside Sherman’s. Cahun’s photographs, in their critical exploration of masking and performance, pre-empt contemporary theory’s obsession with identity politics and what Sedgwick has defined as the deconstruction of “the category of the individual” (1990: 24). Cahun’s work adds to the Surrealist project an important reproach to a Bretonian articulation of gender and sexuality and the polemical categories of male and female, heterosexuality and homosexuality. On the other hand, Sherman’s recent work returns to the violent and erotic images of Surrealist photography, to Hans Bellmer’s disturbing and erotic images of dolls, in order to explore the question of censorship. Sherman herself has spoken of how this body of work began as a response to the controversy surrounding Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic photographs.” In the early 1980’s Sherman’s Centrefold series had been subject to controversy when images that had been commissioned by the progressive art journal, Artforum, were rejected on the grounds that they might be misconstrued as “real” centrefold images. I argue that in turning to the explicitly violent and pornographic Surrealist images of Hans Bellmer, Sherman confronts the complex issues of “political correctness” that plagued the “culture wars” in the United States throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s. In returning to explore some of the most confronting Surrealist images, Sherman restitutes the “here” and “now” of the censorship debate into the “then” and “always”. Moreover, in locating her work within the context of the Mapplethorpe controversy and Bellmer’s images, she unfolds the complex role of fetishism in modernist and postmodernist photography. As such Sherman’s work provides a reading of the tension between complicity and resistance, avowal and disavowal as it unfolds in Bellmer’s, Sherman’s and Mapplethorpe’s work—a dynamic that is also played out in the critical censure of Sherman’s and Mapplethorpe’s work by both the right and the left.

In the final chapter on Sherman, I take up Judith Butler’s work on gender to explore the issue of identity within a contemporary theoretical framework and the increasing role of power within a feminist discourse on subjectivity. In her introduction to Gender Trouble,
Judith Butler articulates the rhetorical turns of troublemaking in a way that exemplifies the strategies and ruses of power and its opposite:

Contemporary feminist debates over the meanings of gender lead time and again to a certain sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism. Perhaps trouble need not carry such a negative valance. To make trouble was, within the reigning discourse of my childhood, something one should never do precisely because that would get one in trouble. The rebellion and its reprimand seemed to be caught up in the same terms, a phenomenon that gave rise to my first critical insight into the subtle ruse of power: The prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it. (1990, vii)

In conclusion to this thesis I want to reflect on how Butler’s theories of gender and Sherman’s representation of the female subject have, in a sense, caused trouble within feminist theory. While Sherman’s work stages what she calls “a hate-love” relationship with the construction of gender in contemporary culture, Butler’s work interrogates the construction of gender within feminist theory. The repeated charge from feminist critics that Sherman’s work colludes with phallocentric fetishistic art practices and is therefore not “good” feminist art mirrors Martha Nussbaum’s (1999) recent attack on Judith Butler for producing “bad” feminist theory, a theory that supposedly does little for the material realities of women. In concluding this chapter with Butler’s account of gender in terms of performativity and parody, I want to reflect on how Sherman’s work, in pointing to the problematic female subject of feminism, imparts the general tenets of Butler’s theory. Like Sherman, Butler returns to a modernist reading of gender and masquerade in order to pose some specific questions about feminism’s obsession with gender as a mirror of sexual identity and the problematic nature of this move. While Butler’s work reveals the crisis of the female subject of feminism, Sherman explores the crisis of representation of the female subject. Reading postmodernism as a new “face of modernity” (along with decadence, kitsch, modernism and the avant-garde) Calinescu suggests that postmodernism can be categorised into two groups: “the first is broadly philosophical, including problems of epistemology, the history and philosophy of science, and hermeneutics. The second refers to the notion of modernism and the avant-garde in twentieth-century culture and their possible exhaustion” (268-9). Employing a familial metaphor, Calinescu concludes that modernism and postmodernism certainly share a “family resemblance”. It is these family
resemblances between various aspects of postmodernist culture that I want to keep in mind in my chapter on Sherman. Reading Sherman alongside Bellmer and Butler, I hope to provide a genealogical understanding of modernism's relationship to postmodernism and the importance of philosophical hermeneutics to contemporary aesthetic practice and vice versa; it is in this sense that Butler's representation of epistemological crisis shares something with the notion of a changing artistic consciousness represented in Sherman's work.

In an effort to encapsulate the diversity of its positions and practices, Lawrence Cahoone has also employed a familial metaphor in his description of postmodernism. Suggesting that it resembles a dysfunctional family, Cahoone argues that the various relationships between the various disciplines and positions of postmodernism are in essence troubled and complex. In contrast to the dysfunctional status of postmodernism, this thesis reads modernism within the rubric of the incestuous family. In this arrangement Surrealism occupies the place of the Oedipal son, transgressively playing with the body of the mother in an endeavour to kill off the bourgeois father, as Suleiman suggested over a decade ago.18 The question that this thesis explores is the place of women Surrealists within these familial arrangements; their relationship within the incestuous family and their relationship to the dysfunctional one. Time and again in this thesis, I attempt to show the connections – both straightforward and tenuous – between what I call modernist representation and postmodernist theorisation as well as between modernist intellectual practice and postmodernist representation. While Calinescu suggests that all ideas of periodisation – of modernism and postmodernism – are historical questions, I am interested in how the questions of modernism are revisited by postmodernist theory and art practice. Reading postmodernism as an intrinsic part of modernity, she argues that "of all the faces of modernity postmodernism is perhaps the most quizzical: self-skeptical yet curious, unbelieving yet searching, benevolent yet ironic."(279). In Sherman's work the distillation of this relationship becomes most explicit and therefore useful as a kind of conclusion to many of the ideas and themes explored throughout this thesis. Her series of mannequins and masks directly engage with a Surrealist historical practice, bearing out the obvious association of the postmodern with techniques of quotation and mimesis. And yet what is also present in these images is a critical relationship that dialogically engages with the work of male avant-garde predecessors in the manner in which Suleiman has referred to as "double allegiance". As her own reflections on her work intimate, the question of complicity and resistance is as central for Sherman as it is for Carrington and Cahun. But
there are also tensions between the work of these three women that unfold the specific historical and cultural locations of their work.

My work takes up sites of conflict as necessary to the process of developing and thinking critically about strategies of interdisciplinarity and intertextuality. In Carrington’s writing the figure of the hybrid is her most persistent strategy for mapping out an epistemology of the self that refuses the static and regulatory cultural forms of femininity. Employed as a feminist and a Surrealist strategy, the hybrid produces a site of conflict and crisis. In Cahun’s self-portraits the fashioning of a lesbian identity disturbs the familial-erotic dynamic of heterosexuality, suggesting that lesbianism itself represents a site for the indeterminacy of sex and gender categories. In Sherman’s more recent work the sense of aesthetic disintegration is repeatedly staged. Reducing the female (and male) body to abstract detritus or substituting the body for the comically perverse mannequin or sex doll, Sherman’s photographs produce a kind of aesthetic and sexual anarchy, a threatening indeterminacy that mirrors Cahun’s own proliferation of professional and sexed identities. Indeed the indeterminacy of Sherman’s work signals a sense of anarchic celebration, a moving on from all that has gone before, while still containing its mythic traces.

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1 The most striking examples of this are Max Ernst’s collage-novels and Magritte’s word paintings.
2 See http://www.duke.edu/~sedgwick/WRITING/BETWEEN.htm; Internet
3 See Conley’s introduction to The Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism.
4 Chadwick goes on to recount how her initial attempts to uncover material on women Surrealists resulted in the assumption that “while the lives of male Surrealists may be considered ‘history’, attempts to piece together the lives of the women involved constituted a search for mere ‘gossip’.” (7).
1 In L’Armour Fou: Photography and Surrealism, Rosalind Krauss positions Surrealist photography as the “féminine” other of straight photography, and defines “woman” and “photograph” as figures of each other’s condition: ambivalent, blurred, indistinct and lacking in “authority”.

2 Included here would be Marina Warner’s edited series of Leonora Carrington’s fiction for Virago in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s as well as critical work initially done by Susan Rubin Suleiman, Mary Ann Caws, Renée Riese Hubert, and more recently by Katherine Conley, Annette Shandler Levitt and Alice Gambrell. Also Penelope Rosemont’s anthology of work by Surrealist women writers has made a significant contribution to making available in English work by women Surrealists.

3 Leonora Carrington, Giselle Prassinos, Jaqueline Lambe, Dora Maar, Frida Kahlo, Léonor Fini, Lee Miller, Meret Oppenheim, Valentine Penrose, Remedios Varo, Nancy Cunard and Claude Cahun were all active as artists, writers and intellectuals within the Surrealist group in the 1930’s and early 40’s. See Whitney Chadwick, Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement and Penelope Rosemont, Surrealist Women: An International Anthology for more detailed biographical information.

4 Alice Gambrell argues that during the late thirties and early forties, Breton “spent a great deal of time as entrepreneur and patron to a scattered group of younger artists... [and] began... quite consciously to seek out and promote work by writers and visual artists, who, for him, embodied and made literal those carefully constructed fictions of difference and alterity” (42).

5 Examples of Miller’s photographs of groups and couples include: of Picasso and Dora Maar (1936), Adie, Lee Miller and Nusch Eluard at Antibes (1937), Leonora Carrington, Lee Miller, Ady and Nusch Eluard at Lambs Creek, England (1937), Nusch and Paul Eluard in their apartment in Paris (1944), Ernst and Tanning in the Arizona Desert (1946), E.L.T. Messers, Max Ernst, Leonora Carrington and Paul Eluard in Paris (1937) a number of portraits of Carrington and Ernst in 1939 in St. Martin d’Ardèche.

6 These photographs were exhibited at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery in Sydney in 1999. Looking at the collection as a whole one is struck by the political forcefulness of the images. In this series Miller contrasts the clean, almost poetic destruction of buildings and monuments with the human corpse’s prolonged and visceral process of decay. Miller seems to dwell on the wounded body of the soldier as a new kind of aesthetic icon, turning from the ruinous and erotic body of Surrealist aesthetics to the fragile masculine body of war. In contrast the photograph of herself in Hitler’s bath creates a more subtle dissonance in relation to the shock effect of much Surrealist photography.

7 For an account of Miller’s role as a photojournalist during the war and a close reading of her photograph of Hitler’s Bathtub, see Carolyn Burke’s excellent article, “Lee Miller in Hitler’s Bathtub”.

8 Neither Ernst nor Dalí, key figures in the movement at various times, showed any interest in the Marxist debates that reached a critical point during the 1930’s.

9 In his autobiography, Breton recommends Cahun’s political pamphlet, Les Paris sont auxards as “a truly evocative image” of Surrealism’s involvement with the French communist party during the early 1930’s(1993:32).

10 Calinescu points out that “Bakunin’s anarchist maxim, ‘To destroy is to create’ is actually applicable to most of the activities of the twentieth-century avant-garde” (117).

11 “The great question that has never been answered and which I have not been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is ‘What does a woman want?’” (Sigmund Freud, cited in Ernest Jones, The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud).

12 As Stephen Heath notes, Freud never responded to Riviere’s paper and it only began to receive critical attention more recently in the context of representation and sexual differences in connection with film theory. Of course, as I suggest in my final chapter, Butler also returns to Riviere in order to articulate her theory of gender performativity and parody.
See Noriko Fuku's interview with Sherman, "A Woman of Parts". The controversy surrounding Mapplethorpe's exhibition arose when the director of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Centre faced obscenity charges for mounting a touring exhibition of Mapplethorpe's work. Mapplethorpe's exhibition "The Perfect Moment" was first mounted in 1988 in Philadelphia before travelling to other cities throughout the states. In the period between its first showing and its arrival in Cincinatti, Mapplethorpe had died of AIDS. When the show had reached Washington, the stop before Cincinnati, Jesse Helms and the religious right mounted a massive campaign against Mapplethorpe's work, which resulted in the gallery caving in and closing the show. When it finally moved to Cincinnati, Helms's campaign continued, resulting in obscenity charges being laid against the director of the Arts Centre.

This is in fact how Suleiman defines Surrealist transgression in her groundbreaking analysis of the role of gender and sexuality in modernist and postmodernist avant-garde practice. See Subversive Intent.
Chapter Two
Eating the Maid:
The Spectacle of Female Rebellion in Leonora Carrington's "The Debutante".

"Nanny do let's pretend that I'm a hungry hyena and you're a bone!"
- Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

Introduction

Throughout the 1930's Surrealism became increasingly preoccupied with the experiences of marginal groups; of women, of children, of non-western cultures and of the criminally insane; investing their experiences and acts with a political resonance that reflected back onto the revolutionary tenor of the movement.\(^1\) Marginality itself increasingly came to signify Surrealism's opposition to bourgeois culture, so that in the "Second Manifesto of Surrealism" Breton writes, "every means must be worth trying, in order to lay waste to the ideas of family, country, religion"(1930/1972:128).\(^2\) It was during this decade that Leonora Carrington made her debut in the Surrealist movement. Only twenty years of age, and striking because of her dark Irish beauty and droll sense of humour, Breton was to become one of her most ardent admirers and supporters.\(^3\) His inclusion of Carrington in the important and canonical *Anthology of Black Humour* reveals his admiration for her trademark "black humour" and eccentric behaviour. British born and raised, Carrington was introduced to Max Ernst at his London exhibition in 1937. Already a great admirer of his work – her mother had given her Herbert Read's book on Surrealism the year before – Ernst in turn became enamoured with the young and rebellious British artist. Following a trip to Cornwall with members and associates of the Surrealist group, including Max Ernst, Man Ray, Nusch and Paul Eluard, Lee Miller and Roland Penrose, Carrington decided to move to Paris to be with Ernst. Intent on escaping the conservative and watchful eye of her family, Carrington seemed to have found in the Surrealist movement a sympathetic environment for her own rebellious nature and spirited imagination.\(^4\) However, as tensions within the Surrealist group intensified and the animosity between
Ernst’s wife, Marie-Berthe, and Carrington became intolerable, Ernst and Carrington relocated to St Martin-d’Ardèche in the South of France. Here they began working and living together and playing host to a string of visitors in the final years before the war; collaborating on publications, paintings and sculptures and exhibiting in the two important Surrealist shows in Paris in 1938 and in Amsterdam in 1939.

It was during this period – around 1937 to 1938 – that Carrington came to write what would become her most anthologised work – the masterful and macabre story, “The Debutante”. In this narrative the image of the debutante as both child and woman, caught in the transitory and difficult space of adolescence, references the Surrealist category of the *femme-enfant* and records the cross-class commodification and cultural exchange of women’s bodies. The theme of unruly adolescence evoked by the debutante’s violent resistance to her “coming out” also recalls two notorious criminal cases involving young women in Paris in the early 1930’s; those of the Papin Sisters and Violette Nozière. Like Nadja, these women became emblems for Surrealism’s anti-bourgeois aesthetic and social revolt, for their crimes exposed the inherently repressed and problematic nature of bourgeois family life and society. But the Surrealist glorification of these crimes illustrates the problematic nature of the figure of the “ruined” woman as a metaphor for, and embodiment of, Surrealist revolutionary ideology. In its critique of the commodified spectacle of the debutante, Carrington’s narrative presents a scene of adolescent violence and rebellion that also evokes a Surrealist celebration and eroticisation of female violence.

Originally written in French and published as part of the collection *La Dame Ovale* in Paris in 1939, “The Debutante” thematises the question of feminine and sexual identity within the socio-cultural and political world of the 1930’s; including the changing role of the debutante during this period and the increasingly prevalent participation of women within the Surrealist movement. Throughout the course of this short narrative, the body of the debutante, traditionally the commodified emblem of heterosexual and heterosocial ritual, becomes tropologically marked by the disruptive logic of hybridity, effected through the representation of a violent masking. In exploring the themes of masking, passing and transformation, Carrington’s text registers the violence enacted in the cultural shaping of the feminine body as well as the codes of violence inherent to Surrealist aesthetic practice. Presented as an adolescent scene of rebellion, Carrington’s debutante experience in “The Debutante” and other autobiographical commentaries, conjures the racial, sexual and class narratives of violence in the 1930’s within the context of her
navigation of questions of power, resistance and complicity, that came from her involvement with the Surrealist group.

Carrington’s repeated autobiographical discussion of her experience as a debutante in 1936 elliptically signals her other momentous “introduction” shortly after – to the Surrealist group in 1937. In two of Carrington’s early Surrealist publications, “The House of Fear” and “The Debutante”, introductions were provided by Max Ernst and André Breton respectively, which placed Carrington within the dynamic of an erotically charged and entrepreneurial relationship. These texts imbue a culture of patronage and introduction intrinsic to the operation of Surrealist coterie politics and artistic production which resembles in part the rituals of debutante culture with its own system of patronage, hierarchy and authenticity. In choosing to write her first published stories in French, Carrington signals her rejection of her upper-class English family, at the same time augmenting her affiliation with the Surrealist movement. Carrington’s narrative exploration of the commodified body of the debutante in the rite-of-passage rituals of the English upper-class addresses a wider cultural and aesthetic exchange of women, including the exchange of women’s literal and figurative bodies within the Surrealist movement. The narrative employs a Surrealist aesthetic economy of violence, rebellion and hybridity to offer a satirical account of the world of Edwardian manners. It critiques this economy by foregrounding gender and class in a way that disrupts the “revolutionary” rhetoric of canonical surrealist aesthetic and political ideology. While the violence performed in the narrative reinforces a canonical Surrealist taxonomy of violence, through its themes of masking and passing, it also unfolds the dynamics of power inherent in a Surrealist celebration of female violence.

Masking the Intellectual Woman

I begin examining the themes of masking and feminine identity in "The Debutante" by turning to Joan Riviere’s 1929 essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade", and the personal and public context in which it emerged, in order to disclose some of the complexities and contradictions for modernist women writers, artists and intellectuals. I hope to show that Riviere’s delineation of femininity as masquerade in terms of a theory of aggression and conflict resolution, one that is inflected by the boundaries of race and class, shares certain salient features with Carrington’s attempts to represent a more complex epistemology of the self than the more conventional Surrealist dichotomization of woman as pure and impure, idealised and debased. Riviere’s article is important here precisely for the way in
which it delineates the politics of praxis for modernist women intellectuals and writers as well as for its tracing of the violence of gendered masking strategies. While I have no evidence of Carrington’s familiarity with this piece, I hope that a brief analysis of Riviere’s essay will set out its appositional reading. Her article raises a series of questions around masking and performance rituals which are important for my reading of Carrington’s aesthetic representation of violence and transgression.9

Riviere begins by providing an analysis of feminine identity within the context of the newly participating intellectual and professional woman. At the centre of Riviere’s article is an analysis of an intellectual woman who moves between a "masculine" intellectual professional performance which includes public speaking and writing and a "hyper-feminine" display of flirtatious and coquettish behaviour adopted upon completion of her public performance. Under analysis it is revealed that Riviere’s subject has "quite conscious feelings of rivalry and superiority" toward many of her male colleagues and that her coquettish behaviour toward them "was an unconscious attempt to ward off the anxiety which would ensue on account of the reprisals she anticipated … after her intellectual performance"(Riviere, 1986: 137). The subject’s masquerade of the "guiltless and innocent" unknowing woman, represented by her display of hyper-femininity, is a strategy that diminishes the success of her intellectual performance. According to both analysand and analyst, this behaviour is inappropriate, reflecting the ambivalent cultural position of the intellectual woman in this period: she is damned for performing as a man and damned for performing as a woman to hide her performance as a man.

Riviere concludes, however, that "womanliness ... could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she were found to possess it" (1986: 36). Up to this point Riviere’s paper is straightforward, but in a move that posits the radical nature of her anti-essentialist position, she declares that there is no difference between “womanliness”, which, by nature of her "lack" is only a dissimulation of masculinity, and the masquerade, a dissimulation of dissimulated masculinity.10 Thus, the reassurance that the masquerade is just that quickly spills over into the disturbing awareness that there is only ever the mask – a disturbance which constitutes the alienation (and rebellion) of Woman’s being. Further investigating the analysand’s performance of the gender masquerade, Riviere uncovers a series of daydreams and fantasies which are marked by both race and class. The fantasies, originating from the analysand’s childhood in the American South, revolve around a fear of attack from a Negro man. These are dealt with by the analysand offering herself
sexually to him, to delay and hopefully thwart the imagined attack. In a variation of this scenario the subject under analysis reports that she assumes the menial role of washing clothes so as to disguise both her power and privilege.

It becomes clear, then, that Rivière's analytical development of the 'masquerade' has its origin in racialised fantasies of violence and sexualised fantasies of race; scenarios that display the subject's cross-class and cross-race identifications as well as the transgressive sexual desires, which may serve, according to Ann Pellegrini, to "undercut the powerlessness the white woman experiences vis a vis the law of the father" (138). In Rivière's narrative the threat of what lies behind the mask is the 'darkness' and 'danger' that the subject herself imagines: a sexual and racial taboo which has been culturally transferred and which threatens to unleash the retributive paternal fear of miscegenation. And yet clearly the masking strategy is a performance that stages a rebellion as well as an attempt at mastery and control. Pellegrini argues:

Putting herself in the place of a lower-class woman, black or white, or a black man, the white woman can look back at and down on her other(ed) self. Because Rivière nowhere explicitly addresses the social conditions or historical context in which the woman’s psychical defences against anxiety are negotiated, she leaves out of consideration an explicit engagement with questions of power, resistance, and complicity. (138)

It is precisely these ("left-out") questions of power, resistance and complicity, which I want to explore in my reading of "The Debutante". Firstly however, I want to explore why I think Rivière's essay provides a useful frame for examining Leonora Carrington's own early relationship to Surrealism.

In focusing on a very specific type of woman – the intellectual woman newly competing within the male-defined institution or discipline – Rivière’s piece is poignantly self-reflective. In a letter of introduction to Freud, Ernest Jones, Rivière’s analyst for many years, describes Rivière as “a case of typical hysteria” who has “a strong masculine identification” (Heath, 19: 46). He also notes, however, that she is extremely useful to the cause (of psychoanalysis) primarily because of her fluency in German and English; Rivière would eventually become an important mediator between Freud and the English-speaking world as well as between Freud and Jones. The tension between the subject under analysis in Rivière’s piece and her own position within the coterie world of psychoanalysis

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reveals the more general problem of the relationship between modernist women intellectuals and artists and the disciplinary fields in which they worked. Of this relationship Heath asks:

What did it mean to be an intellectual and a woman, an intellectual woman? The question for Riviere’s patient in the paper can hardly but have been a question for her too (as it was widely in the writing of the period, the question of identity as a woman...). (1986: 46-47)

The question of identity as a woman became increasingly important in the years between the wars, and came to be exemplified by Freud’s notorious question: “What does a woman want?”, a statement which has guided the direction and nature of contemporary feminist analysis on subjectivity and desire. Echoing Freud’s own consternation, Breton declared during this period that women constitute the most “marvellous and disturbing problem in all the world”.11 Breton rejected the model of the professional New Woman as too entrenched within the modernist bourgeois literary establishment. Instead, Surrealism relied on the rhetorical paradox of the idealised and transgressive woman as the emblem of its poetical practice, revealing both the Romantic and Symbolist influences on literary Surrealism. Reading Riviere’s analysis of her subject as a mask for her own relationship to psychoanalysis suggests the encoded ways in which women modernists might illustrate the complexity of their disciplinary affiliation. The question of Riviere’s position within this piece and within a male dominated psychoanalytic coterie is masked by her analysis of the “other” woman, the intellectual woman who is both the subject and object of her analysis. As an object of analytical exchange herself, between Jones and Freud, as well as a significant contributor to the field of psychoanalysis, translating into English many of Freud’s most significant essays, Riviere’s life and work reveals the resistant and often complicit nature of modernist women’s intellectual and artistic production at the same time that her psychoanalytic analysis of the violence of gendered masking strategies attempts to describe its etiology. If Riviere’s article describes the symptoms of this experience, Leonora Carrington’s “The Debutante” explores the political, cultural and aesthetic structures inimical to it, through the performance of a violent masking ritual and the representation of the cross-class commodification of the female body.
Carrington’s Surreal Debut

The surreal narrative of “The Debutante” commences with an early morning visit to the zoo by the protagonist of the story, the debutante. A place she visits frequently, preferring, as she informs us, the company of the animals at the zoo to friendship with girls her own age, the debutante manages to persuade her friend the hyena to attend her coming out ball in her place. Smuggling the animal back to her room, the debutante assists in preparing an elaborate disguise for the hyena, becoming a willing accomplice in the murder of her maid, Mary. Neatly chewing around the edges of the maid’s face, the hyena constructs her mask from human skin before consuming the rest of her body, save for one or two bones she stuffs in a fleur-de-lis bag that she takes with her to the party, in case she gets hungry. Thus costumed in all the accoutrements of debutante wear – ball gown, high heels and gloves – the hyena sets out for the ball wearing the face of the reluctant debutante’s maid. Meanwhile, the reluctant debuteante, “tired by the day’s emotions” sits down to read Gulliver’s Travels. The ruse is unsuccessful, however, because the hyena’s overwhelming smell, alluded to throughout the story, attracts the attention of the other guests. The tale ends abruptly when the debutante’s mother enters her daughter’s bedroom, “pale with rage”, and exclaims:

We’d just sat down at table ... when that thing sitting in your place got up and shouted, “So I smell a bit strong, what? Well I don’t eat cakes!” Whereupon it tore off its face and ate it. And with one great bound disappeared through the window. (48)

Shifting in tone between artlessness and canniness, the narrator of the tale recalls Lewis Carroll’s Alice narrator, whose own desire for transformation is registered by her favourite parlour game “Let’s Pretend...”, which incites her remark: “Nurse! Do let’s pretend that I’m a hungry hyena and you’re a bone”(18). The “black humour” in Carrington’s narrative is thus established through the literal rendering of Alice’s cannibal fantasy and through the dissonant effect of simple declarative sentences narrating a tale of grotesque and absurd violence. When the hyena first mentions her plan of tearing off the maid’s face, the reluctant debutante replies with curious but faultless logic: “It’s not practical, ... She’ll probably die if she hasn’t got a face. Somebody will certainly find the corpse, and we’ll be put in prison”(47). The narrator’s response is reminiscent of Alice’s own practical but absurd powers of reasoning in both Through the Looking Glass and Alice’s Adventures in
Wonderland. The stark writing practice of the narrative and the intrusion of the banal and the everyday into the fantastic recalls the tension in Carroll’s narrative between Alice as innocent unknowing girl and Alice as intrepid explorer; a tension that is also illustrative of the contradictory performance of caricatured femininity and intellectual competence for the intellectual woman in Riviere’s essay. Alice’s double persona (as artless and canny) is developed in Carrington’s text through the double figure of the reluctant debutante, who withdraws from social action, and the hybrid hyena-maid, whose attendance at the ball constitutes a disruptive presence.

Drawn to the rebellious quality of Lewis Carroll’s writing, with its satire on Victorian mores and literature as well as its use of the fantastic, many of the Surrealists payed homage to Carroll by referencing or illustrating his work. Breton included him in both The Anthology of Black Humour and The Dictionary of Surrealism, while Ernst and Salvador Dali completed illustrations of the Alice series. Dali’s illustrations for Alice in Wonderland draw on the figure of the femme-enfant through their overt display of the eroticism of Alice’s child-woman status. The illustrations repeat in emblematic form a blank ink silhouette of Alice’s “womanly” body about to jump through a skipping rope. The prominence of warm hues throughout the illustrations – hot pink, orange, red and yellow seeping into each other, often from black outline or concentrations of black ink – emphasise the libidinal and oneiric quality of Alice’s adventures. Sarah Wilson has noted that Max Ernst’s life-long fascination with Carroll intensified during his time with Carrington in the South of France. His paintings Alice in 1939 and Alice in 1941 belong to a series of decalcomania portraits of Carrington which extensively explored the theme of “the lost beloved” as the ruin of the world (Wilson, 1991: 368). Like Dali, Ernst appeals to the incestuous and erotic nature of the femme-enfant as an exemplary model for his recreation of Alice and in doing so reminds us of his closing illustration for Carrington’s debut publication, The House of Fear. In this image a horse’s head, proud and aloof, is contrasted with the adolescent body of a girl (an Alice figure), in modest Edwardian dress, thrown upside down on a rock, her hand clutching her head in a pose that records the consternation of her abandonment and ruin. Wilson ironically comments on how this image prophetically encapsulates the effect on Carrington of Ernst’s imprisonment as an enemy alien, producing in the process powerful “elisions between pictorial inversion, sexual abandonment and the abandonment of reason” (368).

Like Dali and Ernst, Carrington explores the ambiguous status of the child-woman figure. But rather than present her as an icon of erotic transformation, Carrington dwells on the
logical contradiction of her status as both child and woman. The space of transition, or, the contradiction of being two things at once, is explored throughout Carrington's fiction through such hybrid figures as the child-woman (the debutante) and the feral woman. These figures problematise the dichotomous relationships of adulthood and childhood, as well as of nature and culture, the civilised and the uncivilised, in much the same way that Carroll's work destabilises the ubiquitous binary position of logic and nonsense. As Camille Paglia points out:

In Carroll, manners and social laws are disconnected from humane or “civilising” values. They have a mathematical beauty but no moral meaning; they are absurd. But this absurdity is predicated not on a democratic notion of their relativism but on their arbitrary, divine incomprehensibility. In the Alice books, manners are meaningless but still retain their hierarchical force. (553)

Like Carroll, Carrington comically exposes the arbitrariness of masking and unmasking rituals within social hierarchies. Carrington's satire on the English upper-class debutante ritual in her short story resembles Carroll's own lampooning of Victorian manners and rituals, such as his satirical exploration of the "madness" of the tea party ceremony. In Carrington's story the cultural and class-bound nature of the debutante ritual – its very "Englishness" – becomes the focus for a satirical reflection on the absurd and violent codes vested in rituals of the proper and the authentic. Her story unfolds the way in which questions of class and gender are central to the organisation and maintenance of social rituals and the public display of manners.

The reluctant debutante of the story mirrors Carrington's resistance to her own experience as a debutante in 1935. Mary, the maid in the narrative matches Carrington's own working-class Irish nanny, Mary Kavanaugh. The debutante's reluctance in the narrative reflects Carrington's own repeated failure to adopt a conventional mask of appropriate upper class feminine behaviour and her increasing rebelliousness within the family home. In an interview with Paul de Angelis, Carrington bluntly sums up the events of her debutante season:

... I was presented at court ... That was the last court of George V. I was on the marriage market ... I went through the season in London, the Royal garden party, ... Then you go to Ascot, the races, and you’re in the Royal enclosure. And if you please, in those days, if you were a woman, you were not allowed to bet. You weren’t even
allowed to the paddock where they show the horses. So I took a book. I mean, what would you do? It was Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza*, which I read all the way through. (1991: 34)

Like the fictional heroine in "The Debutante", this autobiographical account places her resistance to the codes and practices of heterosocial behaviour within the conventional trope of the woman reader as a figure whose seduction by the romance plot is seen to circumvent her moral and social responsibilities. In shifting the scene of rebellion from the contemporary and popular *Eyeless in Gaza*, a romance that warns of the fate of an uppity intellectual woman, to Swift's canonical but iconoclastic *Gulliver's Travels*, Carrington strategically connects her narrative with a tradition of satire and its practice of humorous social critique, rather than the more "feminine" tradition of frustrated romance, represented by *Eyeless in Gaza*. However, the trope of the woman reader, historically theorised as both complicit and resistant, underscores the way in which the narrative action of the story is structured around themes of complicity and resistance or rather rebellious social withdrawal (the reluctant reading debutante) and disruptive social participation (the masked hyena). The ambivalence of this strategy serves to highlight the ambivalent position of the woman artist within the Surrealist movement and the construction and representation of women within the male Surrealist aesthetic and erotic imagination. It also reminds us of the affective ambivalence registered by the intellectual performance of Riviere's subject, whereby adopting the mask of femininity constitutes a strategy that is at once complicit and transgressive.

Carrington's referencing of Swift and her claims to a literary tradition of satire is reinforced by Breton's selection of "The Debutante" for his important Surrealist collection, *The Anthology of Black Humour*, published in 1940 but not distributed until after the war because of its banning by the Vichy Government. Breton's *Anthology* opens with Swift's absurd narrative "Directions to Servants" and all but concludes with Carrington's "The Debutante". Before each selection in the *Anthology*, Breton formally "introduces" his authors, providing an informal account of their importance within the definitive Surrealist category of "black humour". In these introductory pieces Carrington and Swift are linked via a literary performance of masking. While Swift, "the true initiator" (Breton, 3) of black humour, is said to carry an impassive glacial mask despite being a man who was constantly outraged, Carrington is described as wearing "the mask that can save her from the hostility of conformism" (335). Breton's description of Carrington's literary style as a kind of masquerading performance immediately suggests the hyena's own violent
masking in her narrative as well as Carrington’s reputation for unconventional and often disruptive social behaviour. Breton, in fact, recounts two such episodes in his introduction. The first one involves her presence at an important dinner in a public restaurant during which she lathered her feet with the mustard provided on the table. When questioned about her odd behaviour, Carrington merely replied that her feet were sore (Breton, 335). The second story Breton tells involves his attendance at a dinner at which Carrington served her guests dishes from a sixteenth century English cookbook, improvising certain ingredients that were unavailable to her. To this episode Breton comments rather wryly: “I will admit that a hare stuffed with oysters, to which she obliged me to do honour for the benefit of all those who had preferred to content themselves with its aroma, induced me to space out those feasts a bit” (335). On another occasion Carrington’s surreal recipes included sago died with squid ink which she disguised as a plate of caviar. Her penchant for eccentric and “surreal” social performances greatly enhanced her reputation within the group since it reinforced the importance of the marvellous within the experience of the everyday. Moreover, Breton’s “introduction” plays up the transgressive nature of this performative role, reminding us of his description of Jacqueline Lamba as “scandalously beautiful” at the beginning of Mad Love. In his introduction Breton defines Carrington’s artistic authority using the trope of the “beautiful divine witch”, who initiates and performs spectacular rituals for the consumption of the male Surrealist imagination, facilitating the poetic function of woman as transgressive other:

Michelet, who so beautifully did justice to the Witch, highlights among her gifts two that are invaluable, because granted only to women: “the illuminism of lucid madness” and “the sublime power of solitary conception”... Who today could answer the description better than Leonora Carrington? (Breton, 1941/1977:335)

But here Breton also pays tribute to Carrington’s creative powers by granting her “the sublime power of solitary conception”. In many ways “The Debutante” reminds us that Carrington had already adopted the role of the rebellious and defiant femme-enfant long before she met the Surrealists. The narrative also signals her position as other in ways apart from her muse-like status. Not only was she English rather than French (thus having a different literary heritage) she was also from the upper class while many of the Surrealists were from the middle class. Although Carrington’s rebellion in many ways constituted a personal rejection her upper class family with its gender bias and aristocratic pretensions, she also deployed a Surrealist anti-bourgeois rhetoric. Having been brought
up as a Catholic, Carrington shared their blasphemous humour and their rejection of the institutional triumvirate of family, state and church. But given the fact that Carrington was only around twenty years of age when she wrote "The Debutante", her social and political ideas were perhaps still inchoate. Like so many of the women that came to Surrealism in the 1930's, she was a generation (25 years) younger than her male peers such as Breton and Ernst and valued precisely because she represented a new lease of life for the movement. Breton's description of Carrington as "superb in her refusals, with a boundless human authenticity" (Polizzotti, 1997: 448) illustrates the role ascribed to many of the young women that came to be associated with the movement throughout the 1930's. In representing a kind of "authentic" Surrealist spirit, Breton, and critics that have followed, read Carrington's work as spontaneously imbibing a Surrealist sensibility. But despite Breton's recuperation of Carrington's artistic performance within the traditional Surrealist trope of the beautiful, crazy muse, he acknowledges the resistant and ironic capacity of her masking strategy (both within and outside the text) when he concludes: "Over these and many other exploits... reigns a smooth mocking gaze" (335).

In his introduction to the Anthology Breton presents humour itself as a masking strategy. Quoting Freud, Breton reminds us of the liberating quality of humour as a literary mode:

It is now time to acquaint ourselves with some of the characteristics of humour. Like wit and the comic, humour has in it a liberating element... Obviously what is fine about it is the triumph of narcissism, the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability... It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure. (Freud, cited in Breton, 1977: xviii)

For Freud, and for Breton too, humour is in essence a kind of masquerading whereby that which would normally constitute vulnerability or weakness becomes a source of pleasure and hence power. The use of black humour in both Swift and Carrington is akin to the way in which satire twists its subject into something other: masking and therefore transforming "the real". This closely coincides with Breton's description of Carrington's literary style as a kind of masquerading performance (where she can "don and remove the mask that can save [her] from the hostility of conformism"). Like Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation of humour, Carrington's narrative reveals both resistant and complicit strategies of displacement.
In his Preface to Carrington’s debut publication, “The House of Fear”, subtitled “Loplop Presents the Bride of the Wind”, Ernst introduces Carrington to a Surrealist reading public, staging the dynamics of power reminiscent of the chaperoned debutante’s presentation to the world of upper class society. Casting both himself and Carrington in their mythological roles, Ernst adopts a tone that is whimsical, though churlish:

Who is the Bride of the Wind? Can she read? Can she write French without mistakes? What wood does she burn to keep warm? She warms herself with her intense life, her mystery, her poetry. She has read nothing, but drunk everything. She can’t read. And yet the nightingale saw her, sitting on the stone of spring, reading. (Preface, “The House of Fear”, 1938/1988: 26)

While Breton acknowledges the “sublime power” of Carrington’s “solitary conception” in his introduction to “The Debutante”, Ernst presents her as conducteur merveilleusement magnétique, a term used to describe the role of the femme enfant to the male Surrealist imagination.17 Drawing attention to Carrington’s adoption of French in these stories, Ernst instructs her readers that the quality of the stories rests on their “inspired” and “intoxicated” sensibility rather than their literary skills. Here the Bride of the Wind, who cannot read or write French without mistakes, produces her fiction through a kind of immaculate conception, with Loplop, the Bird Superior, as her chaperone and guide. The preface thus establishes a hierarchical and eroticised relationship between Carrington and Ernst; which suggests a series of antithetical positions between experience/inexperience, artist/muse, professional/amateur, and teacher/pupil.

Carrington’s adoption of French, a language in which she was far from fluent despite having been taught at home by a French governess, indicates a certain pragmatic move, given her association with the Surrealists. As Marina Warner argues, however, her adoption of a language she had only begun to master adds a certain profundity and uniqueness to the tone of her stories:

Carrington tells a tale in a unique tone of voice, that deadpan innocence of the masters of the macabre. The simplicity of her syntax, and the cool sequential structure of her narratives… owes something to her adoption of French…. But unfamiliarity [with French] does not cramp her style; rather it sharpens the flavour of ingenious knowingness which enchanted the Surrealists. (Introduction to The Seventh Horse and Other Tales, n.p.)
Warner's astute observations of Carrington's literary style contrast with Ernst's more ambivalent praise in his preface. While Ernst reflects on Carrington's spelling mistakes and shrouds her work in a collection of unintelligible and abstract statements, Warner celebrates the understated genius of Carrington's turn of phrase.

"The Debutante's" publication history reveals its importance not only within the context of Breton's trans-historical construction of the Surrealist category of "black humour" but also within a contemporary feminist revival of modernist women's writing. 38 "The Debutante's" inclusion in a number of feminist anthologies (by Angela Carter, Marina Warner and others) 39 from the 1980's and 1990's highlights what Alice Gambrell has outlined as an ongoing interest for contemporary feminist work in the process of "back-talk". Gambrell reads Carrington's work within the context of a cultural history of academic feminism, finding in the work of a number of interwar women writers and artists - such as Carrington, H.D., Frida Kahlo and Zora Neale Hurston - an engagement with the issues of alterity and difference in a way that pre-empts contemporary feminist critical practice. Eliding the complicated relationship between past and present and the problem of disciplinary affiliation more generally, Gambrell explores what it meant, during the 1930's and 1940's, for women to work within the boundaries of schools, movements, or disciplines in which, under more usual circumstances, they would have occupied the position of "Other": the object of investigation, the eroticised source of inspiration, the respondent in - though rarely the initiator of - an interlocutionary exchange. (1998: 1)

Calling this kind of engagement "insider-outsider activity", after de Lauretis's work in the problematising of identity and practise, theory and experience, Gambrell argues that it forms part of the complex history of modernist women's intellectual modes of interrogation and can hardly be, as it often is, conceived as a newly emergent postmodern concern. She argues that one of the reasons for the "rediscovery" of women such as Carrington, Kahlo, Hurston and H.D. (and here we might add Joan Riviere) in the 1980's and early 1990's is that at about this time feminists began to reconceptualise their own work - literary and cultural - as a complex dynamic of complicity and resistance. Increasingly during this period, issues of race, class and sexuality became intrinsic to a rethinking of the relationship between theory and praxis, in part because they highlighted
the material experience of positionality. As with the interwar work that Gambrell examines, “experience” became an important heuristic for a feminist politics.

Both Riviere and Carrington, working within and against canonical disciplines, use the trope of the mask as a strategy for negotiating and illustrating the embedded dynamic of complicity and resistance. In “The Debutante” this is effected through a doubling and absenting of the self. Through the narrative events of social withdrawal and disruptive participation, “The Debutante” sets in play a rhetorical turn of ambivalence, which references the wider cultural position of Woman as allegory, as the object and condition of representation (as crazy muse, femme-enfant etc...) and the historically specific female subject negotiating the conditions of her inscribed image. In the narrative, skin becomes the fetishised site for the enabling strategies of masking and passing, evoking the surface materiality of all forms of feminised display as well as the threshold between an inside marked “natural” and an outside marked “cultural”. The turn of ambivalence that the narrative events play out is symbolically echoed by the hybrid debutante-maid. Unlike more canonical Surrealist visual and literary production, the hybrid body in this story unfolds a complex narrative of race, class and eugenics within the construction and representation of gender, sexuality and desire. In doing so the story explores issues of power, resistance and complicity with regard to Carrington’s own class background and the narratives of gender and sexuality that operated within surrealist ideology and aesthetic production. The strategies of masking and passing (here and also significantly in the work of Claude Cahun and Frida Kahlo) become culturally gendered and racialised responses to the disabling position of women and lower social classes. Through the hyena’s performance of passing, the narrative conflates the animal and human body, as well as the social roles of working-class maid and upper-class debutante. Thus the hybrid figure unfolds a series of combinations – hyena-maid, maid-debutante and animal-human – that work against a unified or stable interpretation of this figure. Here hybridity represents the very anxiety of classification, what Homi K Bhabha calls “that ambivalent turn of the discriminated subject into the terrifying exorbitant object of paranoid classification – a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority”(1994:113). Thus the conflation of the animal and human body in the narrative registers a modernist collapse of the reasoned knowing subject while also exploring new kinds of subject positions and ways to represent a more dynamic and complex epistemology of the self. Here Carrington’s work acknowledges the importance of destabilising canonical Surrealist constructions of female “otherness” using a masculinist tradition of satiric critique, a tradition associated with Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll,
both of whom are obliquely connected to Carrington in Breton’s *Anthology of Black Humour*.

As an “object of paranoid classification” the hybrid hyena-debutante in this text (and the many other hybrid identities in Carrington’s paintings and stories from this period) evokes the subject’s marginalisation, alienation and position as grotesque outsider. Echoing Gulliver’s sense of alienation and displacement in Swift’s novel, the protagonist in the “The Debutante” begins her narration with a confession of misanthropic withdrawal:

When I was a debutante, I often went to the zoo. I went so often that I knew the animals better than girls of my own age. Indeed it was in order to get away from people that I found myself at the zoo everyday. The animal I got to know best was a young hyena. She knew me too. She was very intelligent. I taught her French and she taught me her language. In this way we passed many pleasant hours. (44)

The debutante’s rejection of social interaction at the beginning of the narrative heralds her ultimate refusal to participate in the formal rite of passage from childhood to marriage market, in much the same way that Gulliver escapes the responsibilities and demands of a wife and children, and Alice resists the formal lessons of instruction by her elder sister. The intellectual exchange between the hyena and the debutante further reminds us of Alice’s communicative attempts with the black kitten in *Through the Looking Glass* and Gulliver’s encounters with unfamiliar “beings”. In all three texts anti-social behaviour leads to an extraordinary journey or event, one that interrogates the given nature of institutional practices and the arbitrary effects of power relationships. Carrington’s relationship to both Swift and Carroll is thus carefully orchestrated within Breton’s *Anthology*.

The hybrid body of the masked hyena also disrupts the logic of serial reproduction, exemplified by the figure of the conventional debutante, who, as an object of exchange between men becomes a serialised body on display; the debutante’s ball itself signifies a parade of women lined up before the watchful eyes of potential suitors and husbands. The spectacle of the debutante’s body, paraded in an expensive and elaborate gown, contrasts to the image of the faceless wage labour servant who haunts the narrative’s action. The removal of the maid’s face macabrely registers the impersonal treatment of the working class domestic at the same time that it underscores their indispensable role in
masking the unseemly behaviour of the upper classes. Furthermore, the narrative mobilises the trope of hybridity to satirically depict the debutante's increasingly devalued and comic status among the upper and middle classes. The debutante's traditionally symbolic status as "pure" and "noble", colour-coded through the fetishization of her "whiteness" and her "blue blood" [2], had begun to erode by the early decades of this century. Increasingly debutante culture took on the terms and references of commodity culture, signalled by its association with the term "the marriage market" in literature of the period. In her history and analysis of debutante culture, Margaret Pringle has shown how money and not blood became the currency of exchange as this traditionally aristocratic ritual was opened up to more entrepreneurial families. At the same moment that the blood of the aristocracy became "diluted" the debutante ritual was increasingly compared to the "primitive" mating rituals of non-western countries. In her examination of this story and its strategic use of the debutante, Alice Gambrell argues that

... with increasing popular awareness of developments within the discipline of anthropology, a series of smugly self-mocking "debutante jokes" – which compared debutante rituals to puberty rites among non-Western peoples – started to emerge from the upper classes. Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence (1920), for example, is filled with jokes of this kind. While these jokes successfully mocked the pretensions of those who presumed that their activities stood for the height of "civilization", they also required a generic (and utterly problematic) hypothesis of a "primitive" cultural "other" to serve as the ultimate butt of the joke. Thus, while Carrington's short story bears some resemblance to this kind of humour, her tone is quite different: she undermines its smugness by foregrounding violence in an extremely disruptive way. (1998: 208)

If the hyena-maid represents the partially successful infiltration of the middle-class other into an aristocratic debutante coterie, as well as its violent expulsion, then the violence in Carrington’s story strongly evokes the violence of paternal anxiety over miscegenation.

In foregrounding violence in the debutante’s masking performance, Carrington’s narrative dramatises the violent cultural shaping of the female body, suggesting that notions of the “primitive” and the “civilised” are themselves caught up in a racial and gendered class narrative of privilege and power. While the narrative dramatises the cross-class commodification of women’s bodies it also self-consciously exposes the violent human cost of maintaining upper class ritual at the expense of lower social classes. The hyena’s
attendance at the ball, its very domestication, provokes a blood-lust that metaphorises the latent violence invested in an aristocratic maintenance of bloodlines. The figure of the violated maid and the latent “blood-lust” of the masked hyena, who kills in order to attend the ball, powerfully evokes the Surrealist fascination with female criminality, in particular the two notorious criminal cases involving young women in Paris in 1933 – those of Violette Nozière and Christine and Léa Papin. Violette Nozière was eighteen years old when she was accused of poisoning her parents, supposedly because they had refused to allow her to attend a party. The Papin Sisters, previously dutiful household domestics, had violently murdered their employer and her daughter. The themes of violence, femininity, and class evoked in Carrington’s narrative, are central to the controversy that erupted over these criminal cases in popular and intellectual circles, both at the time of the events and for years to come. The sensationalist Parisian press presented these women as “monsters” and “cannibals”, unleashing a wave of “anti-woman hysteria” (Rosemont, 1998: 42) throughout France, despite evidence that the Papin sisters had been subjected to an oppressive code of silence by their employer and Nozière’s initial claim that she had been repeatedly raped by her father, a prosperous and respected middle class father and husband.

In her autobiography Simone de Beauvoir records that the trials of all three women coincided over a three month period toward the end of 1933, and which precipitated a legal correspondent to call for the harshest penalties to be given to “all cases of youthful delinquency” (109). According to Penelope Rosemont, the misogyny and hysteria surrounding these cases was evident not only in the popular press but in writers such as Janet Flanner, the Paris correspondent for The New Yorker. In her article on Nozière, Flanner writes:

Violette killed her father like a cannibal, because she wanted to eat and drink up the savings that were his French life and blood… Violette was, one fears not the last of the faked-silver-foxed, hard-toothed, modern young monsters of mediocre looks and without any sense of the business of life … (1936/1972:158-59)

The language and tone of Flanner’s piece reflects a modernist cultural anxiety over the corrupting influence of consumer culture on young women, as well as an anxiety over women’s increasing independence and assertiveness. Violette’s greatest crime, according to Flanner, is her wasteful consumption of the nationalist and paternal symbols of French bourgeois culture, her father’s hard earned savings, which for Flanner is the unquestioned
- here at least - "business of life." Flanner's representation of Violette as a "faked-silver foxed, hard-toothed, modern young monster" recalls the trope of the modern woman as a voracious consumer, eating away at the traditional moral values of bourgeois culture. In leaving out of consideration any mention of the violent incestuous relationship that Violette claimed had occurred with her father, Flanner's polemical piece reflects the way in which the Nozière case split the whole of France. According to Roudinesco

In the press and in public opinion, there were two adversary camps. One, which was the patriotic and conservative majority, was convinced of Baptiste's [the father] probity, and saw him as the victim of a perverse creature. The other, the minority, recommended a certain prudence. In the fall of 1933, all of France was obsessed with the Nozière affair. (1990: 18)

The Surrealists were on the side of Nozière, championing her as a heroine whose crime could be read as a backlash against an increasingly corrupt social order, in particular the hypocrisy of the bourgeois family, an institution that harboured incest and perversion. A special pamphlet, Violette Nozières came out in December 1933, with poems and drawings illustrating the case, by many prominent Surrealists, including Breton, Péret, and Crével. Magritte also provided an illustration - L'imromptu de Versailles (1933) - which depicted a disturbing narrative of the events of the case. In this image the incestuous relationship between Violette and her father is made graphic with a young Violette sitting on the lap of her father, his hand disappearing under her dress. Looking on this scene of incestuous desire is a man with a white beard and a bowler hat, who bears a striking likeness to Freud. The facial expressions of rapture on both father and daughter seem to gloss any sense of trauma experienced by Nozière.

In 1933, the same year as the Nozière and Papin scandals, Jacques Lacan published "Motives of Paranoid Crime", a psychoanalytic case study of the Papin Sisters, in the Surrealist journal, Minotaure. During this period, Lacan had begun to associate with the Surrealists, becoming particularly interested in Dalí's essay on the "paranoid-critical" method. In the midst of his doctoral thesis on paranoia, Lacan was drawn to the sensational nature of the crime and its lack of any obvious motive and took the opportunity to test his own theories. Providing graphic detail of the events of the crime, Lacan's essay bears the stamp of a Surrealist fascination with violence:
The sisters each grab an adversary, and tear out her eyes from the socket while she is still alive... Then using whatever comes to hand – a hammer, a pewter jug, a knife – they fling themselves on the bodies of their victims, smashing in their faces, exposing their genitals, lacerating their thighs and buttocks, and daubing them with each other's blood. They then wash up the instruments they used for their atrocious rites, clean themselves up and go to sleep in the same bed. (cited in Jay, 338)

Lacan's description is indebted to a Surrealist obsession with enucleation as a symbol for the crisis of modernist visibility and the fragile nature of the self's boundaries. And although his reading of the crime differs from that of the Surrealists, as it did from contemporary orthodox psychiatry and general public opinion, he nevertheless shares with them an interest in the graphic spectacle of female criminality. But rather than claim that the sisters were reprehensible monsters guilty of a heinous crime or victims of bourgeois hypocrisy out for class revenge, Lacan argues that they were suffering from paranoia and thus "questioned the fundamental responsibility of the Papin sisters for the murders" (Lane, 1993: 34). Noting that the sisters exhibit an emotional attachment akin to the bonds of identical twins, Lacan draws on Freud's explanation of paranoia, in the Schreber case, as an unsuccessful defence against repressed homosexual desire, one that unfolds a manifest connection between external judgement and internal persecution. For Lacan, the sisters exhibit perfect symptoms of paranoid psychosis born of repressed homosexual desire; that is, their disavowed desire for each other gives rise to a persecution complex which in turn produces a confusion of boundaries between male and female, self and other. This is born out by Christine's confession in prison that "Sometimes I think in former lives I was my sister's husband" (Flanner: 102). Lacan contends that in murdering their employers the sisters were performing an act of self-persecution, seeing in their employers' a specular double of themselves. Evidence of this is suggested by Christine's attempt, when separated from her sister, to rip out her own eyes and subject herself to acts of violence and erotic display that bear a resemblance to her original crime. On closer scrutiny of the maid's lives it is revealed that comments about domestic duties were relayed through a series of notes left on trays. When asked whether her employers' were kind, Christine responded that she did not know since in the six years of their service they had never spoken to her (Flanner: 100). Lacan thus speculates that the "accusatory" silence that existed between the sisters and their employers fuelled their persecution complex:
If one noticed that the employers seemed to have a curious lack of understanding, nothing would allow us to say that the haughty indifference of the maids was other than a response to a prevailing attitude where one group “did not speak to the other” [the phrase belongs to Léa]. This silence, however, did not prove to be empty, even if it was hidden in the eyes of its protagonists. (Lacan cited in Lane: 35)

In closely reading the social and psychical details of the case, Lacan reveals that paranoia is not “a straightforward response to – or even a deliberate answer – to cultural pressure and alienation because psychosis seems to illustrate an asymmetrical relation between the social and the psychical” (Lane, 1993: 35). Although Lacan mentions the details of the sisters’ background, including their strange relationship with their employers, ultimately he provides a rhetorical reading that locates the meaning of the crime in the symbolic silence of the relations between the two groups; a silence which is thus transferred into widespread public and intellectual confusion over a motive for the crime.

In her account of the Papin affair, in her autobiography, Simone de Beauvoir seems to provide an exemplary exposition of this confusion. Although at first she claims full understanding of the events, she also seems drawn to its inexplicable nature. At the time of the Papin affair, she and Sartre were confined to Rouen. With few friends or family to distract them, Beauvoir reports that they became obsessed by the news of the day, in particular the Papin affair:

We were attracted by any sort of extreme, just as we were by psychoses or neuroses... Abnormality we found positively attractive. One of our inconsistencies was our refusal to accept the idea of the subconscious. Yet Gide, the Surrealists, and, despite our resistance, Freud himself had all convinced us that in every person their lurks what André Breton called un infracassable noyau de nuit, an indestructible kernel of darkness, something that cannot break up social conventions or the common currency of human speech, but does, now and then, burst out in a peculiarly scandalous fashion. (107)

Although Beauvoir’s account of the Papin affair registers the social and political significance of the crime in terms of class relations and the conservative nature of the judiciary, it also reveals a certain confusion over its motive or cause. While she sets out regarding the Papin sisters as victims of bourgeois brutality and hypocrisy (108), she
concludes by rethinking her original position in the face of a widely accepted diagnosis of the sisters’ paranoia: “We were therefore wrong in regarding their excesses as being due to the hand of rough justice” (109). What is interesting about Beauvoir’s account is that, despite her commitment to a political and feminist reading of the crime, she has also imbibed a Surrealist reading of female criminality as “marvellous”, as “an indestructible kernel of darkness”. Similarly, she is struck, like them, by the publication in the mainstream press, of a set of photographs of the sisters taken before and after the crimes:

How well-behaved Christine and Léa looked in the old photograph that some papers printed, with their ringlets and white collars! How had they been transformed into the haggard Furies that pictures taken after their arrest displayed for public obloquy? (108)

While Beauvoir’s reticence in initially interpreting the Papin crime indicates her general style of philosophical reflection, in the end she reads their experience through the seductive trajectory of the ruined woman, made palpable through a series of visible somatic signs. It was this discordant quality produced by the “Before” and “After” photographs (see fig. 3) that had inspired the Surrealists to reproduce these images in their journal, Le surréalisme au service de la révolution (no.5, 15 May, 1933). The visual frisson of these images exemplifies the Surrealist aesthetic principle of “convulsive beauty”, registering the problematic dichotomisation of feminine sexuality as either ethereal and transcendent or violently excessive and corporeal.

The various readings of these crimes – by Flanner, Lacan, Beauvoir and the Surrealists – unravel the complex nexus between femininity, class, trauma, rebellion and psychosis as they came to operate in these events. In particular, the Surrealists’ interest in female criminality and their use of these women as emblems of an aesthetic and social revolutionary cause seems to gloss over the very real sense of trauma and loss of meaning experienced by these women. For the Surrealists the rebellious female criminal, like the madwoman, exemplifies what Roudinesco calls “a new vision of femininity”:

“Baudelarian, nocturnal, dangerous and fragile” (20), a spectral figure, who, though dangerously tantalising is nevertheless made powerless by her working class status and her experience of a trauma she can never articulate or understand. Here the trope of the “ruined” woman surfaces in the Surrealist fantasy of feminine criminality and psychosis as a revolutionary aesthetic and social category, one which silences her to an enigmatic spectacle.
While "The Debutante" stages the themes of rebellion and criminality through the reluctant debutante's scene of unruly adolescence, it complicates a Surrealist utopian investment in female rebellion by foregrounding the importance of race and class in the construction and performance of female paranoia. The hyena's working class cockney diction: "So I smell a bit strong, what?", together with its refusal of the class-bound ritual of eating cake registers the animal's status in a way that collapses the working class body of the maid (the domestic) onto the undomesticated body of the hyena, exposing the female body's abject and liminal status. The hyena's smell and its hairiness ("her hands... were too hairy to look like mine") emerge as a trope for the grotesque leaking body, a body that has escaped the processes of socialisation and the successful mask of idealised and commodified femininity. It is the strong and noticeable smell of the hyena that brings about its own unmasking at the party. The mother's repeated plea that her daughter wash before the party, together with her traumatic outburst over the hyena's presence, suggests the repressed horror of the unclean woman and the violence of propriety itself.

The motif of the feral woman, one who lives on the edges of the civilised world, occurs frequently in Carrington's early fiction in which it collapses the boundaries between animal and human as well as nature and culture. In the short story "As They Rode Along the Edge" (1937-40), the Diana-like Virginia Fur enters the narrative shrouded in classificatory ambiguity: "... one could not be altogether sure that she was a human being. Her smell alone threw doubt on it - a mixture of spices and game, the stables, fur and grasses" (3). Like the reluctant debutante, Virginia Fur chooses the company of semi-wild animals rather than the pious social world of Saint Alexander and his church. In taking as her lover the beautiful wild boar, Ighame, Virginia brings about the jealous retribution of the Saint. Throughout the story these two characters are strongly opposed: unlike the wild but sympathetic terrain that Virginia roams, where "brambles [draw] back their thorns like cats retracting their claws", Saint Alexander cultivates an unforgiving garden of readymades; strangely surreal sado-masochistic devices invented for the purpose of atonement:

... chairs made of wire ("I sit on them when they're white hot and stay there till they cool off"), enormous smiling mouths with pointed poisonous teeth; underwear of reinforced concrete full of scorpions and adders; cushions made of millions of black mice biting each other - when the blessed buttocks were elsewhere. (1989:5)
Saint Alexander’s garden of “Little Flowers of Mortification” betrays an anal-erotic obsession rather than the desired devotional piety. Carrington’s satirical lampooning of Saint Alexander and his attempts to tame the flighty Virginia Fur, recalls her own flight from, and rebellion against, a Catholic convent upbringing. Unable to tame Virginia, Saint Alexander takes revenge by having Igname killed and served for dinner, an act that highlights a voracious paternal anxiety over miscegenation and female rebellion. Like the feral debutante, Virginia Fur navigates the threshold between the domesticated and the undomesticated where her hybrid status betrays both a cultural anxiety over the feminine as well as a utopian desire to transcend and alter the proscribed codes of female experience, including the violence of the institutional codes that inform it. Like the exquisite corpse, which is both incidental and intentional, the hybrid female body in Carrington’s fiction and painting has a quality of ambivalence that works to alter the authority of prevailing institutional codes and fixed subject positions.

The incorporation of the hyena figure into “The Debutante” and her 1937 “Self-Portrait” (see fig. 4), reflects the emblematic nature of Carrington’s work. A recurring animal in Carrington’s Surrealist bestiary, the hyena is symbolic of sexual transgression and hybridity. Once thought to be hermaphroditic, because the male and female genitals are almost identical – the female having both testicles and an enlarged clitoris – the hyena has endured a reputation for profanity and sexual deviancy, including homosexuality. The hyena has also been maligned within Christianity and folklore. In medieval mythology it was believed that sorcerers hunted with packs of hyenas and that witches road upon their backs. Renowned as a harbinger of death the hyena is often associated with the devil’s dark wisdom, primarily because of its human-like mocking laughter – a characteristic that pays homage to the very notion of “black humour”. Referencing the ambiguity of the hyena’s sexual and social status, the hybrid body of the hyena-maid disrupts the static and closed body of bourgeois individualism as well as the sealed and spectral body of commodity culture. Mary Russo argues that the grotesque body functions as a libidinal multiplicity through its refusal of the singular and its embrace of the multiple and the possible: “the grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change” (62-3). Russo’s analysis also unfolds a modernist and postmodernist articulation of the hybrid. Within contemporary theoretical parlance, hybridity has also taken on a postcolonial understanding of race and sexuality formed at the site of a 19th and 20th Century discourse on eugenics, signalled in Carrington’s narrative by debutante culture’s fetishisation of blood and genealogy within the historically analogous rise of fascism in Europe. Tracing the cultural anxiety of
miscenation within a postcolonial narrative of modernist cultural history, Bhabha writes:

Hybridity intervenes in the exercise of authority not merely to indicate the impossibility of its identity but to represent the unpredictability of its presence ... The display of hybridity – its peculiar 'replication' – terrorises authority with the ruse of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery(114-15). (emphasis mine)

In light of Bhabha's extensive theorisation of the hybrid, I would argue that Carrington's use of the hybrid form in this story is in part a response to the impossibility of the female subject's identity within the "authoritarian" codes and practices, not only of the bourgeois and upper-class family, but of Surrealist aesthetic ideology and practice. In canonical Surrealist cultural production, the grotesque female body is often deployed as a topos of mutability and instability, one which registers a misogynistic violence that is inherent to its anti-bourgeois political and aesthetic order. While Carrington may have concurred with the political and aesthetic import of much Surrealist imagery, her work critically engages with the repeated dichotomisation of female embodiment as both pure and abject. Like Riviere's subject, who moves between caricatured femininity and intellectual authority as a reflection of the compromised role of the newly born professional woman, Carrington's use of masking strategies and hybrid configurations together with the modes of irony and satire, betray the problematic nature of artistic authority for the Surrealist woman artist or writer as well as a desire to disrupt and mock any such hierarchy of authority. Carrington's literary practice at this point in her career reflects an attempt both to replicate and reformulate the codes of Surrealist iconography. Thus the multiple ambiguities and possibilities of the hybrid enact both the "nowhere" of female identity, signalled by the reluctant debutante's social withdrawal into the utopic textual world of Gulliver's Travels as well as its "mimicry" and "mockery" of paternal and professional codes of authority, signalled by the masked hyena's sadistic and disruptive presence at the ball. Carrington's aesthetic and textual practice thus replicates as it interrogates the "authority" of Surrealist cultural production and professional and personal patronage. In its unmasking of the violence inherent in the commodified exchange of the female body, Carrington's story critiques the narratives of authenticity and purity produced by canonical Surrealism and the class bound institution of debutante culture.

As a text which marks Carrington's debut in the Surrealist movement, "The Debutante" maps out a resistance to the codes of proscribed femininity in the culture of the debutante.
ritual within the context of her participation in the Surrealist coterie. In staging the themes of violence and feminine propriety within her narrative, Carrington weds her narrative to the spectre of violence unleashed by a Surrealist celebration of female criminality and violence. The Surrealist’s promotion of and homage to Nozière and the Papin sisters suggests the way in which women’s “authentic” experiences were mined for political and aesthetic effect. In Lacan’s reading of the Papin sisters’ crime and Magritte’s smug depiction of incest in his portrait of Nozière, as in Breton’s and Ernst’s introductions to Carrington’s narrative, the full meaning of women’s experiences and writing is interpreted and mediated by the male Surrealist. Moreover, the publication of the “Before and After” photos of the Papin Sisters in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (no. 5, 15 May 1933) evokes the Surrealist representation of woman as both pure and abject, a trope used to establish the dialectical foundation of its aesthetic practice. Carrington would later exploit (ironically) the “Before and After” effect for her own political and aesthetic ends. In 1942 she published an account of her psychotic breakdown during the war, in the Surrealist journal, *VVV*. Her autobiographical narrative, *Down Below*, was accompanied with a photograph of the author “before” the events she describes, dressed as a debutante in the company of her mother (see fig. 5). The image presents, like the “Before” photograph of the Papin sisters, an image of feminine purity and conformity. Appearing at the conclusion of the essay, however, the image sets up what Alice Gambrell describes as an “interpretive dissonance”, contrasting “the essay’s many verbal images of degradation and vulnerability with a photographic representation of deliberately constructed purity and protectedness” (1998: 83-4). Gambrell further suggests that the photograph “casts a strangely erotic glow around the astonishingly unsexy essay that proceeds it, helping to blunt the effects of “Down Below” by transforming it, in certain respects, into a kinky story about a debauched aristocrat” (85-86). While I concur with Gambrell’s comments, the photograph’s appearance at the end of the narrative actually reverses the “Before” and “After” sequencing and thus comments ironically on the atypical trajectory of the “ruined woman”. Moreover, as I will argue in the next chapter, the narrative is explicitly framed as a “talking cure”, one that attempts to mimetically reproduce the psychotic episode as a critique of the aestheticised and silenced figure of madness in *Nadja*. While the images that accompany *Nadja* destabilise any mimetic reading of the text, providing quite separate narratives of their own, and positioned obliquely to them, the photograph in *Down Below* seems to reinsert mimesis as a critique of Breton’s distancing of the madwoman in his narrative. The photographic portrait of Carrington as a debutante insists on the realism of the narrative’s embodied subjectivity at the same time that the description (or recreation) of the psychotic subject problematises any notion of cohesion and stability. But as

5. Leonora Carrington and her mother during her presentation at court.
Gambrell herself points out, the narrative of *Down Below* is structured around Carrington’s exchange between a series of male figures. As such the photograph accompanying this narrative must also be read in the context of the satirical vein of “The Debutante”, since both serve to foreground the pervasive exchange and manipulation of women’s bodies and experiences.

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1 Roudinesco notes that during this new phase, Breton increasingly became preoccupied with “new technique[s] for arriving at a knowledge of reality” (1994: 31).
While much of this manifesto reads as a public outing of various former members, it comes as no surprise that in the decade to come Breton would seek to open the movement up to new members. Some of those celebrated by the Surrealists during the 1930’s included the fourteen year old writer, Gisèle Prassinos, the Czech painter Toyen, Meret Oppenheim, Leonora Carrington, Frida Kahlo and the Chinese-Cuban painter Wilfredo Lam. Alice Gambrell argues that during the late thirties and early forties, Breton “spent a great deal of time as entrepreneur and patron to a scattered group of younger artists … [and] began … quite consciously to seek out and promote work by writers and visual artists, who, for him, embodied and made literal those carefully constructed fictions of difference and alterity” (1997: 42).

Polizzotti notes Breton’s fondness for Carrington: “Breton, for his part, was very taken with the stunning Englishwoman, whom he later described as ‘superb in her refusals, with a boundless human authenticity’”(448).

Chadwick argues that Carrington’s portrait of her friend Joan Powell (painted before her encounter with Surrealism), holding a copy of Jean Cocteau’s Les Enfants Terribles, presents an image of woman as “worldly, independent and tough”. Chadwick suggests that Cocteau’s novel, published in 1930, became a symbol of alienated and rebellious youth and seems to signify for Carrington “an emblem of revolt both literary and bohemian” (67-8).

Polizzotti provides a striking portrait of Carrington during this period when he writes: “Fleeing both Carrington’s conventional upper-class family and the crazily jealous Marie-Berthe, the couple went to live in Ernst’s country house in the Saint-Martin-d’Ardèche, among the Côte-du-Rhône vineyards. Lively and uninhibited, equally talented as a writer and painter, the darkly beautiful Carrington brought to Surrealism a keen sense of black humour all her own”(448).

For details of Carrington’s life during this period see Whitney Chadwick(1985). For publication dates see introduction by Marina Warner in The House of Fear: Notes From Down Below.

It is highly probable that Carrington was familiar with both these cases. Although both crimes occurred in 1933, they instantly attracted notoriety, being widely discussed in the press and throughout France for years to come. As late as 1937 the Nozière affair resurfaced when Violette, after a religious conversion and reconciliation with her mother, retracted all accusations levelled against her father. Also Carrington may have discussed the case with Ernst since he had been part of the group of Surrealists who had celebrated Violette’s crime in the form of a published pamphlet. See Roudinesco, 19-21.

I use the term “canonical” here to refer to early Surrealist political and aesthetic constructions, particularly those formulated by Breton throughout the 1920’s. While Carrington’s work certainly became more canonical during the late 1930’s and early 1940’s, I think historically, it has suffered from lack of inclusion in retrospective guides to Surrealism. That is, until feminist scholars such as Whitney Chadwick and Susan Rubin Suleiman began their important work on the women Surrealists. Moreover, I think that much of Carrington’s work forms a dialogical relationship with Breton’s brand of Surrealism. This dialogical relationship is perhaps also reflected in Benjamin’s and Bataille’s representation of their own avowedly “Surrealist” projects as antithetical to a Bretonian idealism.

There is no evidence that Carrington, or any of the Surrealists ever read Riviere’s essay. Its inclusion here is appositional since both texts, written almost a decade apart, explore the importance of masking strategies to modernist women’s identity. Indeed the significance of Riviere’s essay was not fully recognised until feminist theory began to explore issues of female spectatorship and gender performance. See Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator”(1991) and Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (1990).
10 Judith Butler adopts a similar strategy to Riviere when she writes: “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original”. For Butler’s own referencing of Riviere in her account of the masquerade and the theory of gender performativity see Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Chapters Two and Six.

11 Despite Freud’s attempts to deal with the question of feminine identity in his own work, he failed to respond to Riviere’s important paper on femininity and the masquerade, as did Jones. The silence of her male colleagues upon the publication of this essay may have inhibited any further work in this area, since Riviere never again returned to the questions raised in her essay. Similarly, Breton’s reputation for public support of women within the Surrealist movement was in contrast to his more traditional and conservative treatment and expectations of the women he became personally involved with. See Polizzotti, 1997: 431.

12 In interviews with Marina Warner and Paul de Angelis, Carrington has repeatedly spoken about her experience as a debutante. See Interview with Paul de Angelis. El Paseante 17.

13 “Huxley, as Jessica Mitford notes in her autobiography Hons and Rebels, enjoyed a brief vogue among artistically inclined British debutantes during the 1930’s.” Gambrell, 1997: 78.

14 In the following exchange from Love in a Cold Climate, written between the wars, Nancy Mitford provides an example of the increasing resistance to, and parody of, debutante culture by prospective debutantes themselves: “Polly says: ‘This coming out seems a great bore – do you enjoy it, Fanny?’ to which Fanny replies ‘I had never thought … Girls had to come out, I knew. It is a stage in their existence.’” p. 239.

15 See Mark Polizzotti’s “Introduction” to Breton’s Anthology of Black Humour.

16 Carrington was three years older than Ernst’s son, Jimmy Ernst, and Breton was in his early forties when Carrington first met him.

17 See Warner’s introduction to The House of Fear, 15.

18 In his “Introduction”, Polizzotti notes that the Anthology of Black Humour started out as an attempt to create “a showcase of the Surrealist conception of humor and a way for its impecunious author to earn a quick advance …” (v).

19 Two anthologies, in particular, Wayward Girls and Wicked Women: An Anthology of Stories, Ed. Angela Carter and That Kind of Woman: Stories From the Left Bank and Beyond, Eds. Bronte Adams and Trudi Tate, reflect the growing visibility of Carrington’s work as well as the way in which “The Debutante” has become an exemplary story about the crisis of gendered identity both between the wars and more recently within a contemporary feminist framework.

20 It is important to note that the hybrid of the animal and the human body cannot be sustained, as the events of the narrative make clear. The hyena-maid hybrid does not successfully pass as a debutante at the party.

21 The cultural historian Angela Lambert suggests that the expression “blue blood” derives from “the sangre azul claimed by certain families of Castile, as being uncontaminated by Moorish, Jewish or other admixture; probably founded on the blueness of the veins of people of fair complexion. (OED) Thus racism and anti-Semitism are also inherent in the idea of blue-bloodedness.” 15.

22 The Surrealists also celebrated Aimée, who was the subject of Lacan’s doctoral thesis; a woman also suffering paranoia who had attempted murder.


24 As Rosemont notes Surrealist interest in these two criminal cases was later echoed by others: Genet’s play The Maids was based on the Papin sisters and Claude Chabrol made a film in the 1970’s on Noziere, titled Violette. More recently Nancy Meckler’s film Sister My Sister (1994) attempts to read the Papin affair from the
perspective of the sister’s incestuous lesbian relationship and the class relationship between the maids and their employers.

23 Polizzotti argues that for Breton, the Nozière case held a particular personal resonance: “Breton in particular felt a visceral commitment to the case... For him supporting Violette Nozières meant spitting in the face of the parents he still resented” (393).


25 Martin Jay notes that this in turn inspired Lacan’s development of the “mirror-stage”.


27 In her interview with Paul de Angelis, Carrington suggests that once she met the Surrealists in London she became aware for the first time of “who Hitler really was” and that later when she moved to Paris to be with the group, Hitler became the most common topic of conversation (_{El Paisante} 17, n.p._).
Chapter Three
Surrealism and Madness: Nadja and Down Below

Introduction: Uncanny Intertextuality

In an article celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of hysteria in La Révolution surréaliste (March 1928), only months before Breton’s fateful encounter with Nadja, Breton and Aragon recalled the days at the Salpêtrière when the young interns had made love to the hysterics. Although they rebuke the doctor for their hypocrisy, they go on to declare that

We Surrealists... are intent on celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of hysteria, the greatest poetic discovery of the latter part of the century, and we do so at a time when the dismemberment of the concept of hysteria appears to be complete. (cited in Roudinesco, 1990: 6-7)

In that same issue were photographs of Augustine, the celebrated fourteen-year-old hysterical from Charcot’s clinic, “performing” her hysteria before the camera (see fig. 6). Surrealism’s fascination with hysteria and madness exemplified the movement’s endeavours to open up the field of creative expression. Since the Surrealists regarded the unconscious as central to creative thought, they sought to explore other sites of its revelation: from dreams and hallucinations to hysteria and madness. While Breton’s early psychiatric training with shell shocked soldiers had instigated his experiments with automatic writing, it was specifically female madness that came to define Surrealism’s revolt against the Cartesian subject of bourgeois, liberal ideology. Female insanity, in particular hysteria, was taken to be “a supreme vehicle of expression”(7) rather than a pathological phenomenon. Championing the work of Charcot, long after contemporary psychiatry had moved on from the experiments at the Salpêtrière, the Surrealists heroised the expression of hysteria as a poetic act. Like Freud’s own interpretation of hysteria, they regarded the hysterical body as capable of producing a series of somatic signs that become a coded message for the subject’s psychic disorder; the hysterical’s bodily performance was akin to automatic writing, for both revealed the workings of the
unconscious. The concept of “compulsive beauty”, inspired by the hysterics's somatic performances, thus became a trope for the aesthetic paradox underlying much Surrealist imagery. In leaving behind his career in neuropsychiatric medicine in order to become the leader of an artistic avant-garde movement, Breton abandoned the scene of traumatised masculinity so profoundly displayed in his shell-shocked patients. Instead he constructed an image of femininity that was at once inspiring and enchanting — as Nadja promises to be — and traumatised and abandoned — as Nadja finally becomes.

It is Surrealism's complicated representation of female madness that I want to examine in this chapter. By performing a parallel reading of André Breton's Nadja (1928) and Leonora Carrington's Down Below (1944), I explore the nuances of each text as well as the relationship between them. While Nadja is central to accounts of Surrealism's ideological and aesthetic investment in madness, Down Below's critical reception has been more obscure. Despite its subject matter and experimental quality, Down Below has never achieved the same kind of notoriety as Nadja nor really been regarded as an important text of the Surrealist canon. Indeed it seems that psychiatry, and later feminist attempts to reclaim and re-read the work of the women Surrealists, have been more responsive to what is in many ways a groundbreaking attempt to articulate the nexus between psychosis, auto-analysis, and experimental autobiography.¹ It was not until feminist readings of Carrington's work in the late 1980's and 1990's that critical attention began to focus on Down Below's uncanny relationship to Nadja. Susan Suleiman briefly mentions it in her chapter on feminist intertextuality in Subversive Intent, describing it as "a kind of Nadja, but told from the point of view of the madwoman, not the male observer" (1990: 172). Similarly, Marina Warner, in her introduction to The House of Fear suggests that on a literary level, Down Below resembles Breton's autobiographical experimentation in works such as Nadja and Mad Love (1989: 17). Along with Marina Warner, Alice Gambrell points to the way in which Carrington and other women Surrealists were "charged with the responsibility of disclosing alien vistas of experience" (1997: 82), so that Carrington's text came to be valued for its "authentic" account of female madness. Warner concludes that Surrealist interest in female rebellion and madness was often based on its experiential value rather than its "literary" merits:

[Carrington] was Nadja retrouvée, the heroine of Breton's text returned to "normal"... she had truly experienced the dementia Breton and Paul Eluard had only been able to simulate in L'immacule Conception of 1930, though their impersonation of insanity later won Jacques Lacan's applause. (1989:19)
As Warner points out, Carrington was highly regarded for her femme enfant qualities which tended to overshadow early responses to her literary and artistic work. *Down Below*, however, is both highly self-conscious and intertextually responsive to a Surrealist methodology as well as its philosophical and cultural tenets – in particular those explored in *Nadja*. In spite of its shared sympathies with Surrealist-inspired autobiography, it also reads as a pointed response to Breton’s classic Surrealist text on female madness. Before examining the way in which a Freudian uncanny operates within these texts in the context of self-analytical autobiography, I want to firstly discuss how the relationship between these two texts is also imbued with the uncanny.

A feminist reading of Carrington’s narrative forces us to rethink not only the relationship between these two texts but the relationship between Carrington and Nadja herself. While Breton’s work is invariably read as an example of a high Surrealist exploration of literary form and aesthetic cultural practice, using Nadja as a prop for this exploration, *Down Below*, is taken as an earnest, though powerful, account of the experience of madness, by someone who happened to participate in the Surrealist movement. I argue, however, that *Down Below* offers us a critical insight into Breton’s Surrealist text on madness by drawing attention to its highly problematic conceptual framework; to its literary cannibalisation of Nadja’s experience of madness. Using Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of a minor literature, I suggest that Carrington’s narrative subverts from within the language of Surrealism its aesthetic and political dimensions and offers a critique of Breton’s literary practice in *Nadja*. Although we rightly read Carrington’s narrative as noncanonical in relation to *Nadja*, this is to overlook the text’s own stated claims to authority. *Down Below* assumes a position of authenticity which soon translates, via its uncanny relationship to *Nadja*, into one of authority. It is this slippage between canonical/noncanonical and major/minor which underlines the central paradox of how to read – as a feminist or otherwise – Carrington’s text.

In *Kafka: Toward A Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari take up the question of how to read Kafka in a way that draws out the ideological and political aspects of the work and its place within the literary canon. In the process of exploring ways of reading Kafka without simply reducing his work to a major literature, they define the central elements of a minor literature:
The three main characteristics of a minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of an individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature. (1986: 18)

Read in the context of Nadja, Carrington's text draws out the political and material ramifications of a Surrealist aesthetic investment in madness. As a communally orchestrated text—between analyst and analysand, in a community that valued the experience of madness—Down Below reflects a collective assemblage of annunciation par excellence. However, it also deterritorialises a high Surrealist rhetoric of madness by replacing the ventriloquised voice of the hysteric/madwoman with a language that engages the experiential and literary dimensions of psychosis. That is, it gives voice and texture to the dreams, delusions and hallucinations that make up the text's narrative on madness. The political immediacy of the text derives from its insertion of a feminist and female speaking subject into the Surrealist literary canon on madness, drawing us into a reading of Nadja that necessarily asks us to question the political implications of Breton's literary appropriation of Nadja's psychosis. The relationship between the major and the minor is an uncanny one since a minor language develops from within as a reterritorialisation of the major language; as something familiar which returns in an unfamiliar deterritorialised form. Deleuze writes: "Minor languages do not exist in themselves: they exist only in relation to a major language and are also investments of that language for the purpose of making it minor" (1988: 105). While Breton opens up a language of experience by including both the everyday and the nonrational as important to cultural and aesthetic meaning, Carrington's narrative takes on both the circumstances and content of his literary experiment:

Defining her text as "an embryo of knowledge" (164) Carrington articulates her experience of madness within a Surrealist project of incorporating the nonrational into everyday life. In attempting to create a language that mimetically represents the experience of psychosis, Carrington's text becomes revolutionary in ways that Breton's can never be. This underscores what Deleuze and Guattari define as central to the category of minority:

Minorities, of course, are objectively definable states, states of language, ethnicity or sex with their own ghetto territorialities, but they must also be thought of as
seeds, crystals of becoming whose value is to trigger uncontrollable movements and deterritorilizations of the mean or majority. (1988: 106)

If Down Below is haunted by Breton’s seminal work on madness, a critical reading of Nadja in light of Carrington’s text has increasingly become haunted by the real life figure of Nadja. While Down Below critically responds to a Surrealist investment in madness, it also embraces many of its aesthetic and psychoanalytical strategies, incorporating and interrogating the language of Surrealism in order to politicise and re-present the madwoman’s symbolic status. As a minor literature, its claim to authenticity – to a minoritarian experience – also seals its claim to authority since it brings to the fore questions of gender, power, agency and representation. It is these questions that give Carrington’s text its political force.

Perceiving Surrealism’s oblique relationship to modernism as indicative of a radical investigation of subjectivity, Peter Nicholls has suggested that the avant-garde rejection of mimesis is clearly linked with the dismemberment of the body (1995). More recently Kevin Brophy has argued that “after psychoanalysis the “I” is always (at least) doubled – the self one knows always stands beside the self one can only witness and marvel at – or interpret” (1998: 119). A Surrealist interest in madness, therefore, can be linked to the deconstruction of the Cartesian subject and the complication of the relational boundaries between subject and object, mind and body, the conscious and the unconscious; all of which imbue Surrealism’s more general polemical relationship to realism. Nadja and Down Below both self-consciously subvert traditional notions of narrative authority and coherence by textually materialising the traces, contours and impressions of the nonrational, albeit in very different ways. Freud’s 1919 essay on the uncanny will elucidate the complex ways in which these texts materially and textually come to haunt each other.

Freud begins his essay by noting certain peculiarities about the etymology of the word as well as the relative absence of any critical discussion of it as a literary category despite often being employed as a literary device. Freud’s philological investigation points to a contradiction at the heart of the term’s usage: an uncanniness about the ‘uncanny’. Tracing its etymology, Freud discovers that the German word heimlich (meaning homely or familiar) “develops in the direction of ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich” (PFL, Vol. 14, 347). Thus Freud concludes that the uncanny is the return of the familiar in an unfamiliar form or, indeed, a remembering not recognised as a
remembering of that which has been repressed. This definition links Freud’s theory to the
notion of “haunting” as well as to the use of the “double” as a literary device. Like the
etymological vicissitudes of the uncanny, the “double” functions as a device which at once
reinforces the subject and obliterates its unitary status. This is significant since Freud
develops his theory of the uncanny simultaneously as a psychoanalytic and an aesthetic
inquiry, recounting ETA Hoffman’s “The Sandman” as an exemplary narrative of the
uncanny illustrating the way that repressed material surfaces under certain conditions;
how material that ought to remain hidden comes to life. The connection between Freud’s
ey essay on the uncanny and Surrealism unfolds in Nadja and Down Below as these texts
illustrate the extensive connections between literature and psychoanalysis; the way in
which psychoanalysis suggests as much about the possibilities and limits of narrative as it
does about understanding manifestations of the unconscious in our lives. Although these
texts articulate a profound distrust of institutional psychiatry, they are keenly interested in
the aesthetic possibilities of nonrational states and the role of the unconscious in
uncovering the creative and oniric aspects of a subject.

Originally published in 1928, Nadja relates Breton’s encounter with an enigmatic woman
who goes by the name of Nadja. Part self-portrait, part portrait of how this poetic figure
comes to haunt his life, Breton’s narrative lasts for the duration of the month of October,
1926 until Nadja’s eventual institutionalisation. The text is also an autobiographical
experiment, one which utilises a number of important Surrealist and psychoanalytic
principles. The first of these is the inclusion of photographs and paintings obliquely
connected to the narrative events. The second is the description of the events in a tone of
detached observation – almost like neuropsychiatric observation (Matthews, 1982: 22). In
spite of Breton’s attempt at clinical observation, from the very beginning of the text, the
narrative explores his own ambivalence about self-representation. It is this ambivalence,
however, which makes the text particularly fascinating, because it reveals Breton’s own
“neurotic and creative anguish” (22) unfolding in the course of the text.²

The events of Leonora Carrington’s narrative occurred nearly fifteen years later. Living at
the time in the South of France with Max Ernst, Carrington became increasingly unstable
after Ernst had been taken away by the French police and interned as an enemy alien. As
the war approached and the threat of Nazi occupation increased, Carrington fled into
Spain only to be pronounced by the British consul as “ incurably insane” and placed in a
psychiatric hospital in Santander, Spain. When Carrington finally escaped and regrouped
with fellow Surrealists in New York, she was encouraged by Breton and others to write
about her experience. As Marina Warner notes, Carrington had realised one of the
greatest desires of the Surrealists – "the voyage down into madness" (1989: 16). Her
written account of this period examines her mental illness and the horrific treatment she
was subjected to in the sanatorium but with the desire to extract some kind of meaning
and knowledge. The text’s tone is both lucid and humorous, reflecting the strength of the
subject and her refusal to become either a victim of institutional forces or an aestheticised
object of madness. Like Breton’s narrative Carrington’s sets out to understand the self in
relation to a set of unfathomable circumstances and events and to find a kind of "profane
illumination" (Benjamin, 1978:) in the most unlikely episodes and encounters. As such it
reflects a commitment to a Surrealist process of unchaining; of liberation through the
confrontation of liminal states of experience.

In her analysis of the interconnections between Marxism, Surrealism and Freudian
psychoanalysis, as it pertains to the work of Walter Benjamin, Margaret Cohen offers a
succinct account of the significance of a culture’s marginalia to the intellectual projects of
both Breton and Benjamin. Pivotal to their cultural analyses, Cohen suggests, is the
valorisation of "a culture's ghosts and phantoms as a significant and rich field of social
production rather than a mirage to be dispelled" (1993: 11). Intrinsic to the high value
placed on the marginal, and on the other, is a methodology that produces "a notion of
critique [that moves] beyond logical argument and the binary opposition to a
phantasmagorical staging more closely resembling psychoanalytical therapy, privileging
nonrational forms of "working through" and regulated by overdetermination rather than
dialectics." (1993: 11). Reading Nadja as an exemplary text about haunting, Cohen reveals
the importance of Freud’s essay on the uncanny to a reading of this text. Building on
Cohen’s discussion, I want to take the concept of the uncanny and fan it out in a number
of directions. Firstly, I am interested in Nadja’s own uncanny presence within Breton’s
text and also how the figure of Nadja uncannily surfaces in Carrington’s own narrative
lending a somewhat ghastly quality to the text’s representation of madness. The notion of
the uncanny therefore imbues the relationship between these two texts. The relationship
between these texts also inhabits the relationship between a minor and a major literature –
a relationship which I read as intrinsically uncanny.

The biographical and cultural context of these texts is inherent to my reading of them.
While Down Below engages with a Surrealist aesthetic it also encapsulates the political and
social institutions – fascism and the psychiatric hospital – underlying Carrington’s
experience. Both texts directly and indirectly engage the fields of psychiatry and
psychoanalysis. Breton’s connection to psychiatry and Freudian psychoanalysis was at this time well established. His virulent attack on institutional psychiatry, in Nadja and elsewhere, reveals his ambivalent and difficult relationship with the reality of Nadja’s madness and her eventual incarceration. While Carrington’s connection to psychoanalysis is a little more obscure up to the point of the text’s inception, the very circumstances of Down Below’s conception are implicated within the psychoanalytical field as well as within a Surrealist collaborative process. First prescribed as a talking/writing cure by the Surrealist surgeon and psychoanalyst, Pierre Mabille, Down Below emerges as a communally parented text, one that is encouraged along the way by Breton himself. The creation of a psychoanalytically inflected subject is central to both Breton’s and Carrington’s narratives.

"Haunting"

The importance of a psychoanalytically-inflected notion of haunting to Breton’s text was first explored by Walter Benjamin in his 1929 essay on Surrealism. Reading Nadja as an exemplary Surrealist text within his wider representation of Surrealism as modernism’s other, Benjamin draws out the historical and cultural significance of Surrealism’s investment in madness and alterity. Benjamin’s essay is fascinating for the way it canonises Breton’s text within a Surrealist critical and aesthetic practice. For Benjamin, Nadja becomes the defining text of Surrealism and of its oblique relationship to modernism. In both Carrington’s and Breton’s narratives, autobiography operates as an intertextual and intersubjective “haunting”. In these two Surrealist narratives the normal mimetic function of this genre takes on the spectre of the uncanny through the interrogation of the boundaries of the rational and the irrational as well as fiction and memory. The autobiographical subject uncovered is one that is continually obfuscated in the folds of a Freudian unconscious, as if to posit the genre of autobiography as formally close to the psychoanalytic process: the construction of the self in narrative form by a historically lived and present self who can only trace the outlines and contours of a past from a present that is symbolically compressed or ruptured. Breton explicitly describes the process of autobiography at the beginning of Nadja as akin to the “talking cure”, complete with modes of transference and repetition. Using the figure of the ghost as an exemplary illustration of the indeterminate boundaries of identity, Breton underlines the ambiguity of self-analysis, in terms of both psychoanalysis and autobiography.
... what I regard as the objective, more or less deliberate manifestations of my existence are merely the premises, within the limits of this existence, of an activity whose true extent is quite unknown to me. (1928/1960: 12)

Carrington’s text also has its starting point in self-analysis; an analysis that keeps being repeated as the narrative is first written, lost and then verbally recounted and reconstructed. By inserting the present moment of writing into the narrated events of the past, Carrington, like Breton, reveals the uncanny process of self-representation as an attempt to come to terms with the errant logic of memory. But the concept of literary “haunting” also imbues the relationship between these texts. I read Carrington’s text as a symbolic “haunting” of Breton’s earlier narrative on madness. While for Breton, autobiography is an aesthetic exploration of the other – of madness, of the feminine, of the chance encounter and of the seedy side of Parisian flânerie – as part of a heroic self-analysis, Carrington’s text confronts the material realities of her breakdown with a detailed and lucid articulation of hallucinatory and bizarre states, a process that explicitly displaces the rational and coherent self with an incoherent but strongly willed subject, a subject who haunts Breton’s heroic self-analysis and the Surrealist anti-mimetic autobiographical moment.

In his essay, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” Benjamin suggests that Surrealism embodies the critical and transgressive possibilities of modernism. The importance that Benjamin places on Nadja reflects his own valorisation of a culture’s marginalia in providing revelation and insight, what he calls throughout the essay, profane illumination. Rather than repress it, Benjamin, like Breton, searches for a way in which to understand the relationship that the nonrational brings to the everyday world. In his essay he, too, hints at an aesthetics of the uncanny and its importance for Surrealism when he recalls Breton’s own description of Nadja as “a book with a hanging door” (1960:180), and then in parenthesis recounts a marvellous story that illustrates very closely Freud’s explanation of the uncanny as it emerges in Breton’s text:

(In Moscow I lived in a Hotel in which almost all the rooms were occupied by Tibetan lamas who had come to Moscow for a congress of Buddhist churches. I was struck by the number of doors in the corridors that were always left ajar. What had at first seem accidental began to be disturbing. I found out that in these rooms lived members of a sect who had sworn never to occupy closed rooms. The shock I had then must be felt by the reader of Nadja). (1978: 180)
For Benjamin the “profane illumination” exhibited in Nadja is part and parcel of its “creative synthesis between the art novel and the roman-à-clef” (180). This generic innovation embodies the uncanny in so far as the familiarity of roman-à-clef narrative is made strange by a Surrealist-inflected prose. The haunting quality of the text arises through its opening of the self to the scrutiny of the everyday: the door left ajar (hanging open and shut) is the intrusion of the unconscious – individual and historical – into a familiar everyday world.

Although Breton’s uncanny encounter with Nadja is the structural device holding the entire narrative together, the formation of Breton’s identity is also linked early in the narrative to the uncanny presence of the “great men” of history, whose tombs Breton can see from his hotel window. Thus the opening of his autobiographical project begins at his place of residence, the Hotel des Grands Hommes, which overlooks the tombs of the great men of the 19th century, including Rousseau. As author of The Confessions, Rousseau constitutes one of the haunting presences in the text, a presence which immediately conjures up the historical “greatness” of Breton’s own attempts at psychoanalytic self-portraiture. Rousseau represents a figural and literal haunting: for although Breton attempts to distance his autobiographical project from Rousseau’s seminal work he does not entirely succeed since his statue is a visual reminder of Rousseau’s literary and historical greatness. But Rousseau is not the only “great man” to influence this text. A close reading of the opening of Nadja reveals the importance of Freud to the unfolding narrative.

The examination of the self, as Breton conceptualises it, contains the contradiction of the uncanny – being both familiar and unfamiliar. The process of self-portraiture involves the destruction of one self in order for a new self to be possible, or rather the temporary displacement of one self to allow other selves to come to the fore. But for Breton the self is always situated, defined by and through its contact with people and places. As such Breton questions the idea of full presence or the notion of a unified self-contained subject. This is made clear from the very beginning of the narrative:

Who am I? If once I were to rely on a proverb [tell me who you haunt and I will tell you who you are], then perhaps everything would amount to who I “haunt”… Such a word means much more than it says, makes me, still alive, play a ghostly part, evidently referring to what I must have ceased to be in order to be who I am.
Hardly distorted in this sense, the word suggests that what I regard as the objective, more or less deliberate manifestations of my existence, of an activity whose true extent is quite unknown to me. My image of the “ghost”, including everything conventional about its appearance as well as its blind submission to certain contingencies of time and place, is particularly significant for me as the finite representation of a torment that may be eternal. Perhaps my life is nothing but an image of this kind; perhaps I am doomed to trace my steps under the illusion that I am exploring, doomed to try and learn what I should simply recognise, learning a mere fraction of what I have forgotten. (1960:11-12)

Here the self in the autobiographical project is linked to both people and places, to a past and a present which is explored through a Freudian psychoanalytic paradigm: the unconscious, memory, the uncanny and through the use of ghost language. Like the journey that Breton recounts throughout his narrative, the autobiographical process for the male Surrealist involves a kind of aimless wandering, a retracing of footsteps as he endeavours to “haunt” his past in order to define the present self. Benjamin reinforces this when he reminds us of Nadja as “a book with a banging door”, adding that the Surrealist project involves a level of intoxication equal to the hashish trance: the intoxicating depths of self-analysis provide a profane illumination. As Benjamin conceives it, Bretonian autobiography is a kind of psychic flânerie; a stroll through a corridor of selves where as soon as one door opens another bangs shut as the errant logic of memory trips up any notion of full presence or unitary experience, of a “whole” life moving through time. The figure of the ghost thus becomes a trope for the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding any knowledge of the self as well as a sense in which the present – both personal and historical – haunts the past. Here Breton is writing against the autobiographical project conceived by Rousseau in The Confessions while still inserting his own project into the history of France’s revolutionary “great men”. The experimental and hence “revolutionary” nature of Breton’s text is its flirtation with psychoanalysis. Thus it is Freud and not Rousseau who takes on paternal authority in the text. But, necessarily, Freud’s presence within the text carries with it a certain anxious ambivalence. Suleiman therefore concludes that ‘What [Breton] wants to discover is his “differentiation” from other men...” (1990: 101).

As Margaret Cohen (1993) has shown, autobiography and historiography are fused in Breton’s narrative: a geographical passage through Paris uncovers an historical unconscious infused with the spectre of a bloody revolutionary past. Part of this historical
unconscious is Breton’s ambivalent engagement with a Romantic sublime, articulated within Rousseau’s *Confessions*. But the text also engages with a present and future, explored through the “chance encounter”, that unconscious but marvellous find, much exalted by the Surrealists. Nadja then comes to represent such an object, whose uncanny connections to the past spark Breton’s own literary encounter with the bohemian and revolutionary world. Central to Cohen’s reading of *Nadja* is what she defines as Breton’s attempt to write “Surrealist historiography by applying a Freudian paradigm of memory to collective events” (Cohen, 1993: 80). Cohen explains:

In *Nadja*’s uncanny moments of Parisian encounter, objective history effaced in the manner of repressed material flashes momentarily to view through its contact with the strolling surrealist and his concerns (here turning around his problems of “la révolution surréaliste”)…(1993: 80)

The figure of the ghost, and all that we conventionally associate with it (as Breton notes), represents the amorphous boundaries of the self within history and autobiography. Cohen illustrates that central to Breton’s encounter with both Nadja and the past, is his attraction to “that little déclassé something” (Cohen’s translation, 1993: 90). Through her uncanny awareness of past events Nadja comes to represent the symbolically revolutionary and bohemian tenor of Breton’s experimental prose memoir. Since, as Benjamin argues, Nadja is closer to such things as revolutionary and Bohemian Paris than Breton, her presence in the text serves to guide his narrative through the déclassé streets of Paris. Like the analysand in the “talking cure” Nadja serves as a prop to uncover the past – a collective social past represented by Parisian revolutionary history and Breton’s own individual past, his experience as a psychiatric intern during the war. Both of which inform the two significant intellectual and social paradigms in Breton’s life up to this point: psychiatry (and psychoanalysis) and communism. In many ways *Nadja* is an attempt to work through the spectre of these paradigms as they haunt the revolutionary project that is Surrealism.

But if Breton’s subject is a series of haunting “T’s”, what is it about Nadja’s presence within the text that comes to haunt Breton’s narrative? Benjamin provides a clue when he informs us that Breton is closer to the things Nadja is close to than to her (181). But what are these things that Nadja is close to and through her, Breton as well? Benjamin writes:
[Breton] was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the “outmoded”... No one before perceived how destitution – not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects – can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism... Breton and Nadja are the lovers that convert everything that we have experienced on mournful railway journeys (railways are beginning to age), on Godforsaken Sunday afternoons in the proletarian quarters of the great cities, in the first glance through the rain-blurred window of a new apartment, into revolutionary experience, if not action. They bring the immense forces of “atmosphere” concealed in these things to the point of explosion (180-182).

Breton’s encounter with Nadja is part of a wider interest in what Benjamin here defines as Breton’s interest in the “outmoded”. Like the found object and the déclassé, the destitute and the outmoded are aesthetic and revolutionary categories within the Surrealist project. As Breton and Aragon’s celebration of fifty years of hysteria indicated, it was the “outmoded” status of the hysterical, her status as an enslaved object of representation, that sealed her significance within Surrealism – at a time when Charcot’s theories were being dismantled by an orthodox psychiatric and psychoanalytical profession (Roudinesco, 1990: 7). As with the outmoded nature of the hysterical, Nadja becomes a symbol of revolutionary nihilism, paradoxically embodying a Marxist anti-progress ideology alongside its drive toward making something new out of the old. More significantly, as a category, the outmoded is itself imbued with the spectre of the uncanny since it is that which has been familiar and popular but now faded into obscurity, replaced by the “new”, that central category driving capitalist commodity culture. The modern city is central to – “the most dreamed-of of their objects, the city of Paris itself” (Benjamin: 1978: 182). Because Nadja is a “thing” of the city and closer to “things” of the city in a way that Breton is not, her significance in the text is akin to the muse in Romantic poetry and the beloved in courtly love traditions. Nadja is the muse, the enslaved object, of a modern urban sublime; her déclassé status provides Breton with an “authentic” connection to the revolutionary and experiential world of the street.

Breton’s project in Nadja thus seems to be a simultaneous engagement with the “high” and “low”, with the great men of French history and with the street prostitute; with an aesthetics of the sublime and with an aesthetics of the uncanny. But despite being the most significant of the chance encounters within the text, Nadja is eventually abandoned in order for the heroic project to succeed. This is why Benjamin, in a particularly astute
reading, perceives Breton’s relationship to Nadja along the lines of a courtly love romance
where the object of love matters less than the heroic quest: “The lady in esoteric love
matters least. So, too, for Breton. He is closer to things that Nadja is close to than to
her”(181). Here Benjamin notes how Breton’s heroic quest hinges around Nadja’s
proximity to the street (“the only region of valid experience for her” (Breton, 1960: 113) and
to madness, categories invested by Surrealism with exemplary revolutionary significance.

As Breton sets out exploring “Who am I?” he increasingly becomes preoccupied with the
nature of Nadja’s identity, though only ever in relation to himself. He asks:

Who is the real Nadja – the one who told me she had wandered all night long in
the Forest of Fontainbleau with an archeologist... is the real Nadja always this
always inspired and inspiring creature who enjoyed being nowhere but in the
streets... (112-113)

Despite repeatedly doubting his own attempts at finding self-knowledge, of fixing the self
in autobiography, Breton attempts to draw out the “real” Nadja. In a text that purports to
deconstruct the fully knowable subject, the phrase “the real Nadja” seems out of place.
While Breton deconstructs the male autobiographical subject, situating it within the larger
context of literary innovation, female identity here is atomised according to a reductive
notion of the real. This occurs at a point in the narrative when Breton grows both weary
and bored with Nadja’s behaviour and her inability to differentiate between what he sees
as the trivial and the important:

For some time I had stopped understanding Nadja. Actually perhaps we have
never understood one another... She had decided... to make no differentiation
between the trifling remarks which she happened to make and those which meant
so much to me, to ignore my momentary moods and my considerable difficulty in
forgiving her worst fits of abstraction. (130)

Breton’s encounter with Nadja, with a “real hysterical woman on the street” unearths his
own earlier, uneasy relationship to psychiatry as well as his ambivalent relationship to
psychoanalysis. Towards the end of the narrative, as Nadja’s mental illness brings to a
standstill the wandering Surrealist’s enchantment with his muse, Breton launches into a
diatribe on societal prejudice against eccentric behaviour and the failings of institutional
psychiatry:
I was told several months ago, that Nadja was mad. After the eccentricities in which it seems she has indulged herself in the hallways of her hotel, she had to be committed to the Vaucluse sanitarium. (136)

and

Unless you have been inside a sanitarium you do not know that madmen are made there, just as criminals are made in our reformatories... I still cannot see why a human being should be deprived of freedom. They shut up Sade, they shut up Nietzsche; they shut up Baudelaire. (139-141)

What is most intriguing about Breton’s diatribe against psychiatry is that it actually prevents him from inquiring after her:

My general contempt for psychiatry, its rituals and its works, is reason enough for my not having dared investigate what has become of Nadja. I have indicated my pessimism as to her fate, as to that of several others of her kind. (141-42)

Here Breton’s polemic glosses his own uneasiness at Nadja’s fate in the text. Furthermore, Breton’s abandonment of Nadja hinges, among other things, on his earlier abandonment of a neuropsychiatric profession. His failure to help her, to visit her, or even to inquire after her, stems in some senses from his inability to confront the demons of his own past. Although Nadja’s madness fuels the creative and revolutionary significance of Breton’s project, her real incarceration haunts the sublime nature of his project since it unearths the ghosts of his own past. In order to repress the scene of traumatised masculinity that emerged in the wake of the first world war, Breton fashions an heroic self-portrait out of an “outmoded” and spectral image of female madness. That is why in the final instance, Breton shuns the reality of Nadja’s madness.

In his examination of Breton’s relationship to Freud and the creative process, Kevin Brophy argues that “Nadja becomes Surrealism’s necessary response to psychoanalysis” (1998: 123). While Breton certainly championed many of Freud’s central concepts, many critics have also noted his somewhat ambivalent relationship with Freud himself, in part due to his unsatisfactory meeting with him and the ensuing frustration of
their correspondence, as well as his general mistrust of Freud’s curative claims for psychoanalysis. Elisabeth Roudinesco suggests that

For the Surrealists, the struggle for lay analysis did not have as its objective the recognition of the right of nonphysicians to practice therapy, as was the case for Marie Bonaparte. It was on the contrary a matter of establishing a radical break between psychoanalysis and the ideals of medicine. (1990: 5)

At the outset of his narrative Breton asks us not simply to read his text along psychoanalytical lines but to be open to the revolutionary nature of its exploration of subjectification. Therefore, whilst Breton places his project alongside Freud’s innovations, he does not slavishly endorse them. What Surrealism and psychoanalysis did share, however, is their claims for a stake in a revolutionary (scientific) modernity. As Brophy argues:

Surrealism’s alliance with psychoanalysis – most explicitly acknowledged in Breton’s manifestos – served to bring it into association not only with science but with a new and revolutionary science which attempted to overthrow accepted world-views. (1998: 128)

Perhaps because of the high stakes placed on the scientific revolution of psychoanalysis, Breton reveals at the beginning of *Nadja*, his disenchantment with a Marxist belief in proletarian revolution. Moments before his momentous encounter with Nadja, Breton watches as factory and office workers spill out of their places of work, onto the street, commenting, “No, it was not yet these who would be ready to create the Revolution” (64). Out of the crowd of masses that Breton has lost faith in, comes Nadja, “her head high, unlike everyone else on the sidewalk” (64). It is Nadja, as the feminine Other, who will provide the terms of reference for the revolution. But by the end of the narrative this hope seems dashed as Nadja’s schizophrenia means that she is no longer the heroic figure of Breton’s text but rather silenced and abandoned in an insane asylum.

Cohen’s reading of this work positions Nadja, the prostitute/ drug seller/ clairvoyant/ madwoman as the muse who makes Breton’s encounter with “the ghosts” of Paris and his own self possible. But while Nadja is the uncanny object of Breton’s sublime, her material presence also haunts the sublime project that constitutes Breton’s experimental self-portrait. As a real figure who has been incarcerated in a mental asylum by the end of the
narrative, Nadja's fate becomes to the reader (particularly a feminist reader) of more urgent concern than Breton's attempts at aesthetic and experiential revolution. The final declaration of his text, "Beauty will be convulsive, or it will not be" (160), serves as a reminder of Charcot's photographs of the performing hysteric; an erotically charged spectacle whose performance is controlled by the whole apparatus of the psychiatric institution. These images were frequently reproduced in La Révolution surréaliste and notoriously celebrated in Dali's collage piece, "The Phenomenon of Ecstasy". Thus Breton's elaborate framing of Nadja within his project of experimental Surrealist prose, with all its claims to a scientific revolutionary modernity, mirrors Charcot's own scientific framing of the hysteric through photographic portraiture.

Captivated by the recording process of photography, Charcot used the medium to study the somatic signs of hysteria, so that the hysteric's body came to be read in much the same way as an aesthetic object. Breton's textual representation of the madwoman is akin to Charcot's presentation of the performing hysteric. Just as Charcot displays the hysteric for his own pedagogical performance, Breton incorporates Nadja into his narrative as part of an examination of his own heroic quest. In an effort to interpret and narrate a Surrealist sublime, Breton's subject becomes entangled and contaminated by its object. In turning to the somatic language of hysteria and female madness, Breton displaced the traumatised body and mind of masculinity - the shell-shocked soldiers of the first world war - onto an image of femininity that is at once enchanting and convulsive. As we will see, Carrington's narrative, by virtue of its detailed description of psychosis and incarceration, is haunted by - and in turn seems to haunt - Breton's text and to some degree the anti-mimetic function of Surrealist autobiography.

In both straightforward and oblique ways Carrington's text bears an uncanny relationship to Nadja's story. In articulating the experience of mental instability and institutionalisation within a Surrealist context, Down Below returns to the moment in Breton's text where Nadja is institutionalised and finally abandoned by Breton. Haunted by Breton's silencing of the madwoman, Carrington's story offers us the unfamiliar and often confronting details of a familiar - though aestheticised - subject within Surrealism. Fuelling the uncanny tenor of this relationship is the semantic closeness of Carrington and Nadja's first names. Recent research on the eponymous figure of Breton's novel has confirmed Nadja's identity as Léona-Camille-Ghislaine D. (Polizzotti, 1997: 265). The similarity between Léona and Leonora is one of the many coincidences that surely evokes the Surrealist's fascination with the exigencies of chance and brings to life the operation of
the uncanny. More significant, however, is the title of Carrington's text's evocation of Nadja's repeated vision of an underground passage as she strolls the streets of Paris with Breton. In imagining an underground passage, "starting at the Palais de Justice... and circling the Hôtel Henri IV" (1960:83), Nadja connects individual apparition with an historical Parisian uncanny. Becoming extremely agitated when she imagines that she is passing by one of the exits of the underground tunnel, in the company of Marie-Antoinette's circle (85), Nadja senses Breton's alarming disapproval. Moments later, she inquires of Breton: "You think that I'm very sick, don't you? I'm not sick" (86). The title of Carrington's text read alongside Nadja's visions of the Paris underground and her imagined role in the revolution, uncannily connects their collective experience of madness. A name given to one of the pavilions in the asylum in Santander, "down below" also works in the text as an anti-transcendent metaphor, one that situates the subject of madness within the rebelliousness of a female underground tradition, one which revises a Surrealist idealisation of otherness.  

Persuaded by Breton and other Surrealists to write about her breakdown and incarceration in a mental asylum in Santander, Spain, during the Second World War, Carrington embarked on a narrative that was to have a remarkable fate. The first version of this text was written in English in New York and shown to Janet Flanner, who was working for a publishing house at the time. Flanner was not interested in the manuscript and it was subsequently lost during Carrington's move to Mexico City. Shortly after her arrival in Mexico City, the Surrealist surgeon and psychoanalyst, Pierre Mabille, encouraged her to reconstruct the story (Warner, 1989: 16-17). Marina Warner informs us that the text as it now stands is addressed to Mabille and was begun in August 1943, on the third anniversary of the events of the narrative, in an abandoned Russian embassy in Mexico City, where Mabille, Carrington and others were living as refugees. Carrington then "talked" the account through with Mabille's wife, Jeanne Megnen, who established the first published version in French. This was then translated back into English by Victor Llona for the final issue of the journal VVV in February 1944. VVV was an interdisciplinary New York Surrealist journal edited by David Hare, which Carrington had previously contributed material to, in particular a piece on Max Ernst in an issue solely devoted to him. Alice Gambrell argues that this final issue was particularly concerned with "preserving or improving" Surrealism's "bloodlines" (1997: 87), that is, establishing a future for the movement after its exodus from Paris. Seemingly then, Carrington's piece was regarded as an important work, one that might secure her future as well as that of the Surrealist movement. The version of Carrington's text that we read
today therefore has itself the uncanny symmetry of the surrealist “found object”: its genesis, transmission, translation and publication involving risk, chance and displacement, categories that bespeak the productive mode of the Surrealist work of art and the uncanny fate of the non-canonical text. Such a symmetry underscores Carrington’s interest in the modes of reading, writing and talking as emblematic of the way in which autobiographical self-portraiture is as much about “chance” and self-revision as it is about fact and authorial intention. Carrington’s text is continually rebirthed and communally parented, its creation tied not to one singular moment of genesis, as is Breton’s, but to a form of production that constitutes an unequivocal haunting.

As if to counter the silencing of Nadja’s own sense of meaning in Breton’s narrative, Carrington attempts to describe the intensity of her experience of mental illness while also conscious of the lapse of time between her illness and the time of writing. Written in diary form, and addressed to Pierre Mabille, Carrington self-consciously draws attention to the text as reconstruction. A close friend of Breton’s – as well as his physician – Mabille was renowned as “an eminent surgeon, psychologist, anthropologist, art lover and critic, writer and fervent student of occultism” (Polizzotti, 1997: 428). At Breton’s suggestion, Mabille took on the role of analyst and healer, extracting from Carrington an account of her experience of madness. Thus with Mabille in mind as analyst and guide, Carrington begins her narrative, concerned that what she is about to write will be both of individual and collective value:

Monday, August 23, 1943

Exactly three years ago, I was interned in Dr Morales’s sanatorium in Santander, Spain, Dr Prardo, of Madrid, and the British Consul having pronounced me incurably insane. Since I fortuitously met you, whom I consider the most clear-sighted of all, I began gathering a week ago the threads which might have led me across the initial border of Knowledge. I must live through that experience all over again, because, by doing so, I believe that I may be of some use to you, just as I believe that you will be of help in my journey beyond that frontier by keeping me lucid and by enabling me to put on and take off at will the mask which will be my shield against the hostility of Conformism. (163)

The opening paragraph reveals what Renée Riese Hubert has called the text’s “aggressively female point of view” (1994: 117). Just as the text incorporates a range of
narrative styles – from a straightforward descriptive prose to a more elliptical representation of dreams and hallucinations – the “mask” that will be taken off and on at will hints at the range of personae that constitute the text’s narratorial voice. Her reference to “the hostility of Conformism” registers and pre-empts the heightened, already contextualised, reception that her narrative will receive. Although the comment could refer to a more general audience who may be shocked by the text’s revelations, it reads as a pointed aside to a Surrealist reification of female madness. Putting on and taking off her mask, Carrington will both resist and conform to a Surrealist representation of female insanity.

Despite insisting on the subject’s sense of strength and determination in resisting incarceration, with hindsight, Carrington does not retreat from the reality of her psychosis: “...I want to say that the sentence passed on me by society at that particular time was probably... a godsend”(1989:164). Instead she looks to it as a way in which to acquire a new kind of knowledge about the self and its relation to the historical circumstances in which she was enmeshed. Referring to the analysis and account of her experience of madness as “an embryo of knowledge”(164) the narrative attempts to uncover the half forgotten details of her experience, to afford them value on their own terms, without providing over-detailed explanations. As such the text shares the experimental and epistemological framework that constitutes Breton and Benjamin’s exploration of the nonrational and their attempt to include a culture’s marginalia within their own intellectual projects. And yet, as Gambrell suggests, “Carrington remains deeply concerned with the issue of how to perceive and articulate historical and political fact” (96), in the context of her own personal ordeal. While Gambrell concludes that this signifies Carrington’s anxiety over the way in which historical fact comes to be represented (96), there is also a sense in which Carrington wants to ground her work in the public and cultural sphere rather than simply provide an account of her own internal psychosis. By drawing our attention to the political and historical details of her narrative, Carrington reads her own psychic drama as part of the traumatic and chaotic atmosphere of war. This seems apt considering that the political world intervenes, quite abruptly – with Ernst’s removal – into Carrington’s idyll in the South of France.10 As both lover and artistic collaborator, Ernst occupied a central position in Carrington’s life up to this point. While Ernst’s arrest and incarceration acts as the catalyst for her ensuing psychosis, after his initial mention at the beginning of the narrative, he becomes conspicuously absent:
I wept for several hours, down in the village; then I went up again to my house where, for twenty-four hours, I indulged in voluntary vomitings induced by drinking orange blossom water and interrupted by a short nap. I hoped that my sorrow would be diminished by these spasms, which tore at my stomach like earthquakes. I now know that this was but one of the aspects of those vomitings: I had realised the injustice of society, I wanted first of all to cleanse myself, then go beyond its brutal ineptitude. My stomach was the seat of that society, but also the place in which I was united with all the elements of the earth... That mirror – my stomach – had to be rid of the thick layers of filth... in order properly, clearly and faithfully to reflect the earth... . (164)

The text is at once exceptionally clear and shockingly intense. Carrington’s psychosis throughout the narrative is signalled by a disintegration of the self’s boundaries and the near fusion of self and world. Having embarked on the journey out of France, Carrington writes:

We were riding normally when, twenty kilometres beyond Saint-Martin, the car stopped; the brakes had jammed. I heard Catherine say: “The brakes have jammed.” “Jammed!” I too, was jammed within, by forces foreign to my conscious will, which were also paralysing the mechanism of the car. This was the first stage of my identification with the world. I was the car. The car had jammed on account of me, because I, too, was jammed between Saint-Martin and Spain. (167)

and later in the narrative:

In Madrid...I found myself in a euphoric state. In the political confusion and the torrid heat, I convinced myself that Madrid was the world’s stomach and I had been chosen for the task of restoring the digestive organ to health... the dysentery I suffered... was nothing but the illness of Madrid taking shape in my intestinal tract. (170-171)

In these passages the self and the body are tied to the external world through the strict control of the alimentary functions. In her reflection on the role of food in Carrington’s work, Sonia Assa argues that the narrative in Down Below is structured around rituals of food and appetite(1991: 223). In the beginning of the text Carrington remarks how her increasing anxiety manifested itself in a restriction of food; she limits herself to a diet of
salad and potatoes, in order to “cleanse the thick layers of filth” lining her stomach. Throughout the narrative diet and regimen come to figure as an important part of Carrington’s sense of power and control within a world where freedom has been denied – firstly in the chaotic world of war-torn Europe and then within the world of the psychiatric hospital in Spain. By internalising the chaos around her as a disease of the body, Carrington attempts to redeem the world through strict, ritualised alimentary processes. Alongside her attempt to unite the external world with the internal manifestations of her body, Carrington reads her psychosis as an attempt to bring together the oppositional poles of mind and body:

I realized that my anguish – my mind, if you prefer – was painfully trying to unite itself with my body; my mind could no longer manifest itself without producing an immediate effect on my body – on matter. Later it would exercise itself on other objects. (168)

Although startling in the way that Carrington records her experience within the rubric of Surrealist investigation, much of what she records reads as exemplary psychotic experience. What makes her text so fascinating is that it works hard to retain a sense of the hermetically sealed world of the psychotic patient, of a “hyper-aware, acutely reflexive mind” (Sass, 1992: 258) at the same time, in true psychoanalytic fashion, attempting to provide a key to understanding that experience. In this aspect Carrington’s text shares many similarities to what is perhaps the most celebrated – in psychiatric circles at least – account of paranoid schizophrenia: Daniel Paul Schreber’s Memoirs of My Nervous Illness (1903). A well-respected and highly intelligent man, Schreber suffered his most severe bout of mental illness after his appointment as Presiding Judge to the Appeal Court of Dresden in 1893. After several years of institutionalisation Schreber wrote an account of his illness which he used as part of his legal defence for his discharge from the asylum (PFL, Vol 9: 135). As with Carrington, Schreber hoped that a detailed description of his psychosis would be of some benefit to wider audience, in particular to medical science. Indeed Schreber’s memoirs have proved enormously important not only to psychiatry but also to psychoanalysis.

It was the extraordinary lucidity and clarity of Schreber’s memoirs that attracted Freud’s attention when he began his case study on paranoia, turning for the first time in his career to the examination of psychosis rather than neurosis. While the focus of "Psychoanalytic
Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia" (1910) is the connection between paranoia and repressed homosexuality (PFL, Vol. 9, 132), it was here that Freud first made parallel connections between dream life, psychosis, childhood and primitive culture; connections which Surrealism would later mine for its own revolutionary aesthetic practice. Indeed the focus of Freud's reading of Schreber's illness is Schreber's own account of a dream that he had shortly before the onset of his first major illness:

Once, in the early hours of the morning... when he was in a state between sleeping and waking, the idea occurred to him: 'that after all it really must be very nice to be a woman submitting to the act of copulation'. (36) This idea was one which he would have rejected with the greatest indignation if he had been fully conscious. (142)

For Freud, psychosis is a result of a conflict between the ego and reality, often stemming from an intolerable idea or event which leads to hallucinatory and delusional symptoms, including world-destruction fantasies, delusions of persecution, oral regression and the assumption of the role of redeemer. Thus Schreber's early dream of emasculation develops into a full blown experience of imagined transformation of sexual orientation: "he believed that he had a mission to save the world and to restore it to its lost state of bliss .... The most central part of his mission of redemption is that it must be preceded by his transformation into a woman" (PFL, Vol 9: 146). Once this transformation is complete, Schreber believes that his soul will be murdered and his body subject to sexual abuse (149). Freud reads Schreber's delusional emasculation as "the salient feature and the earliest germ of his delusional system.... It also proved to be the one part of it that persisted after his cure, and the one part that was able to retain a place in his behaviour in real life after he had recovered" (151). Throughout his illness Schreber imagines that he is being persecuted by his doctor, Flechsig, and by God. Indeed Freud notes that although previously a nonreligious man, God occupies a central role in Schreber's delusional cosmos and that his attitude toward him is a mixture of reverence and insubordination (187). In concentrating on Schreber's real and imagined experience of emasculation, Freud locates the origin of such fantasies in his relationship with his father: "Thus in the case of Schreber we find ourselves on the familiar ground of the father-complex" (191). Freud makes a great deal of Schreber's father's famed reputation for his work on therapeutic gymnastics and health in conjunction with his untimely death: "Such a father as this was by no means unsuitable for transfiguration into a God in the affectionate memory of the son whom he had been so early separated by death" (187). Freud therefore concludes that
Schreber's delusions stem from an infantile conflict with his father whereby his infantile attitude towards his father "is composed of the same mixture of reverent submission and mutinous insubordination that we have found in Schreber's relation to his God" (187-188). Summing up his views on paranoia Freud notes that the striking element in many cases of paranoia is the experience of social humiliation (197) which may bring to the fore feelings of both hate and love toward their persecutor. Subsequent research on Schreber's background, in particular the fraught and often humiliating nature of his relationship with his father, has sustained Freud's central hypothesis even though it overshadows the complexity of paranoid schizophrenia in general.

In Freud's detailed examination of the Schreber case and in Schreber's own memoirs we can detect similarities to Carrington's own description of delusional experiences. From Carrington's sense of persecution by a series of male figures to her attempts to save the world through her own alimentary regimen, Carrington provides us with an accurate account of some of the classic symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia. But perhaps what is most significant about Freud's reading to my argument here is the way in which psychoanalysis, in particular Freud's use of it in this case history, reads across the realms of reality, delusional psychosis and creative expression contained within autobiographical memoir. That is, like Surrealism, it looks for the connections between dream, reality, creativity and madness, in providing a key to the unconscious. Therefore I hope that Freud's reading of the Schreber case may provide some speculative insights into the origins and causes of Carrington's own experience and the text's relationship to the Surrealist canon.

As we have already noted, Carrington's illness manifests itself after Ernst has been taken away. The intolerability of this injustice instigates her attempt to purge the world of its "brutal ineptitude" through her stomach. And yet from this point on, Ernst seems to become indistinguishable from a series of retributive Oedipal figures present in the text. After weeks of living alone, in which she is interrogated and suspected of being a spy and treated with suspicion by the local villagers, an old friend finally arrives from Paris to help her escape across the border into Spain. By now, Carrington informs us, Belgium has collapsed and the Germans have entered France:

After three solitary weeks, Catherine, an Englishwoman, a very old friend of mine, arrived, fleeing from Paris with Michel Lucas, a Hungarian. A week went by and I believe they noticed nothing abnormal in me. One day, however,
Catherine, who had been for a long time under the care of psychoanalysts, persuaded me that my attitude betrayed an unconscious desire to get rid for the second time of my father: Max, whom I had to eliminate if I wanted to live. (165)

Driving the narrative structure of Carrington’s story are her attempts to escape a series of male figures who come to represent the powerful presence of her father: Max Ernst, who because of their difference in age already constituted a father figure to Carrington; various associates of Carrington’s father – such as the Dutchman Van Ghent; various embassy officials; the Doctors in Madrid as well as in the asylum in Santander. It is Van Ghent who plays a particularly sinister role in Carrington’s delusional fantasy and who takes on the role of the persecuting father as well as Hitler’s accomplice:

...in the Hotel Roma I met a Dutchman, Van Ghent, who was Jewish and somehow connected with the Nazi government, who had a son working for Imperial Chemicals, the English company. He showed me his passport, infested with Swastikas. (171)

and later

One evening, as I sat by Van Ghent on a café terrace watching the people of Madrid passing by, I felt that they were being manipulated by his eyes (171).

and again

I was still convinced that it was Van Ghent who had hypnotised Madrid, its men and its traffic, he who turned the people into zombies and scattered anguish like pieces of poisoned candy in order to make slaves of all. (172)

Believing that she must save Madrid and the world from Van Ghent, Carrington writes: “To me Van Ghent was my father, my enemy, and the enemy of mankind; I was the only one who could vanquish him; to vanquish him it was necessary for me to understand him” (173). As Carrington’s illness becomes more manifest, she is eventually put under the care of a physician by the name of Martínez Alonzo. “Panic-stricken and stuifed” by her political theories and perplexed by her condition generally, Alonzo retreats to a coastal resort in Portugal, leaving Carrington in the hands of another physician, Alberto N, who she immediately attempts to seduce: “Alberto was handsome; I hastened to seduce him,
for I said to myself: 'Here is my brother, who has come to liberate me from the fathers'” (174). But Alberto proves to be more interested in “the power of Papa Carrington and his millions” (174). In turn a Dr Pardo is summoned who places her in a sanatorium full of nuns but they too are unable to cope with her delusional political views. Finally Pardo and Alberto drug her with Luminal and give her an anaesthetic, before driving her out to the asylum in Santander and handing her over “like a cadaver” to a Dr Morales (175).

In the narration of these events Carrington’s characteristic black humour brings out the farcical and inept nature of her exchange between doctors and other officials, which heightens the sinister and frightening nature of her final incarceration. Here humour restores a sense agency to what is otherwise an alarming description of Carrington’s increasing vulnerability and powerlessness. As Gambrell argues

What is perhaps most surprising about “Down Below”… is the extent to which Carrington’s confession seems motivated and shaped by a profound critical awareness that the journey described therein is marked by her contact with a series of male figures who pass her – quite literally – from hand to hand (1997: 89).

Many of the relationships in the narrative are represented within an incestuous erotic triangle, recalling her own position within an erotically charged Surrealist coterie. Framing the exchange of Carrington between various officials of her father and the physicians purporting to treat her, is her exchange from one Surrealist brother to another, via the father. At the beginning of her journey Carrington is the lover of one of the favoured sons of the Surrealist movement – Max Ernst. After her experience of insanity, she is formally reunited with Breton, the father of the movement, in New York, before being taken into the care of Breton’s close friend and physician, Dr Mabille, with whom she undergoes treatment. In a postscript to the narrative, written in 1987, Carrington concludes the events of the narrative, reflecting on how once she was freed from the asylum by her cousin, who happened to be working as a doctor in Santander, her father had made arrangements to ship her off to a sanitarium in South Africa. But rather than be shipped off to another institution, Carrington fled to the embassy in Lisbon, where she met up with Renato Leduc, a friend of Picasso’s, whom she had known in Paris. Leduc offered her a marriage of convenience, so that she could escape with him to New York. Reflecting on those years Carrington concludes somewhat alarmingly that “At that time I was as
frightened of my family as of the Germans. ... I was just feeling that I would do anything not to be sent to Africa, not to fall in with my family's plans" (213).

The figure of the all-powerful father haunts the entire text. He is at the centre of Carrington's initial delusional world in the guise of the Nazi-collaborator van Ghent, who we eventually learn, is in fact an associate of her father's. The uncanniness of the text begins to emerge as we learn that at the heart of Carrington's paranoid delusions is the very real sense in which the political and historical events of her life are indeed manipulated and controlled by both her father and Hitler. Central to the powerful role played by the figure of the fascist father is that of the zombie. Throughout the narrative the figure of the zombie is associated with the dehumanising effect of war and the overall destruction of both artistic culture and political life. It is this loss of humanity and individuality, rather than any sense of her own physical vulnerability that fuels Carrington's fear:

> The Germans were approaching. For Catherine, the Germans meant rape. I was not afraid of that. I attached no importance to it. What caused panic to rise within me was the thought of robots, of thoughtless, fleshless beings. (166)

Here and elsewhere in the text it is social and political manipulation and control, rather than physical violation, that renders Carrington's fear most palpable. The figure of the robot is an image that powerfully invokes the spectral horror of the mass political subject of fascism and which seems to haunt, along with its analogous figure, the zombie, the entire narrative of *Down Below*.13 Associated with the automaton - Freud and Surrealism's archetypal figure of the uncanny - the robot/zombie haunts both the outside world of Europe and the inside world of the asylum, connecting Carrington's internal psychotic drama with the political and social psychosis of war-torn Europe. Taking on the role of redeemer, Carrington writes:

> I thought that the Moraleses were masters of the Universe, powerful magicians who made use of their power to spread horror and terror. I knew... that the world was conjealed and that it was up to me to vanquish the Moraleses and the Van Ghents in order to set it in motion again. (186)

Within the external world the robot or zombie controlled by an all-powerful father is a trope for the dehumanising and destructive effects of fascism and war. Within the asylum
it comes to signify the effects of Cardiazol, the shock treatment administered by the
doctors in order to tame and control Carrington and other mentally ill patients. Driving
the narrative structure is Carrington’s fear of conformity, institutionalisation and a loss of
individuality; within the stultified upper-class world of her family, within the psychiatric
hospital and within the fascist state.  

In reading Carrington’s narrative, as with Schreber’s Memoirs, what soon becomes striking
is the way that delusion closely intersects with reality, with historical fact and personal
biography. What Carrington’s account reveals is the intrusion of the unconscious into the
everyday, so that at times neither she nor the reader can decipher where reality ends and
delusion begins. This becomes most apparent in the early part of the narrative in a
description that powerfully evokes the grotesque reality of war:

We had driven all night. I would see before me, on the road, trucks with legs and
arms dangling behind them, but being unsure of myself, I would say shyly: “There
are trucks ahead of us,” just to find out what the answer would be. When they
said: “The road is wide, we’ll manage to bypass them,” I felt reassured; but I did
not know whether or not they saw what was carried in those trucks, greatly fearing
I would arouse their suspicions and becoming prey to shame, which paralysed me.
The road was lined with rows of coffins... They were obviously people who had
been killed by the Germans. I was very frightened: it all stank of death. I learned
later that there was a huge military cemetery in Perpignan (167).

Here and at other moments in the text it becomes hard to differentiate between psychotic
delusion and paranoia and the surreal and chaotic experience of war. In this passage the
reader is not told whether the limbs belong to human beings who are still alive or whether
they are amputated body parts. The confusion over semantic meaning for the reader
mirrors Carrington’s own confused state within the unimaginable horror of war. Here
Carrington’s account achieves a poetic lucidity that contrasts with the psychotic nature of
warfare, blurring the distinction between the insane and the rational. Similarly,
throughout the text there is often an obsession emphasis on words and their meanings.
We have seen how the jamming of the car’s brakes and Catherine’s utterance that the
brakes have jammed take on a monumental significance: Carrington’s sense of impending
emotional and psychic seizure as well as being jammed geographically between France
and Spain. Before she sets out on her journey Carrington has to be convinced by her
friend, Catherine, to make the trip to Spain. Finally acquiescing Carrington informs us
that: "I accepted above all because, in my evolution, Spain represented for me Discovery" (166). Later sorting through the things that she will take with her, Carrington carefully packs them "into a suitcase which bore, beneath my name, a small brass plate set into the leather, on which was written the word REVELATION" (166).

Carrington's account of her incarceration in Down Below adds to the body of women's literature that attempts to examine madness and the treatment that women received from psychiatric institutions, treatment which often replicated the sort of behaviour that the subjects were trying to flee. Carrington's experience of brutality and infantalisation in the clinic mirrors the senseless brutality and dehumanising experience of the war, so that personal experience and historical event come to mirror each other. Recounting increasingly psychotic acts, until her final incarceration, the narrative then abruptly shifts as we are brought back into "real time" and the scene of self-conscious analysis:

Tuesday, August 24, 1943

I am afraid I am going to drift into fiction, truthful but incomplete, for lack of some details which I cannot conjure up today and which might have enlightened us. This morning, the idea of the egg came to my mind and I thought that I could use it as a crystal to look at Madrid in those days of July and August 1940 – for why should it not enclose my own experiences as well as the past and future history of the universe? The egg is the macrocosm and the microcosm, the dividing line between the Big and the Small which makes it possible to see the whole. To possess the telescope without its essential half – the microscope – seems to me the darkest incomprehension. The task of the right eye is to peer into the telescope, while the left eye peers into the microscope. (175)

Within the self-conscious, self analytical moment of the "talking/writing cure" the symbol of the egg gives birth to the double vision of the macroscopic and the microscopic, of the self and the world. Carrington seems to suggest that the hallucinations and delusions that she experienced are tied not only to her private psychotic moment but the psychosis of history, the literal madness of war-torn Europe. In trying to uncover the memory of those days, the narrative refuses to lose sight of the historical context of her suffering and madness: her personal loss of Ernst as a result of the crisis of war and his own institutionalisation as an enemy alien. The microscope and the telescope thus become tropes for the dramatic shifts in narrative perspective: the staged truth of fiction and self-
analysis haunting the incompleteness of memory and historical fact. Indeed Alice Gambrell argues that *Down Below* continually explores “the boundary between fact and fiction, between history and hallucination (1997: 94)”. In recreating scenes of psychosis the text takes on the contradiction at the heart of the uncanny: it is familiar and unfamiliar; repudiating mimesis in the way it draws attention to the present time of its writing but also mimetically restoring the scene of madness absent in *Nadja*. It is as though Carrington goes in search of the absent and silent meanings of Nadja’s visions and hallucinations in the context of her own madness, giving them a political and cultural weight that Breton glosses over in his narrative.

If the uncanny encounter is the structuring principle of *Nadja*, in *Down Below* the narrative is constructed around the idea of a double vision: the microscopic and the macroscopic, the inside and the outside. Through this double vision Carrington recounts the vivid detail of her hallucinations and delusions as part of a microscopic focus, but connects them to a macroscopic view of a world in crisis. Thus events in the outside world take on an oblique relationship to the material realities of her experience of madness and incarceration. She writes:

> I believed that I was being put through purifying tortures so that I might attain Absolute Knowledge, at which point I could live *Down Below*. The pavilion with this name was for me the Earth, the Real World, Paradise, Eden, Jerusalem. Don Luis and Don Mariano were God and His Son. I thought they were Jewish; I thought that I, a Celtic and Saxon Aryan, was undergoing my sufferings to avenge the Jews for the persecutions they were being subjected to. Later I would go *Down below* as the third person of the trinity.... The son was the Sun and I the Moon, an essential element of the trinity, with the microscopic knowledge of the earth, its plants and creatures. I knew that Christ was dead and done for, and that I had to take His place, because the trinity, minus a woman and microscopic knowledge, had become dry and incomplete. (195)

In this hallucination of grandeur, it is microscopic knowledge, metaphorically gendered as “woman”, that is missing in the scheme of things. Although a classic example of the redemption fantasy frequently seen in patients with delusional paranoia, it also reinforces an imagined erotic triangle of father, son, and daughter. It recalls Carrington’s sense of powerlessness as a young woman, firstly in the familial arrangements of her life in

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England and later in the Surrealist coterie structure of patronage and collaboration. Born into a wealthy but conservative upperclass family, Carrington lamented the fact that she was not afforded the same privileges of education and inheritance bestowed upon her brothers; that indeed despite their incompetence and stupidity they would take up positions of power and authority in the world. The passage also recalls Breton, Christ-like as the self-professed leader of the Surrealist revolution, whose work on madness is “incomplete” and “dry”, lacking the microscopic detail that Carrington is now recounting, since he abandoned Nadja at the point at which she began to articulate her own personal narrative. The pathos of this abandonment is revealed when Breton exposes his frustration with Nadja’s increasingly elaborate stories:

Sometimes I reacted with terrible violence against the over-detailed account she gave me of certain scenes of her past life, concerning which I decided, probably quite superficially, that her dignity could not have survived entirely intact. (113) [my emphasis]

Breton’s distaste at the details of Nadja’s own narrative reinforces Benjamin’s reading of Breton’s encounter with Nadja as akin to courtly love romance. For Breton, the details of Nadja’s past produce a sense of disgust while her symbolic location within the street – “the only field of valid experience” – brings him closer to the world at the centre of his heroic quest. In this context, Carrington’s work restores this “over-detailed” microscopic dimension of female psychosis, the absent details of Nadja’s own narrative. Moreover, the image of the microscope recalls the scientific zeal with which Breton pursued his Surrealist experiment. In Carrington’s text the microscope becomes an instrument for unearthing the hidden layers of the unconscious, “down below” the surface of the everyday. Together the microscope and the telescope provide an intimate and individual experience alongside an historical and political worldview.

**Conclusion**

Like many Surrealist works *Down Below* employs the errant logic of free-association in its weaving of the unconscious and the conscious, the past with the present, memory with fiction, mimesis with metaphor, working against narrative linearity and the creation of a static autobiographical subject. The text continually makes us aware of the self-conscious staging of events within the narrative as part of the “talking/writing cure”, in a manner similar to Breton’s auto-analysis in *Nadja*. Despite Carrington’s stated endeavour to
provide accurate and detailed account of the various states of her madness – her dreams, delusions and hallucinations – the text as a whole is not just a straightforward description of madness. In recording her experience, Carrington does not “dissolve the present self in order to resurrect the past” (Hubert, 1994: 114) but self-consciously exposes the presentness of all autobiographical writing. In this way the text explores autobiographical narrative in a manner that is very close to both Breton’s construction of the autobiographical subject in Nadja and Schreber’s reflexive and self-conscious articulation of the psychotic experience. Although Carrington attempts to accurately represent the experience of psychosis, she also makes us aware of the uncontrollable movement of her narrative as it weaves between the flux of memory and the present and controlled moment of narration. As such the entire narrative becomes infused with a sense of individual agency as well as literary purpose that reflects Breton’s own commitment to the representation of experience through literary language and the avowed acknowledgment of chance in the aesthetic process. Significantly, however, Carrington’s narrative also positions itself against the disembodied nature of the detached male observer of madness. As Hubert argues: “Although we can justifiably construe the narrative as essentially an account of erotic, social, and political victimization by a phallocratic institution, we can find even better reasons for treating it as an unusual example of feminine liberation” (1994:115). Despite its detailed account of physical violation and mental torment, the subject in the text is imbued with both power and a sense of rebellion.

Finally, it is within madness – within the representation of dreamstates, hallucinations and delusions of grandeur – that Carrington’s text is imbued with the uncanny. As I have suggested, Carrington’s internal loss of equilibrium is repeatedly shadowed by the political and social horror of the external world. This reflects the operation of a Freudian uncanny which works in literature by destabilising the boundary between what is literal and what is figural. It is this eloquence at the heart of her most extraordinary delusions that makes Down Below a work of uncanny insight. In the process of representing the haunting experience of madness Carrington lucidly interrogates a male modernist reading of the madwoman – her spectral image observed, photographed, eroticised, infantilised and dissected – an image descended from Charcot’s highly fetishised display of the hysterical and reified in Nadja. While Down Below is symbolically haunted by Nadja, in the wake of a feminist reading of Carrington’s text, Breton’s narrative and indeed the whole project of Surrealist revolutionary desire has come to be haunted by Nadja herself.
1 See Salomon Resnik, _Personne et Psychose: études sur le langage du corps_ for a discussion of the importance of Carrington’s description of madness to psychiatry, in particular the way in which she registers the meaning of the external world through bodily experience. Feminist work on Carrington’s text includes Marina Warner (1989), Renee Riese Hubert (1994) and Alice Gambrell (1998).

2 Various critical readings of _Nadja_ have informed this chapter; they include Kevin Brophy (1998), JH Matthews (1982), Susan Rubin Suleiman (1990), Kendall Johnson (1999) and Margaret Cohen (1993).

3 For the purposes of this chapter I will not be engaging with a Derridean hauntology but rather a directly Freudian one developed in “The Uncanny”. Of course many other writers have examined this essay in relation to Surrealist writing and art. Those that have directly influenced this chapter in terms of their work on the uncanny in relation to Surrealism include Elizabeth Wright, Kendall Johnson, Margaret Cohen and Hal Foster. The notion of the uncanny and its related concepts – haunting, ghosts, the double – are central to a psychoanalytically inflected Surrealist aesthetics and will appear time and again in my discussion.

4 Howard translates this phrase as “books left ajar, like doors” (18).

5 Many critics have noted Howard’s inaccurate translation of _Nadja_, hence my inclusion of Cohen’s which seems to work better in this context.

6 Mark Polizzotti notes that despite his attempts to verify Nadja’s surname, he has been repeatedly blocked by both members of the Surrealist movement and the psychiatric profession (265).

7 Elsewhere in Carrington’s fiction the ethiopian underworld is a Surreal Wonderland, a site imbued with risk and adventure as well as a utopian female world of imagination and creativity. See my analysis of the underground metonym in Carrington’s novel _The Hearing Trumpet_ in Chapter Four.

8 Pierre Mabille was Breton’s close friend and doctor for nearly twenty years. As the cultural attaché to Haiti, Mabille, with the help of others, invited Breton at the end of the war to give a series of lectures on the island. Whilst on this visit Mabille organised for Breton to witness the secret voodoo rituals of the Haitian people. Breton was particularly impressed by the phenomenon of “possession” which he compared to his own experiments with “sleeping fits” (Polizzotti, 1997: 532).

9 Alice Gambrell’s extensive textual comparisons between the original VVV publication and the one established for Virago with Marina Warner reveals some striking differences. Gambrell concludes that for Carrington “the terms of representation must constantly be shifted – not in order to disclaim the possibility of ‘factual accuracy’ – but in order to achieve a more complicated version of what constitutes ‘fact’” (98).

10 In her introduction to _The Seventh Horse and other Tales_, Marina Warner writes that Carrington was “cast to perform the role of the marvellous erotic and farouche child.” But as well as performing the role of femme enfant, Max Ernst expected her “to be a femme de ménage, and to provide for the guests who flowed in from Paris and London and other points and stayed to talk and play, dress up, quarrel, tease one another, explore and feast and drink…” (np).

11 This is Louis Sass’s description of how, for the psychotic patient (in this case Schreber), everyday events and thoughts become the subject of intense scrutiny.

12 Louis A Sass writes: “Schreber’s memoirs, which Elias Canetti calls “the most important document in psychiatric literature,” made the author perhaps the most famous and influential patient in the history of psychiatry. Though the book, which contains virtually all the classic symptoms of both schizophrenia and paranoia, is seldom read, it has played a major role in forming modern conceptions of schizophrenia, of paranoia, and of psychosis in general… And Schreber continues to be cited as a paradigmatic case of the
schizophrenic diagnosis in contemporary psychiatry" (1994: 6-7). It is interesting to note that Walter Benjamin, a devotee of the nonrational, owned a copy of Schreber's Memoirs.

13 Klaus Theweleit, in his study of the Freikorps in Male Fantasies, uses psychoanalysis to help understand the fascist imagination and its fears of contamination by women and Jews, often represented in terms of bodily violation and subsumation.

14 Within the context of Surrealism the figure of the manipulating father alongside his doll-like robot recalls Hans Bellmer's series of Poupées.
6. Photograph of the hysteric Augustine in André Breton and Paul Eluard, “Le Cinquantenaire de l'hystérie,” La Révolution surréaliste (March 15, 1928)

8. Prologue, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali, Un chien andalou, 1928
Chapter Four
Transgression and Subversion
in *The Hearing Trumpet* and *Story of the Eye*.

Introduction

The themes of violence and transgression, propriety and social ritual resonate throughout Carrington’s visual and textual work. In *The Hearing Trumpet* they are taken up in a satirically comic mode and explored at the intersection between myth and autobiographical anecdote. Written in Mexico City sometime between the late 1940’s and early 1950’s, the novel weaves autobiographical and historical vignettes into an ironic retelling of the Grail legend. At the centre of the novel are a series of transgressive female characters who attempt to subvert various institutions – the family, the mental institution and the church. The novel also disrupts a Bretonian idealism through its parodic representation of female transgression: the novel’s central character, Marian Leatherby (“let her be”), explicitly challenges the Surrealist idealisation of the femme-enfant, and celebrates – through the magical hearing trumpet – the symbolic nature of the ear and a female storytelling tradition. In comic defiance of Surrealist convention, Carrington’s intrepid heroine sports a rather gallant beard and at the age of ninety-two leads a group of senile old women in revolt against their corrupt institution, finally succeeding in literally turning the world upside down.2 Within Marian’s own narrative is the story of the winking Abbess, Dona Rosalinda, whose portrait hangs in the dining room of the institution. Dona Rosalinda’s perverse escapades are chronicled in a book written by the Confessor of the Abbey which eventually falls into Marian’s hands. As their stories begin to merge the novel moves toward its apocalyptic ending in which a new ice age restores the Grail to Hecate and a non-Christian female (and feminist) underground tradition.3

In many ways the novel celebrates Carrington’s life in Mexico, in particular her close friendship and artistic collaboration with the Surrealist artist, Remedios Varo.4 At the same time that the novel pays homage to this new collaborative phase it also casts a winking glance over a more youthful past and Carrington’s association with the Surrealist movement in France. While in “The Debutante” Carrington had explored adolescent rebellion in the context of the cross-cultural commodification and exchange of women’s bodies, and by implication Carrington’s own experience of this process,
The Hearing Trumpet incorporates subversive revisionist strategies in order to parody its own attempts at an autonomous Surrealist aesthetic. Pasted throughout the narrative are "souvenirs" of the past; autobiographical vignettes which give the novel its collage effect. The setting of the novel, an institution for old ladies, recalls Carrington's experience in a psychiatric institution in Spain during the war. Very different in tone from Down Below, The Hearing Trumpet lampoons and critiques traditional forms of knowledge and institutional practices through defiant fantasy. The central object of the narrative, the hearing trumpet, becomes a surreal device aiding Marian's parodic quest for knowledge, one which suggests the importance of the ear to Carrington's textual iconography. The novel also shares a Surrealist exploration of the violated and/or distorted hybridised body as intrinsic to its aesthetic critique of the normative subject of bourgeois ideology.

The figure of the detached eye is a ubiquitous example of bodily violation as a critique of knowledge within Surrealism. Carrington's surreal trumpet and its connection to the ear disturbs a celebration of the violated eye metaphor. Notoriously present in Bataille's early Surrealist pornographic novel, Story of the Eye, the metaphor of the violated eye unfolds the Oedipal connections of Bataille's parodic exploration of the quest narrative and its connections to a psychoanalytically influenced Surrealist quest narrative. In reading Carrington's novel alongside Bataille's, I want to contemplate how these two texts, through their use of parody, autobiography and fantasy, explore a Surrealist interest in the aesthetic violation of the human body as central to the movement's anti-institutional and anti-bourgeois politics. However, I also want to suggest that these two texts critique a Bretonian transcendental vision, defined in "The Second Manifesto" as the ideal point at which all contradictions cease (1972:123-124). Here, Breton's imagined romantic unity produces an idealism that encompasses everything from the idea itself to his conception of heterosexual love. In contrast to a Bretonian transcendence, Carrington's and Bataille's texts sustain rather than resolve contradiction. While Bataille uses violence and obscenity to explore the contradictory elements of the high and the low within cultural experience, Carrington employs the categories of the hybrid and the grotesque to critique a Bretonian celebration of a femininity at once transgressive and erotic. In de-eroticising feminine transgression, Carrington replaces the figure of the femme-enfant with the maternal figure of the crone whose transgression is signified through the categories of the hybrid and the grotesque.

In reading Carrington's text through the framework of transgression, I argue that it is imbued with a critical relationship to Surrealism in the manner of Bataille's fundamental opposition to a Bretonian idealism. As I illustrate, Bataille and
Carrington incorporate parodic effects into their texts; strategies of appropriation and travesty which underlie a certain resistance to a high Surrealist literary practice. The Hearing Trumpet constitutes an important, early example of feminist revisionist fiction: a category of writing that has come to mark contemporary avant-garde feminist writing, including work by Kathy Acker, Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson and Monique Wittig. Carrington is one of the few women Surrealists who has publicly identified herself as a feminist and who has spoken critically of the power imbalance inherent in many of the personal and artistic relationships between male and female Surrealists.5 The Hearing Trumpet explores a feminist polemic within a Surrealist aesthetic and political methodology. As a hybrid of feminism and Surrealism the novel necessarily transgresses the disciplinary boundaries of Surrealism, signalling the contradictions and tensions within these two disciplinary categories. Central to Carrington’s employment of the hybrid, both in terms of form and theme, is her use of play and perversion – which Suleiman suggests makes her work particularly close to the “carnivalesque”. Suleiman situates Carrington’s work between “Surrealism and (feminist) postmodernism” since it aligns “the subversive laughter of carnival with the figure – and even more important, with the voice – of the mother” (1990: 145). In her reading of Bataille’s Story of the Eye, Suleiman similarly locates the drama of transgression within the contradiction of the maternal body: the fascination and the terror, the fear and the desire provoked by the mother’s sexuality (85). If the maternal body becomes a trope for transgression and subversion in Bataille’s and Carrington’s texts then its figuration is often explored through the spatial arrangement of the labyrinth. The network of myth, personal anecdote and narrative fantasy in Carrington’s text mirrors Bataille’s horizontal and circular exploration of metaphor and metonymy in Story of the Eye. Each text inscribes a narrative process of leakage – between objects and words and between narrative styles – which reflects a privileging of the spatial form of the labyrinth over and above a transcendent unity.

Before turning to an examination of transgression itself, however, I want to make some preliminary comments about my reading practice in this chapter. This chapter began as a reflection on Suleiman’s groundbreaking work on gender politics and the avant-garde in Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde (1990). In a recent article, “Dialogue and Double Allegiance: Some Contemporary Women Artists and the Historical Avant-Garde” (1998), Suleiman reflects on her earlier use of the term “double allegiance” to describe a certain kind of dynamic in the work of contemporary avant-garde feminist writers. Suleiman applied the term to those postmodernist writers (Kathy Acker and Angela Carter) who were drawn to the avant-garde work of male predecessors such as Bataille and Aragon but who were also interested in feminist critiques of the power relations inherent in the discourses of male avant-garde
movements such as Surrealism. In “Dialogue and Double Allegiance” Suleiman extends the concept to include not only artistic practice but also critical practice:

Dialogism does not simply occur; it is also, to a large extent, staged by the critic who juxtaposes works and makes them speak to each other, perhaps even inventing the very words one work might address to the other. (1998:133)

Suleiman argues that to perform such a staging, the feminist critic must not be tied to a single reading but move equivocally between positions. Just as the critic must be open to her positionality, Suleiman has also warned of the necessity to negotiate the historical differences between texts. In staging a reading between Carrington and Bataille, I hope to provide some insights into the nature of these texts and their relationship to the Surrealist movement, while also paying attention to the nuances of each text. If the critic’s work pivots around an imagined dialogue between two authors as well as a series of shifting allegiances between different kinds of readings and various sorts of disciplines, then these strategies are themselves present within certain historical avant-garde texts.

I would argue that “double allegiance” is the defining characteristic of Carrington’s and Bataille’s texts. Both push beyond the limits of the disciplinary boundaries that came to define Surrealism throughout the 1920’s and 1930’s; one as Surrealism’s “enemy from within” and the other with “a smooth, mocking gaze” – characterisations which exemplify the parodic nature of their work. Historically, these texts are situated at either end of the Surrealist movement and therefore reflect a unique relationship to the contingencies of their time and place. Published anonymously in the same year as Breton’s Nadja, in 1928, Story of the Eye was in some senses an underground text; one that reflects its opposition to a psychoanalytic literary quest narrative exemplified by Nadja. Bataille’s opposition to what he called Breton’s Icarian idealism would become more explicit a year later when he came to write his critical essay, “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme and Surrealiste”. In this essay Bataille responds to Breton’s virulent attack on him in the Second Manifesto (1930). Similarly, Carrington’s text was circulated and read privately for many years before the manuscript was lost. The autobiographical context out of which these texts emerge is central to my reading of the way in which literary transgression itself becomes a response to the personal, literary and historical context of the work. Bataille came to write Story of the Eye at the recommendation of his analyst, Adrien Borel, in part as a way of transferring his violent opposition to dignity – manifested in his obsession with brothels, orgies and all forms of perversion – into an “intellectual violence” (Stoekl, 1985:x). Indeed much of Bataille’s early work, including Story of the
Eye, can be traced back to the Oedipal terror of his blind, syphilitic and eventually insane father(x). But while the text invites us to read autobiographical confession alongside narrative fiction, Bataille also parodies the narrative function of the psychoanalytic case history. Similarly, the autobiographical context of Carrington’s novel – as well as its incorporation of personal anecdote – is significant to a reading of her text. The novel emerges out of a new Surrealist phase in Mexico, and through the characters of Marian and Carmella, celebrates her important collaborative relationship with Remedios Varo. Although both texts incorporate modes of autobiography and self-analysis they also parody the very nature of quest narratives providing an ironic twist to Breton’s ‘Who am I?’ at the beginning of his own quest narrative, Nadja. While Carrington parodies a Bretonian celebration of the femme-enfant, Bataille’s erotically violent quest parodies a Bretonian celebration of pure heterosexual love.}

*Story of the Eye* explores transgression through the play of unlimited pornographic and lexical substitution. Similarly, Carrington’s text unfolds an infinite number of different myths, stories and anecdotes which converge into each other, producing a narrative structure that is labyrinthine and intricately overlaid. In her text, the two most celebrated female figures within Surrealism, the femme-enfant and the madwoman, are transposed into the figure of the transgressive crone: it is senility as opposed to madness, hybridity as opposed to the dissected female body, that Carrington’s novel celebrates. Marian Leatherby and her alter ego, the winking Abbess, together unleash chaos on the world, bringing about a final apocalyptic moment in which a new ice age begins and the surviving inhabitants move to a cavern “down below” the earth. The cross-dressing, winking Abbess, a figure of majestic and grotesque excess, allegorically signals Carrington’s own transgressive textual practice. Through the motif of the wink (suggested in the text as a blinding of one eye), the novel sets in place its ironic tone; one in which laughter and excess foreground the materiality of body and its subversive position within a feminist aesthetic. While Bataille uses obscenity to illustrate rupture and transgression – as in the placement of a priest’s eye in the lower orifices – Carrington employs satire and laughter to signify rebelliousness and regeneration. The upside-down world of the carnivalesque is represented in Carrington’s text through a comic pastiche of different versions of the Grail legend. Similarly, her use of the grotesque turns on its head a Surrealist idealisation of the young and beautiful female muse. In *The Hearing Trumpet* the layering of myth and legend competes with random interjections of personal memoir so that both public and private, the personal and the cultural, history and autobiography are never distinct; rather they are always set in relation to each other. In self-consciously confusing the boundaries between author and subject, between fiction and autobiography, these texts highlight an
investment in the author or artist as a deviant subject, one who articulates our relation to the world through writing, desire and the body. A closer examination of the importance of transgression to these two works will serve as a frame for my discussion of each text and its relationship to Surrealism.

Transgression

The concept of transgression within Surrealism is invariably located in the practice of disjunction as well as consisting of an exploration of the limits of consciousness and reality. In Bataille’s and Carrington’s texts the operation of desire, fantasy and the unconscious unfolds through a series of lexical and mythological substitutions which challenge particular cultural and discursive codes. The operation of transgression therefore lies in their pulling apart of traditional forms and practices, to get below or beyond the surface of things. However, in both these texts the modes of fiction and autobiography come together in a way that suggests transgression itself signifies a certain crisis of subjectivity and the representation of the self. In “A Preface to Transgression”, first published in a special issue of Critique (Aug-Sept, 1963) devoted to Bataille, Foucault examines the historical and social conditions that have made transgression important to contemporary subjectivity. Foucault argues that at a point in time in which sexuality defines who we are in relation to the world, the concept of transgression has come to replace the idea of profanation. Foucault credits Bataille for seeing the connections between language and sexuality and the importance of transgression to a modern subjectivity:

... since Sade and the death of God, the universe of language has absorbed our sexuality, denatured it, placed it in a void where it establishes its sovereignty and where it incessantly sets up as the Law the limits it transgresses. (85)

In this essay Foucault reveals the way in which sexuality both determines and is determined by language. He argues that since the death of God, it has become obsolete to speak of the sacred; language no longer serves “as a veil for the infinite” (85). In the wake of the modern sexual subject, language is employed in the service of finitude and being (85). Foucault suggests that, for Bataille, writing itself becomes a moment of deferring one’s own imminent finitude (writing as a transgression of death) as well as signalling the crisis of being. In a world in which the subject is defined through sexuality, the self’s boundaries are thus constituted through erotic transgression; but transgression also involves a systematic loss of self since it is the moment in which the boundaries that constitute the sexed subject are transcended. As Foucault informs us, the paradox of transgression that Bataille’s work makes manifest is that beyond the
limit that defines the subject there is nothing, only a limitless void. Paradoxically, this is also the site of excess, an excess that Bataille's narrative repeatedly plays out. In *Story of the Eye*, there is no limit to the possibilities of transgression: everything becomes something else as everything is pushed to its limit. In *The Hearing Trumpet* the multiple layering of story and myth evokes an unlimited circulation of semantic meaning and mythological interpretation.

Tracing the origins of contemporary theory to earlier avant-garde experiments on language and subjectivity, Suzanne Guerlac suggests that

> The powers subsequently claimed for theory are a displacement of powers attributed to literature, variously theorised in terms of modernist pure art, transgression, automatism, and engagement. (2)

In her prehistory of postmodernism, Guerlac reveals how Bataille's notion of transgression was crucial to the development of poststructuralism but that a poststructuralist reading of Bataille almost invariably equates "transgression with polysemia and the infinite play of significance, characterised as the literary equivalent of perversity" (23). In the Surrealism of Bataille and Carrington the notion of transgression is indissoluble from an awareness of the boundaries that it shatters, so that the practice of writing discloses an implicit awareness of the traditional boundaries of meaning and unity that makes representation possible; as well as being aware that the play of these systems of writing constitutes its very subversion. Surrealist writing, then, constitutes a particular kind of displacement which functions as the risk of the destruction and the consummation of meaning. And yet, as Guerlac argues, one important aspect of Bataille's notion of transgression is left out of a poststructuralist account of transgression; the opposition between the sacred and the profane, which crucially, for my reading of *Story of the Eye* and *The Hearing Trumpet*, unfolds a further series of binary oppositions; between nature and culture and between violence and reason, suggesting that transgression in these texts is literary and linguistic as well as ideological. Read within the context of Bataille's then largely undeveloped system of thought, *Story of the Eye* reveals his subsequent interest in the connection between eroticism and sacrifice. For Bataille, eroticism, like sacrifice, opens up the body to vulnerability and violence, which unleashes a raw and profound experience of life; one which makes manifest the very real meaning of death and overcomes what he defines as the banal inertia of middle-class values of orderliness and propriety. Just as semantic transgression involves both the simultaneous loss and creation of meaning, the erotic encounter involves both the recognition and violation of the other as well as the maintenance and loss of the self. As Michael Richardson

Despite Foucault’s claims that the modern sexual subject has replaced the importance of the sacred with that of sexual transgression, both Carrington and Bataille’s texts examine the tension between the sacred and the profane as part of their incorporation of religious parody. In *The Hearing Trumpet* this leads to an exploration of the violent and irrational nature of institutional power and cultural practices, in particular social propriety and religious hierarchy. Carrington’s text unfolds through the symbiotic relationship of interdiction and transgression, which sets in play the desire to reconfigure other kinds of binary imperatives: nature and culture, male and female, human and animal, propriety and impropriety as well as the internal and external body. As a feminist parodic rewriting of the Grail legend and a turning upside-down of the figure of the *femme-enfant*, the narrative reveals its investment in disturbing the arrangements of all binary categories, including canonical Surrealist ones. Through its proliferation of versions of the Grail myth, Carrington celebrates the ludic, the eclectic and the perverse at the expense of idealism, linearity and truth. Similarly, in Bataille’s text, as in his entire œuvre, the dual operation of transgression and interdiction slides into other oppositional categories; of the sacred and the profane, culture and nature, desire and anxiety, eroticism and death, expenditure and accumulation, attraction and fascination. As Guerlac argues, Bataille’s interest in these binary structures emphasises “the irrational (emotional) nature of interdiction itself and, in this sense, the irrational foundation of reason...” (1990: 96). But there is also a sense in which their work opens up the precariousness and instability of the transgressive moment. Rather than romanticise or idealise the revolutionary moment of the marvellous, as much of Breton’s work seeks to do, they confront the material and productive elements of transgression, which they locate not only in language but within the female body. In Carrington’s novel, in order to resist becoming an object of cultural and aesthetic exchange, the transgressive woman takes on the qualities of hybridity and the grotesque. Although Bataille reverses to some extent a Surrealist mutilation of the female body and a Bretonian idealism concerning love, his text reinforces the erotic and transgressive object as always female, at the disposal of a male avant-garde tradition. A close reading of each text will elaborate a more nuanced understanding of how transgression operates in these texts as well as their relationship to a wider Surrealist context.
The very title of Bataille’s first novel references a Surrealist interest in the enucleated eye as a symbol of its anti-rationalist polemic and as a motif for a post-war crisis of subjectivity and “ways of seeing”. The recurring image of the detached or violated eye forms part of a general modernist aesthetics of violence toward, and scrutiny of, the body. Within a Surrealist aesthetic this iconic image locates a more specific cultural obsession whereby the process of displacement operates as a law of transgression, producing a much desired discordant effect, exemplified by Lautréamont’s famous coupling of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a disecting table. The figure of the detached or violated eye is a trope for Surrealist strategies of displacement, dissection and doubling. In these stylistic forms, displacement works by uncovering a repressed other in the unbinding of an object’s meaning. The process of doubling and dissection therefore produces a shifting of the boundaries of subjectivity; one which aligns a Surrealist violation of form with the sadistic and erotic drives of the deviant subject.

In the axis between avant-garde culture and a newly emerging science of psychoanalysis, the location of the artist/writer as deviant outsider, outside of both cultural and aesthetic norms, is perhaps inseparable from the strategies and effects they employ. The logic of the Surrealist object, like that of Surrealist identity in its employment of the alter-ego, implicitly involves a strategy of doubling, requiring us, as Matthews suggests (1986: 213), to look at it in two directions – to look at what it has been and to look toward what it might become – a strategy that registers the object’s signification within a discourse of desire and becoming.

The recurring image of the detached eye suggests the psychoanalytic, indeed Oedipal foundations of Surrealist aesthetics. It also points to a sense of visual crisis in the wake of the First World War as well as the movement’s anti-mimetic approach. The violence performed on the eye, however, is also an extension of the erotic violence directed toward the female body. In Man Ray’s “Object of Destruction” (see fig. 7) we witness acutely the sense of the surreal as a culture of systematic displacement; a culture invested in the processes of desire rather than truth. This piece was born of Man Ray’s anger at Lee Miller’s decision to break away and set up her own photographic studio in New York. Cutting out a photograph of Miller’s eye, the photographer’s most vulnerable organ, Man Ray attached it to the arm of a metronome with an invitation to the spectator to ‘destroy the object’ (Chadwick:1985,118). When we consider that the function of the metronome is “to keep time”, we can therefore
7. Man Ray *Object of Destruction*, 1932

imagine that this is precisely where Man Ray wishes to keep his former assistant. Fixed to the arm of the metronome, Lee Miller remains the keeper of time, the traditional role assigned to the photographer's assistant in the dark room.

The slit eye in Dali and Buñuel's film, *Un chien andalou* (see fig. 8), is perhaps Surrealism's most violent and memorable moment of ocular violation. Made in 1929, the film shares many of the formal and thematic concerns of *Story of the Eye*, which was written and published anonymously a year earlier. In the film, the slitting of the eye takes place in the prologue which begins with the caption "once upon a time". The fairytale connotation of "once upon a time" is violently shattered by the image of a woman having her eye slit by a man who is possibly her lover, producing a discordant coupling of different levels of reality. Here the slit eye metaphorises both romantic and narrative blindness as our attempts to read coherently are continually frustrated by the film's disjointed anti-linear structure. On the employment of this device Inez Hedges writes:

> A recurrent surrealist theme is that it is necessary to blind oneself to "objective" reality in order to gain inner vision. Surrealism inverts the terms of blindness and sight, proposing various methods for acceding to true vision (117).

Hedges' observations explain in part the prolific occurrence of the violated eye within Surrealism. The violence so persistently enacted represents a Surrealist rhetoric of revolution and liberation, a freeing of the unconscious through the violent disconnection of everyday ways of seeing and perceiving. Although Buñuel refuses a singularly symbolic interpretation of the film, he has suggested that psychoanalysis may help to explain some of the film's meaning (Jay, 1994:257). One of the film's most ardent supporters was Bataille since it explores similar psychoanalytical terrain to his own account of ocular violation, *Story of the Eye*. The scene of the slicing of the eye in *Un chien andalou* – dispersed as it is with a close-up of the moon being dissected by clouds – points to the coupling of seduction and horror here and in Bataille's own pornographic fiction – a reading which Bataille himself seems to allude to when he describes the confusing but powerful effect being produced:

This film can be distinguished from banal avant-garde productions, with which one might be tempted to confuse it, in that the screenplay predominates. Several very explicit facts appear in successive order, without logical connection it is true, but penetrating so far into horror that the spectators are caught up as directly as they are in an adventure film. Caught up and even
precisely caught by the throat, and without artifice; do these spectators know, in fact, where they – the authors of this film, or people like them – will stop. ("Eye" in Visions: 19)

Foregrounding the unsettling effect that art can produce for both author and audience, Bataille locates the very limit of transgression as that which moves between the sacred and the profane, the seductive and the horrific. The representation of the eye in the film, like its counterpart in Story of the Eye, is both seductive and horrific, sadistic and erotic. In "Dictionary of Organs", a serial project for the Surrealist journal Documents, Bataille performs a lexicographical organ removal reminiscent of the play of objects in Story of the Eye. Publishing a short essay on a different organ of the body, Bataille displaces the part from the "whole", subjecting it to a detailed microscopic analysis. The individual organ is removed from the organic function of the whole in the same way that single words/objects in Story of the Eye are displaced and transformed. Both the organs of Bataille's dictionary and the objects of his narrative are turned into a locus of semantic concentration through which the part takes the values of the whole, revealing a kind of textual unconscious. As in the narrative of the Freudian case history, interpretation proceeds through a series of fetishised meanings extracted or displaced from the whole account. In the conflation of the textual and morphological body Bataille performs what is Story of the Eye's most persistent strategy: the construction of the perverse or the pornographic within language, what Allan Stoekl refers to as Bataille's "Oedipal obsession with intellectual violence" (Introduction x).

While Story of the Eye complicates the lines of demarcation between words and things, the Dictionary project's immediate concern is the blurred boundaries between animal and human form. In the essay "Mouth", Bataille locates the difference between animal and human in a difference in symmetry. The mouth and anus of the animal, he suggests, forms a straight line with the animal's mouth as the prow of its body. In the verticality of human architecture, however, the mouth recedes and the eyes take on greater significance. It is only in the moments of greatest pleasure and pain, Bataille tells us, that the human body reverts to its more primitive form. In these extreme states the body falls to the horizontal position, the head is thrust back and the mouth, now open and protruding, issues a cry (Bataille:1985, 59). Bataille's image of the horizontal body in extreme pleasure/pain can be seen in Dali's collage piece, "Phenomenon of Ecstasy" (see fig. 9), where portraits of women in states of supposed sexual ecstasy are placed alongside detailed close-up of ears. Dali's collage piece appeared on the cover of La Révolution Surréaliste, the Surrealist journal that repeatedly reproduced photographs of Charcot's hysterics as illustrative of the
Surrealist principle of convulsive beauty, a beauty defined by its inherently violent undoing of that category.

In Bataille’s work verticality is invariably associated with transcendence, the horizontal with immanence and the labyrinth. In his entry on the eye for the Dictionary project, the paradoxical status of the eye is further elaborated:

It seems impossible, in fact, to judge the eye using any word other than seductive, since nothing is more attractive in the bodies of animals and men. But extreme seductiveness is probably at the boundary of horror. (15) (my emphasis)

The detached or violated eye (or body) represents the coming together of the sadistic and the erotic, effecting a violent repudiation of a humanist, rational, unified subject; one who can no longer guarantee the “truth” of its perspective. The violated eye is thus centrally located in the significance of Freudian psychoanalysis to Surrealism’s unfolding aesthetic and ideological position. The detached eye is the eye turned in on itself, to the subconscious; it is the eye of the Oedipal drama as well as of the uncanny. In her reading of Story of the Eye, Suleiman suggests that the eye functions on the border between seduction and horror, like the body of the Oedipal mother whose very contradiction and duplicity remind us of the coexistence of transgression and prohibition as the two axes on which desire and avant-garde culture are constituted. A closer reading of the autobiographical context of Bataille’s novel will elucidate some of the tensions and contradictions in this arrangement.

Story of the Eye, Bataille’s most notorious novel, was never published in his lifetime under his own name. Published under the pseudonym Lord Auch in 1929, in a limited edition of 134 copies, Story of the Eye explores the violence of the split subject through a number of stylistic and formal devices.39 The interchangeability of objects throughout the narrative is repeated in the doubling of the two protagonists, the narrator and Simone, who share the same fantasy and have an understanding of the other in a way that suggests that they are intrapsychic, or the one psyche manifesting variations of its subconscious – or alter egos. Roland Barthes, however, in his structuralist reading of the metaphor of the eye, suggests that Bataille’s narrative is driven not so much by the characters and their sado-masochistic play but by an object and the linguistic play and fantasy that it generates. He argues that the text is centrally concerned with the transformation and displacement of narrative and lexical form. In light of the text’s autobiographical context, however, I would suggest that just as the objects of the text have no stable boundaries, the text’s object is to explore and hence destabilise the limits and boundaries of subjectivity. This becomes particularly apparent in the last
section of the text where Bataille’s own biographical history is mapped onto the story and vice versa. As the lines of demarcation between fiction and autobiography (as well as the talking cure and creative writing) begin to break down, the female body, both within and outside the text, becomes the privileged site of transgression. This is made explicit in Part 2, “Coincidences” where Bataille outlines the Oedipal origins of his own narrative:

I was about fourteen when my affection for my [blind] father turned into a deep and unconscious hatred... One night, we were awakened, my mother and I, by vehement words that the syphilitic was literally howling in his room: he had suddenly gone mad. I went for the doctor... The doctor had withdrawn to the next room with my mother and I had remained with the blind lunatic, when he shrieked: “Doctor, let me know when your [sic] done fucking my wife!” For me, that utterance, which in a split second annihilated the demoralizing effects of a strict upbringing, left me with something like a steady obligation, unconscious and unwilled: the necessity of finding an equivalent to that sentence in any situation I happened to be in; and this largely explains Story of the Eye. (72-73)

Closely reading the revelations in Part 2, Suleiman locates the significance of Bataille’s transgression in the body of the mother. She argues that the knowledge of the duplicity of the asexual maternal and the sexual feminine is the very contradiction of the coexistence of transgression and prohibition – the fascination and the terror, the fear and the desire - provoked by the mother’s sexuality. Here, the son’s horror powerfully evokes the Oedipal drama – “a confrontation with an all-powerful father and a traumatised son, a confrontation staged across the body of the mother”(85). Self-consciously drawing attention to the Oedipal origins of his story, Bataille unmasks the transgressive dimension of the erotic. Embedding the erotic within linguistic strategies and combinatory effects, Bataille reduces language to an obscene economy that mirrors the displaced and dispersed subject of psychoanalysis. This is significant when we consider that it was through his analysis with Adrien Borel that Bataille took up writing fiction. According to Elisabeth Roudinesco, the work of transference had unleashed Bataille’s literary creativity and Story of the Eye was discussed at every session with Borel and often revised after their meetings(1997: 122). But Roudinesco also points to Bataille’s (and other Surrealist’s) separation of the literary and theoretical dimension of psychoanalysis and its use as a treatment for neuroses: “To sympathise with the Freudian revolution was for [him] an intellectual act, whereas to go to an analyst merely meant one wanted to have one’s malady dealt with as directly as possible”(121). As such any reading of the novel needs to be mindful of not simply
reducing the text to a series of neurotic symptoms. Nevertheless, the historical and autobiographical context of the novel cannot be separated from its emergence through analysis; in many ways this text constitutes an experiment in the narration of the unconscious that goes beyond Breton’s experiments with automatic writing.

Reading the two sections together, “Coincidences, Part Two” becomes an explicit psychoanalytic reading of the fictional nature of the story in Part One. In connecting the erotic fantasies of the fictional moment to “real” events in Bataille’s life, we are quite literally being asked to read the text as case history. And yet the very blatant nature of the Oedipal drama unfolding in the second section reads as a parody. In a recent reading of the significance of trauma in *Story of the Eye*, Jonathan Boulter convincingly argues that Bataille’s text parodies both Christianity and psychoanalysis; two discourses that are ultimately concerned with the repression of trauma. Closely reading the rape and murder of the priest Don Aminado as a parody of the passion and death of Christ, Boulter reveals how the profane rites of erotic sexuality quite literally replace the ritual homage to the death of God. As Simone and the narrator force the priest to piss into the sacred chalice, the wafer and wine, traditionally the transubstantiated symbols of the flesh and blood of Christ are replaced with semen and urine: “Bataille’s priest hereby becomes the fully realized pornographic equivalent to the trauma that is the crucified Christ” (165). As well as performing a parody of the religious rites of Christ’s body, the text more generally reveals itself as a parody of the quest narrative. While in Carrington’s narrative, parody reveals the grail myth as male and Christian centred, here the erotic quest parodies the search for “pure” love. This is strongly reinforced in the final part of the narrative, which recalls the endless proliferation of wrongdoing in Elizabethan rogue literature and its own parody of quest narrative traditions:

Two hours later, Sir Edmund and I were sporting false black beards… In this way, we kept disappearing all through Andalusia, a country of yellow earth and yellow sky, to my eyes an immense chamber-pot flooded with sunlight, where each day, as a new character, I raped a likewise transformed Simone. Especially towards noon, on the ground and in the blazing sun, under the reddish eyes of Sir Edmund.

On the fourth day, at Gibraltar, the Englishman purchased a yacht, and we set sail towards new adventures with a crew of Negroes. (67)

Here, Bataille’s anti-heroic use of the blinding sun imagery explicitly contrasts with Breton’s celebration of the sun in his long poem, *Fata Morgana*, written in Marseilles.
during the war. The poem is a classic example of Bretonian idealism “in which love undergoes hermetic transmutation and ends as a sun, signifier of hope” (Sarwin, 1997: 124), and which contrasts strikingly with Bataille’s figuration of the sun as blinding and castrating.

In many ways *Story of the Eye* appears to perform an uncanny displacement of canonical Surrealist mutilation of the female body. Throughout the narrative it is the male body and psyche that are subject to extreme forms of violence and torture, often by a female protagonist, who is, according to Bataille’s autobiographical confession, one part of a psyche that has both male and female identities. This is interesting in light of Susan Sontag’s defence of Bataille’s text; a defence that has sparked an ongoing feminist debate on the pornographic or erotic content of the narrative, a debate which has more recently been replayed in the context of feminist writers such as Kathy Acker and Mary Gaitskill who employ a masochistic aesthetic in their fiction. While Sontag never addresses the issue of sexual violence within the narrative, she argues that the text’s pornography is located at the level of language in that it constitutes a play of metonymic and metaphoric displacements and transformations – from egg, to eye, to testicle and milk to sperm – which mark the text in one sense as driven by a discursive fetishism. Similarly, Barthes suggests that what is interesting about the operation of the pornographic in this narrative is that it appears to be non-phallic; rather it is ocular or testicular in a way that destabilises the phallic as key signifier (125). Throughout the narrative we are presented with an image of the vagina as a terrifying consuming organ, one that consumes a vast array of objects: an egg, an eye, a bull’s testicle and the erect penis of a dying man. The act of coitus, normally associated with penetration and conjunction, is replaced with an explicit sexuality of commodity and consumption. In many ways the text performs an intricate and repeated tracing of the fetishistic process: fetishism as the play of substitutions and sublimations. The object of the eye, with all its metonymic freedom, is open to a vast exchange of meanings and associations which link it to the non-phallic male genital, the testicle. The image of the vagina dentata, a key signifier of the text, seems to preclude here an understanding of the fetish as one of lack, signifying instead the female genitals as that which can castrate or consume but which are themselves uncastratable. In the final pages of the story the enucleated eye – everywhere in Bataille’s oeuvre a symbol of a declining masculinist transcendent tradition – is returned to the body’s two lowest orifices, the anus and the vagina. The eye, a symbol of Enlightenment ideology and rationality, is debased and feminised, when it is placed within the vagina and the anus. While Bataille’s narrative is in no sense a feminist polemic against the decidedly phallic nature of Surrealism and a Western epistemological tradition, its general destabilisation of the phallic’s transcendent place within a Surrealist aesthetics,
disrupts the revolutionary and experimental tenor of the movement and its idealisation of heterosexual love.

Feminist Transgression

The Surrealists were not good with women. That is why, although I thought they were wonderful, I had to give them up in the end.
- "The Alchemy of the Word" Angela Carter

In her chapter on feminist intertextuality in *Subversive Intent*, Susan Suleiman traces the connection between parody and the practice of intertextuality, via Bakhtin's work on carnival and the "carnivalesque" (1990: 142-3). Following Bakhtin, Suleiman reveals how parody sets up a distance between language and reality so that its attraction for feminist writers lies in the fact that it performs a rereading and a recontextualisation of received texts and ideas. Having established this relationship between feminist intertextuality and parodic conventions, Suleiman goes on to provide a fine-grained reading of *The Hearing Trumpet* alongside other Surrealist and feminist works that explicitly employ strategies of parody and irony - work by Ernst and Duchamp as well as Jeanette Winterson and Tracey Ullman. Along with Suleiman, I want to suggest that parody and humour are central to Carrington's transgressive textual practice. *The Hearing Trumpet*’s satirical and parodic posture casts a critical gaze over various institutions: the church, the family and institutions for the old and the mad. The novel’s central character, Marian Leatherby ("let her be"), explicitly challenges the idealisation of the *femme-enfant*; at the age of 92, she is anything but *enfant* and sporting "a rather galant beard", she could hardly be called *femme*. Placed by her family in an institution for senile old ladies, Marian – the outlaw and accomplice in Malory’s Grail saga – sets out on a quest which leads her to Dona Rosalinda’s own somewhat surreal search for the holy grail, and with it arcane knowledge. Running through the narrative is a black humour that resists any kind of idealism; instead Carrington explores how we take on certain myths about ourselves and the world. Parody and self-parody work together and reveal a tension between the past and the future, how things are and how one wants them to be, which reflects a more general struggle between Surrealism and feminism.
Souvenirs

Feminist nostalgia...looks back not only to what
Feminism desires, but to what it desires differently,
both now and in the future.
- Mary Jacobus First Things

For a novel that incorporates feminist fantasy and Surrealist effects, The Hearing Trumpet is strangely, if humorously, nostalgic. While the novel celebrates a new phase in Carrington’s life, it also unleashes an unruly collection of souvenirs from the past; from Surrealism, the Bible, classical and Celtic mythology and the fairy tale tradition. Perhaps the most significant of these souvenirs is the hearing trumpet itself. If the eye is the recurring trope in Bataille’s novel, Carrington’s text uses the hearing trumpet or ear as its fetishised object par excellence. The hearing trumpet sets up a playful tension between the scopophilic and the aural, between looking and listening, the peeping-tom and the eavesdropper, as well as highlighting the aural nature of a storytelling tradition. Moreover, the eponymous object of the novel self-consciously draws attention to the way in which the narrative unfolds through the deviant actions of spying, confessing and eavesdropping – a strategy which hinders any clear understanding of the events and characters of the novel. The opening words of the novel mark the trumpet’s central importance within the text:

When Carmella gave me the present of a hearing trumpet she may have foreseen some of the consequences. Carmella is not what I would call malicious, she just happens to have a curious sense of humour. The trumpet was certainly a fine specimen of its kind, without really being modern. It was, however, exceptionally pretty, being encrusted with silver and mother o’ pearl motifs and grandly curved like a buffalo’s horn. The aesthetic presence of this object was not its only quality, the hearing trumpet magnified sound to such a degree that ordinary conversation became quite audible even to my ears. (3)

After being given this strange outmoded instrument by Carmella, Marian is able to eavesdrop on her family and thus learn of their sinister plot to send her away to an institution. This begins a narrative device in which the hearing trumpet serves to uncover a number of plots throughout the text, revealing its central role in controlling the narrative. As an outmoded surreal object, found by Carmella at the market, it
recalls the many unusual found objects bought by Breton and other Surrealists at the Paris flea market. As such the hearing trumpet metaphorises a Surrealist praxis of uncovering hidden layers of meaning – of the self and of the object – through displacement, chance, play and transgression – and which subverts normative expectations of narrative logic and coherence. In bringing together disparate levels of reality – from myth, fairy tale, history and autobiography – in a variety of forms – collage, a textual version of the found object, the use of the double – the text continually subverts and plays with the nature of form and meaning.

The iconographic significance of Carrington’s hearing trumpet also recalls Ernst’s painting, *Napoleon in the Wilderness* (1941) (see fig. 10), part of a series of decalcomania works, including *Europe after the Rain* (1940–42), *The Antipope* (1941), *The Robing of the Bride* (1940) and *The Witch* (1941) in which Carrington’s semi-naked figure haunts a series of decadently surreal verdant landscapes. Between periods of internment during the war, Ernst had managed to continue painting, producing haunting images of his abandoned lover in works that evoke his own sense of loss and grief in macabre and sinister scenes. In *Napoleon in the Wilderness* (1941) Carrington appears covered in a majestic cloak of ornate vegetation in possession of a strange yet whimsical trumpet, its decorous organic shape reminding us of Carrington’s description of Marian’s hearing trumpet in the novel. Between 1935 and 1945, Ernst had also executed a number of drawings of detached ears and eyes. In particular, his drawing *The Lent Ear* (1935) (see fig. 11) is reminiscent of Carrington’s whimsical instrument since the hearing trumpet is above all a substitute or “lent” ear. In the years leading up to the war, Ernst and Carrington had been living and working together in St Martin-d’Ardèche in the South of France. When Ernst was interned as an enemy alien Carrington fled to Spain where she was committed to an asylum by her family. Shortly after, Ernst managed to secure release papers and returned to the farmhouse. With Carrington absent and the war intensifying, Ernst retrieved work by both himself and Carrington and left for Marseilles, joining Breton and other Surrealists waiting to emigrate to the United States. A photograph from 1941 shows a collection of paintings by Ernst and Carrington hung in the garden of the Villa Bel Air (see fig. 12), a large country home that provided a temporary refuge for those waiting to flee France. Among this collection is Ernst’s *The Lent Ear* as well as Carrington’s self-portrait and portrait of Max Ernst. The presence of *The Lent Ear* in this photograph places it at St Martin during a period in which Carrington and Ernst frequently collaborated on both textual and visual work. In their years together, they came to share a number of mythological and surreal symbols, including the horse and the bride of the wind. Martica Satzwin has argued that during this time Ernst’s paintings became increasingly fairy tale-like and mythological in response to Carrington’s presence (1997). During this time Ernst
10. Max Ernst, *Napoleon in the Wilderness*, 1941

11. Max Ernst, *The Robing of the Bride*, 1940
12. André Gomes, Photograph of paintings by Max Ernst and Leonora Carrington in the garden at Air Bel, Marseilles, 1941 (Max Ernst's The Lent Ear is in on the ground)
illustrated Carrington's first collection of short stories, producing in the frontispiece a
collage of a detached Medusan evil eye. Included in this collection is a surreal tale
about a powerful anthropomorphic eye, which appears as solitary and enlarged. The
nature of their collaborative relationship suggests that the hearing trumpet may have
been a magical talisman invented between them.

In her overview of the Surrealists in exile in New York during and after the war, Sa•win
suggests that under the influence of Matta and Kurt Seligmann, the movement became
much more interested in magic and the occult: "References to alchemy abound in the
artworks and in the pages of View, an interest reinforced by Jung's writings, which
found in alchemy parallels for psychological processes" (197). As Jung replaced Freud,
the Surrealist sensibility in these years became preoccupied with the process of
morphology: "the form and structure of an organism considered as a whole, that is,
inner and outer, as it evolves and changes..." (197). The interest in morphology and
anthropomorphism is certainly present in Ernst's paintings from this period, where
human, animal and vegetable forms merge into each other producing fantastically
detailed illustrations of strange hybrid creatures in hauntingly surreal landscapes.

Long before Carrington arrived in New York, her work had incorporated
anthropomorphic and mythological elements, but as Renée Riese Hubert argues, they
seem to reach fruition in The Hearing Trumpet (1994:113). Looking at Ernst's suite of
decalcomania paintings produced during and immediately after the war, it is easy to
see Carrington's influence on this body of work. But similarly, Carrington borrows
from Ernst's iconography by incorporating the surreal trumpet into her novel. The
richly woven nature of Carrington's novel with its strange hybrid characters and
surreal underworlds further reminds us of Ernst's decalcomania paintings from this
period.

The significance of the hearing trumpet – and its associative organ, the ear – seems to
replace her earlier story of the solitary eye. In Ernst's drawing "The Lent Ear", the ear
is represented as an ornate spiral funnel, one which over-determines the labyrinthine
quality of the ear. The ear, frequently associated with the labyrinth and the feminine,
is also repeatedly used in Surrealism as the morphological symbol of desire (see Dalí's
Phenomenon of Ecstasy [see fig. 8], in the same way that the eye is symbolic of reason.
Writing of Bataille's fondness for the labyrinth, Martin Jay suggests that in his work it
represents "the antidote to the pyramid, that architectural symbol of solidity and
substance, which was homologous to the optical cone" (229)." Jay reveals the
importance of the labyrinth for modernist writers such as Joyce and Borges as well as
postmodernist theory; in particular Derrida and Irigaray have explored it in
conjunction with different parts of the body; the ear and the labia respectively (229).
The hearing trumpet motif, via its association with the ear, suggests the underground world at the end of the novel and the labyrinthine nature of myth explored throughout the text. Often seen as the feminine equivalent of the peeping tom, eavesdropping becomes central to the unfolding narrative. Moreover, we learn of Dona Rosalinda’s life story through the confessor, a position noted for its professionalised, though anonymous listening; a practice that has been increasingly replaced by the therapist or analyst. Given to Marian by her close friend, Carmella, the hearing trumpet becomes, for Marian and those around her, a life-transforming object. But rather than always providing Marian with the clarity that it should, it opens up a surreal and mythological wonderland where who is telling the tale to whom drives the machinations of the story as plots and subplots are executed and foiled. Here the roles of listener and storyteller, both active and interpretative, contrast to those of looker and looked upon – a relationship constructed around the objectification of the passive other and ubiquitous within the history of a masculinist visual culture. The hearing trumpet also establishes the collaborative and conspiratorial relationship between Marian and Carmella which mirrors the close friendship and artistic collaboration between Carrington and Varo in their early years in Mexico City. In many ways the novel pays homage to this new kind of Surrealist collaboration – between women – moving beyond the erotic dynamic of an older master and his young and beautiful protege, embodied in her early relationship with Ernst. Rather than completely moving away from Surrealism, however, the novel celebrates new kinds of possibilities for an aesthetic and collaborative Surrealist praxis, one which is heavily inflected with a more explicit feminist irony.

In her autobiography of Remedios Varo, Janet Kaplan writes of the mischievous and surreal play between Carrington and Varo, which mirrors the relationship between Marian and Carmella in the text. The spirit of surreal play between these two women also recalls Breton’s own love of games and his propensity at various Surrealist gatherings to cut short conversations with a “half-question, half-command: ‘Alors, on joue (Well then, shall we play?)’” (Sawin, 1997: 124). Carrington, already renowned for her spirit of revolt, enjoyed such occasions and, together with Varo, continued these games with the small group of Surrealist exiles gathered in Mexico City after the war. The relationship between Carrington and Varo, however, was particularly intense; in each other they found a sympathetic and imaginative companion, creative and adventurous in all their endeavours whether painting, writing or concocting strangely bizarre feasts for the guests who flocked to Varo and Peret’s apartment. Like many of the Surrealists influenced by Jung, after the war, Carrington and Varo were also interested in the occult; in magic, sorcery and the tarot, which according Janet Kaplan, was enhanced by their presence in Mexico:
They found Mexico a fertile atmosphere where magic was a part of daily reality: traveling herb salesmen would set up on street corners with displays of seeds, insects, chameleons... and neatly wrapped parcels with such mysterious labels as “Sexual Weakness” – all used for the practice of witchcraft by the caranderas (healers), brujas (witches), and espiritualistas (spiritualists)..."(96).

The friendship between Carrington and Varo is celebrated in the novel as is Mexico itself, which Breton had described as “the Surrealist place, par excellence” (Polizzotti: 454). Throughout the 1940s and 1950s both Carrington and Varo began to develop a more mature individual style of painting that still carried strong influences from Surrealism but which also included influences from each other and their adopted country. Newly charged by their surroundings and each other’s company, their painting began to share an ironic whimsy which earned them high praise within the context of a Mexican modernist tradition: in 1956 Diego Rivera, Mexico’s most famous artist, was moved to declare: “Mexico has the good fortune that among us live three women painters who undoubtedly are among the most important women artists in the world: Remedios Varo... Leonora Carrington and Alice Rahon” (cited in Kaplan: 133). In Mexico, Carrington was no longer an eroticised femme-enfant figure confined to the status of Ernst’s lover. As Rivera’s praise suggests, she had become, along with Varo, a significant figure within Mexico’s flourishing artistic community.

*The Hearing Trumpet* also reveals an obsession with the fetishistic display of objects and architectural forms. The description of the institution at the beginning of the novel recalls the strangely named collection of buildings described in *Down Below*. Here, however, they reflect the text’s comic subversion of the more sinister world of the public institution as well as a surreal wonderland:

First impressions are never very clear, I can only say there seemed to be several courtyards, cloisters, stagnant fountains, trees, shrubs, lawns. The main building was in fact a castle, surrounded by various pavilions with incongruous shapes. Pixielike dwellings shaped like toadstools, Swiss chalets, railway carriages, one or two ordinary bungalows, something shaped like a boot, another like what I took to be an outsize Egyptian mummy. It was all so very strange that I for once doubted the accuracy of my observation. (29)

The bizarre architectural forms of the institution evoke the fantasy world of the nursery rhyme and children’s fiction and ironically reverberate the infantilisation of Marian by her family and then later by the Gambits. The fetishisation of the
institution’s architecture acts as a prelude to the excessive decoration of the monastery and the Abbess’s incorporation of the external ethnological and animal world into her private gaze. Her bizarre collection of objects and domestic items recalls the significance of the flea market and the shop window as modernist loci of desire and the concomitant Surrealist fascination with the psychological, primitive and erotic underpinning of the object:

Relays of foreign craftsmen came to the convent to redecorate the sumptuous apartments of the Abbess... Scarlet silk studded with little purple and gold Griffins constituted the wall hangings... The furniture... was carved like all the beasts in creation.... The Bishop himself brought gifts from the East. These included the embalmed head of a white elephant (and) all sorts of organically embroidered apparel. (97-98)

The Abbess’s collection of souvenirs and precious objects heralds a peculiar reification of the animal and the ethnological which is part of the novel’s microscopic world, the domain where the artefact or primitive and esoteric object is domesticated, removed from its natural origin or location and fashioned into a commodity. Again we are reminded of the Surrealists’ love of arcane collections and ethnographic objects, in particular those of both Breton and Bataille. By transporting and reifying the ethnological and animal into the realm of her private gaze, the Abbess, like the Surrealist collector, collapses the public into the personal, the macroscopic into the microscopic. The objects thus come to attain their value both because of their connection to the other world and by their very removal from that world. Susan Stewart has analysed the way commodity collection signifies our longing for origin and authenticity, represented as a contradictory desire for a distance that is collapsed into proximity. She argues that

Like the collection, (the souvenir) displays the romance of contraband, for its scandal is its removal from its ‘natural’ location.... The souvenir generates a narrative that reaches only “behind”, spiralling in a continually inward movement rather than outward toward the future. (139)

But the Abbess’s rarefied objects are not the only souvenirs that Carrington includes in her narrative. Spliced into the text’s play of fantasy and mythology are highly self-conscious moments of autobiography and history; “[s]ouvenirs of the past”, which rise up “like bubbles”, and float into the narrative:
The Luxembourg Gardens and the smell of chestnut trees, Paris. St. Germain des Prés, having breakfast on the terrace of a café with Simon... Simon talking like the Arabian Knights. Love and Magic. Then I dreamt I was preparing lunch in the summer house in the hollow of a large garden with Simon... He had beautiful eyes like a Siamese cat. Simon lost in interminable gardens, never getting free, and he knew so much. Simon. Perhaps I would still be in Paris, oh the joy if I could walk along the quais and admire the books, or look at the Seine from the Pont Neuf. (76-77)

The nostalgic longing in this passage is contrasted with more satirical and self-conscious passages:

... in Lancashire [where Carrington grew up] I got an attack of claustrophobia and tried to convince mother to let me go and study painting in London. She thought this was a very idle and silly idea and gave me a lecture about artists... Your Aunt Edgeworth wrote novels... but she would never have called herself 'an artist'... Art in London didn't seem quite modern enough and I began to want to study in Paris where the Surrealists were in full cry. Surrealism is no longer considered modern today and almost every village rectory and girl's school have surrealist pictures hanging on their walls. Even Buckingham Palace has a large reproduction of Magritte's famous slice of ham with an eye peering out. It hangs, I believe, in the throne room. Times do change indeed. The Royal Academy recently gave a retrospective exhibition of Dada art and they decorated the gallery like a public lavatory. In my day people in London would have been shocked. Today the Lord Mayor opened the exhibition with a long speech about twentieth-century masters and the Queen Mother hung a reef of gladiola on a piece of sculpture called "navel" by Hans Arp. (85)

These "souvenirs" of the past, floating in and out of the text, suggest a kind of narratorial incontinence whereby moments of history and autobiography leak into the story of Marian's and Dona Rosalinda's quests; the narrator alludes to this when she says, "How my mind runs on, or rather backwards, I shall never get on with my narrative if I can't control those memories, there are too many of them"(85). Carrington's text ironically solemnises the figure of the strolling Surrealist in Nadja, whose own meandering becomes a moment of heroic self analysis, allowing both the exigencies of chance and the historical unconscious to leak into the narrative. Stewart suggests that "the souvenir displaces the point of authenticity [here high Surrealism] as it itself [Carrington's novel] becomes the point of origin for narrative"(138)(my parenthesis). By means of parody and satire the novel expresses a simultaneous
nostalgia for the past and a celebration of the present. Self-consciously nostalgic and belated, *The Hearing Trumpet* displaces a traditional Christian past – and a masculinist Surrealist past – in order to celebrate feminist mythmaking and a Surrealist female collaborative tradition. But the text’s self-irony, represented by the Abbess’ iconographic wink, reminds us that Carrington’s parodic feminism also has its use-by date. The text’s reference to Magritte reinforces the scopophilic theme played with throughout the text and illustrates the incongruity of Magritte’s painting in the throne room; an in situ pun on a Surrealist use of striking juxtapositions. But it also points to the domestication of this once scandalous work and its incorporation into perhaps the most conservative and traditional institution in England. The outmoded nature of Magritte’s painting reminds us of the belatedness of Carrington’s own Surrealist text, and its attempts to rejuvenate a Surrealist aesthetic through its incorporation of feminist parody.

It is at these moments that the text is imbued with an ironic nostalgia, one that suggests the importance of the past to the present and the creative process. Guiding much of the narrative is Marian’s nostalgic memory of the northern hemisphere, in particular her home in England as well as her fantasy land, Lapland, which she connects to her childhood reading of “The Snow Queen”. The first reminiscence in the text centres on Carrington’s/Marian’s childhood and the striking realisation of the power of imagination and fantasy:

Strangely enough I was in England and it was Sunday afternoon. I was sitting with a book on a stone seat under a lilac bush.... My long dark hair is soft like cat’s fur, I am beautiful... Beauty is a responsibility like anything else, beautiful women have special lives like prime ministers but that is not what I really want, there must be something else... The book. Now I can see it, the Tales of Hans Christian Andersen, the Snow Queen.... The Snow Queen, Lapland. Little Kay doing multiplication problems in the icy castle (20).

Throughout the narrative, the Snow Queen is emblematic of Marian’s memories of the north as well as her fascination with Lapland, ironically encapsulated in the final sentence of the text: “If the old woman can’t go to Lapland, then Lapland must come to the Old Woman (199). “The Snow Queen” is also one of the many references framing the quest theme and Carrington’s feminist intertextuality. The story of the brave young Gerda, who sets out on a quest to free her friend Kay from the cold-hearted Snow Queen and the world of reason, Andersen’s tale is set in the snow-bound regions of Scandanavia, a landscape that is described as desolately beautiful and foreboding. A tale about desire and longing as well as the loss of childhood

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innocence, "The Snow Queen" is divided into a series of chapter headings that chart the cast of characters that Gerda meets on her journey. Some of these are loosely taken up in Carrington's text. Andersen's tale opens with the chapter, "The Mirror and Its Fragments", which recalls Marian's epiphanic moment with the old crone in the underground cavern as she looks at herself in a broken piece of mirror and sees a splintering of herself into three characters. In "The Snow Queen" the metaphor of the distorting mirror that splinters into tiny fragments registers the fusion of Christian and pagan elements in the folk tale genre as well as the sinister breaking up of the innocent world of childhood.

When we first encounter Carrington's narrator reading "The Snow Queen" in the garden, we are transported into her own fantasy world. This moment of imaginative reflection is abruptly broken by the intrusion of a young suitor, who chastises the narrator for reading fairy tales and ignoring her guests (21). The trope of the woman reader seduced by the romance plot surfaces again in Carrington's work. As in "The Debutante", reading signals a rebellious withdrawal from social interaction; one which always takes place, significantly, on the threshold between childhood and adulthood. In the chapter, "The Little Robber Girl", Gerda encounters a gruesome old hag, the robber woman, who kills all her coachmen and wants to eat Gerda. Gerda is spared only because the robber woman's daughter wishes to keep her as a play friend. But once the little robber girl hears the story of Kay's imprisonment in the Snow Queen's palace, she assists Gerda in escaping, lending her the precious reindeer she keeps by her bed. In Andersen's story the robber girl and her mother are grotesque feral characters that exist on the borders between the animal and the human world, and which evoke many of the semi-wild women in Carrington's early fiction. Their thieving profession, however, and the robber woman's monstrosity, is ironically signalled by the Abbess's grotesque appearance and her theft of church paraphernalia, as well as Carrington's theft - and reappropriation - of traditional myth and Surrealist iconography. The final chapter of the fairy tale, "What Happened In the Snow Queen's Palace and Afterwards" recalls the final scene in Carrington's novel in which a new ice age is brought about by the restoration of the Holy Grail to a female pagan tradition. In Andersen's story the palace is entirely made of snow, beautifully lit by the northern lights. In the middle of the palace is a frozen lake called the Mirror of Reason upon which resides the Snow Queen's throne (259). Here Kay sits trying to solve the puzzle of how to write Eternity with the fragments of ice, just as Marian has to solve three riddles in order to free the person (perhaps herself) trapped in the tower.

The novel's pastiche of myth, fairy tale and the bible as well as its inclusion of autobiographical and historical material celebrates the belatedness of all "pasts" and
a Surrealist process of making something “new” out of a collection of outmoded objects. Myth and history (both cultural and individual) take on the status of the found object and Surrealism’s fetishisation of history’s discarded bric-a-brac and its status as the belated object. Like Marian’s hearing trumpet that Carmella finds at the market and which eventually transforms Marian’s world and the narrative events of the text, the category of the outmoded is celebrated for its nostalgic effects as well as its new contextual value. Carrington’s “souvenirs” of the past make explicit the link between her feminist parodic narrative and the novel as autobiographical pastiche. Many of the characters in the text are recognisable from Carrington’s own life in Mexico; while Carmella commemorates her close friend, Remedios Varo, the appearance of Marbourough at the end of the novel celebrates Carrington’s eccentric friend and patron, Edward James.

In a recent review to mark the reprinting of The Hearing Trumpet, Carrington’s novel was described as a “lost classic” and Marian as “one of literature’s most endearing and colourful characters, all the more remarkable for belonging to a demographic category novelists usually slight” (Wren, 2000:n.p.). In her introduction, (written for the Virago edition of the novel but reprinted in this recent edition) Helen Byatt also reflects on the protagonist’s elderly status: “It seems perverse that a beautiful and resilient woman in her early thirties or forties should identify with a ‘drooling sack of decomposing flesh’” (Marian’s grandson’s description of her in the novel) (1996: v). Pointing to the aberrant nature of having an old woman as the central character, critics are similarly perplexed that such a novel should be written by a relatively young woman. If we read the novel as loosely autobiographical then Carrington has cast herself and Varo in the role of slightly senile, though intrepid, old women. Having gone beyond society’s determined use-by date – and certainly the use-by date of the femme-enfant – Marian and Carmella constitute the text’s central preoccupation with the old and the new, the modish and the outdated. Throughout the narrative we are constantly witnessing the contradiction between appearance and reality – between the way her family and society see Marian (as a dependent, senile old woman) and the mastery and wit of her narrative voice. This paradox highlights the representation of women within Surrealism and their participation in, and contribution to, the movement.

And yet the novel is not solely interested in exploring a past. As well as evoking the past through her collection of souvenirs, in imagining herself as an old woman, Carrington brings the future to the present in what is an overall strategy of playing with the boundaries of distance and proximity. By employing satire and parody, Carrington necessarily demarcates her own narrative from a high Surrealist discourse,
but also reactivates that discourse, bearing out what Naomi Schor has described as the homology between irony and fetishism: “just as the fetish enables the fetishist simultaneously to recognise and to deny woman’s castration, irony allows the ironist both to reject and to reappropriate the discourse of reference” (1993: 98). The narrative’s double strategy of co-option and transformation is registered by the events of the inset narrative - in what is a literal doubling of the narrative. Alongside Marian’s quest to overthrow the corrupt institution is the unfolding story of Dona Rosalinda’s attempts to steal the Grail from a male hierarchical Christian tradition and restore it to a underground pre-Christian world. The salient feature of her time as the Abbess of the Convent of Santa Barbara is her continued theft of church information and paraphernalia, including the Musc Madelaine, the powerful aphrodisiac that allows her to perform strange rituals and miracles and which seals her reputation as perversely sadistic. The Abbess’s repeated theft of all things (like Carrington’s borrowing of Surrealist aesthetic devices and themes as well as various versions of the Grail myth) signals a kleptomania that was marked by early psychiatry as the female equivalent to male fetishism (Nye, 1993). The fetishistic detail of the Abbess’s interiors and her vast array of exotic objects unfolds her further obsession with souvenirs and collections. In homage to her male and female identities, the Abbess is both fetishistic and kleptomaniac; a double perversion which goes beyond the mere surface of a utilitarian cross-dressing, unleashing her status as one of the narrative’s hybrid figures. Moreover, parody itself involves the practices of kleptomania and fetishisation: like irony it appropriates and then functions as a part for the missing whole.

Myth and Laughter: The Hybrid and Grotesque Body

Myth or rather mythopoeia occupies a central place in the novel, as different versions of the same myth compete with each other and combine to form new ones. Michael Bell suggests that the structure of myth is not unlike the uncanny: just as the uncanny is both familiar and unfamiliar or hidden, myth “means both a supremely significant foundational story and a falsehood” (1997:1). Looking at the narrative strategy in the novel, Hubert argues that Carrington offers us realistic details only to constantly subvert them: “The way that the narrative proceeds actually discourages ordinary causality and prevents us from forming a coherent view of unfolding events” (1994: 136). Similarly, Carrington’s use of myth unfolds a contradictory dynamic of significance and falsehood. The Grail legend, the defining myth of the quest for knowledge, is explored through a range of permutations; pagan, Christian, literary and finally feminist. In presenting a hybrid collection of different versions of the grail legend, the text draws attention to the way myth presupposes a relationship between
the ancient and the modern as well as the past and the present. According to Bell this reveals the way in which “modernist mythopoeia is a way of combining radical relativity with the aproditic nature of conviction” (4). Carrington’s mythopoeia thus registers the playful and subversive elements of her story.

The many partial versions of the Grail myth – pre-Christian, Christian and feminist – that the novel incorporates suggests an all-pervasive desire for sacred and esoteric knowledge. Throughout the text the attainment of sacred or pure knowledge is constantly thwarted by a multitude of profane and satirically banal details that get in the way. But neither does the novel simply celebrate a feminist utopian vision of an all-female world. Helen Byatt suggests that *The Hearing Trumpet* “is like a series of Chinese boxes, each containing another version of the myth.... Though on one level Carrington is undoubtedly out to reclaim its meaning for women, on another, she is a muse who has an eclectic eye for stories, references and allusions” (1991: xiv). Like the collection of autobiographical souvenirs inserted into the text, the various versions of the Grail Legend are interwoven with a myriad other myths and stories, including Andersen’s mythic adventure in Lapland, “The Snow Queen”. A large melting pot of myths, stories, legends and personal reflection, *The Hearing Trumpet* is allegorically rich. But in the same way that myth evokes both the continuity and discontinuity of the past, the quest for self-knowledge is reduced to a series of random but interconnected events, parodying Breton’s haunting “Who am I?” and the eternal wandering of the ghost figure in *Nadja*, as well as the role of chance in a Surrealist ideology. At the end of the novel a terrified Marian descends into the underworld in search of who she is, only to experience a disconcerting sense of herself as a literal ‘double’. Asked to jump into a pot of boiling broth by a menacing old crone, Marian takes the plunge only to find that she becomes both the person in the pot and the crone stirring it. Watching in uncanny horror her own limbs bobbing up and down in the pot, Marian informs us that

From a speculative point of view I wondered which of us I was. Knowing that I had a piece of polished obsidian somewhere in the cavern, I looked around, intending to use it as a mirror. First I saw the face of the Abbess of Santa Barbara de Tartarus grinning at me sardonically. She faded and then I saw the huge eyes and feelers of the Queen Bee who winked and transformed myself into my own face...

Holding the mirror at arms length I seemed to see a three-faced female whose eyes winked alternatively. One of the faces was black, one red, one white, and
they belonged to the Abbess, the Queen Bee and myself. This of course might have been an optical illusion. (176)

Marian’s presence both within and outside the pot, ironically reflects Carrington’s own relationship to Surrealism; as the object in the frame and as the subject outside the frame watching her own objectification. Marian’s obsidian mirror references both a Surrealist and psychoanalytic preoccupation with the mirror as a symbol of feminine narcissism and subject formation. Here the image of the mirror metaphorises the spectral quality of female identity. But rather than reflect back a framed and idealised femme-enfant, the image in the mirror reflects the novel’s trinity of transgressive female figures – Marian, the Queen Bee and the Abbess. The mirror represents the world of dream and imagination, of desire and becoming, recalling Alice’s adventure’s underground with the red and black queen. Like the Cheshire Cat who gradually fades, leaving only his grin, the winking Queen Bee and the grinning Abbess, fade in and out of the mirror.

The Abbess’s wink, a bodily gesture of irony, reinforces Carrington’s comic tone throughout the novel, reminding us of Breton’s description of Carrington’s “smooth mocking gaze” and a Surrealist conflation of visual and textual modes of expression. The Abbess’s wink, first encountered by Marian in the portrait of her that hung in the dining room of the institution, signals Carrington’s evocation of the detached eye and its ubiquitous presence within Surrealist iconography. The Abbess’s pose in the portrait is described as leering and sinister:

The face of the nun in the oil painting was so curiously lighted that she seemed to be winking, although that was hardly possible. She must have had one blind eye and the painter had rendered it realistically. However, the idea that she was winking persisted, she was winking at me with a mixture of mockery and malevolence. (36-37)

And later, still obsessed with the portrait, Marian inquires:

“Do you suppose she is really winking, or is she blind in one eye?” I asked, anxious for Georgina’s opinion on a more personal aspect of the lady.

“She is definitely winking; the bawdy old bag is probably peeking at the monastery through a hole in the wall, watching the monks prancing around in their knickers”. (53-54)
The Abbess’s voyeurism, alluded to throughout the narrative, is contrasted with Marian’s constant eavesdropping. Here, however, the obsession with the wink seems to ironically extend the transgressive possibilities of the body and its significance within Surrealist aesthetics. Invited by Breton to participate in an exhibition on eroticism in 1959, Carrington responded with her enthusiastic rendition of such an exhibition, reinforcing the comic and parodic nature of her incorporation of the erotic:

I’ve longed dreamed of a similar show, but I must confess that I see it as comic eroticism ... Among the most sublime American inventions, it seems that there exists a huge apparatus in the shape of an organ, which giggles across forty different octaves ... With this apparatus in mind, I visualise a room – somewhere between a cathedral and a Swiss [cuckoo] clock – equipped with an organ of peals of laughter multiples through the octaves ... A very rich bestiary of erotic appliances would furnish the room. Thus, mermaids of inflatable rubber, choirboys made of chocolate, steel nuns for the masochists, giraffe-lavatories in pastel-coloured glass for the voyeurs ... bearded corpses in jars of alcohol for the necrophiliacs, velvet spiders with hundreds of vaginas for orgies, etc. etc. etc., all this to the sound of the organ .... (letter to Breton in Warner, 1991: 11)

The catalogue of perversions in Carrington’s imagined exhibition on eroticism mirrors the cast of transgressive characters in The Hearing Trumpet. The comic nature of erotic excess in Carrington’s work foregrounds a disruption to a Surrealist location of transgression in the erotic female body.

Throughout Carrington’s fiction and visual work, the body is often represented as interchangeable; between male and female as well as between the animal and the human or as a hybrid of both.32 The feral women in her early fiction critique the production of bourgeois femininity, in particular the cultural codes of feminine propriety.33 While within Surrealism transgression is located in the erotic female body, in The Hearing Trumpet it is located in the body of the maternal crone, variously signified throughout the narrative as the Queen Bee, Hecate, Marian and the Abbess. The gigantic Queen Bee and the Abbess – who when pregnant inflates to an enormous size – occupy a central place in the novel’s mythological network. By incorporating the gigantic and the grotesque into her novel, Carrington effects a disruption of the socially contained bourgeois body which echoes a Surrealist dismemberment of the body. Indeed Susan Stewart argues that “the grotesque body, as a form of the gigantic, is a body of parts... the grotesque presents... a dismantling and re-presentation of the body according to criteria of production rather than verticality”(1993: 105). Stewart
concludes that, while the grotesque body is invariably achieved through an emphasis on the internal elements of the body, a corresponding sense of disorder is achieved through “an exchange of sexuality and an exchange between animal and human” (104). Within the novel the grotesque and the hybrid are significant sites of literary and cultural transgression. The exchange of sexuality is represented through a number of cross-dressing and sexually ambiguous characters; the Abbess, Maude (Arthur) and Marian herself. After Maude is accidentally poisoned, it is revealed that Maude is really Arthur, a camp pun on Malory’s Christian version of the Grail myth, Le Mort d’Arthur. It is the daring Marian – sporting a gallant beard – rather than her feckless son, Galahad, who assists in the reclamation of the Grail.

Just as transgression exists through the awareness of two categories (the sacred and the profane, fascination and horror) the use of the hybrid form in the novel registers the imaginative process of combining disparate elements. The hybrid figure is the deviant subject par excellence: a subject represented as a subject of body. In the work of many Surrealists the exploration of the disintegration and perversion of the psyche is often mapped onto the body so that the blinding and dissection of an eye – say in both Un chien andalou and Story of the Eye – may be read as a celebratory displacement of the conscious by the unconscious. The hybrid wolfwoman Annubeth, who makes her appearance at the end of the novel, embodies the text’s overall strategy, employing collage and embalming in the creation of her art objects:

Anubeth growled and reached up to get a very strange animal from the ceiling for my inspection. It was a tortoise with a baby’s wizened face and long thin legs which were frozen in a gallop. “Annubeth says this kind of collage she made for fun when the keeper of the principal morgue in Venice gave her the present of the dead baby. The legs originally belonged to some storks that died of the cold. (193-194)

While collage dissects and displaces its material in order to create a new whole, embalming preserves that which is already whole but no longer alive. The dual strategies of dissection and preservation suggest an art practice composed of both tradition and innovation. Moreover, Annubeth’s taxiderm collage provides a literal example of the figurative violence of collage, with its strategies of displacement and rearrangement. Her living “exquisite corpse” is fashioned from the process of art and chance and paradoxically evokes both life and death through its foregrounding of the body. This figure marks the novel’s overall use of the hybrid form – stylistic and thematic – and works to centre a single subject and generic position as well as highlighting the materiality of Surrealist representation. The hybrid explicitly disrupts
the law of non-contradiction (that something is either a or not a) in its production of disparate combinatory systems, producing the discordant effect so privileged within a Surrealist praxis. The term 'hybrid' originates in the Latin *hybrida*, which was used to refer to the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar and to one born of a Roman father and foreign mother or a freeman or slave. Like hybrid's etymology, *The Hearing Trumpet* foregrounds questions of origin, miscegenation and classification if only to mock our obsession with them. The conflation of the animal and human body, however, throughout Carrington's novel, mirrors Bataille's own mapping of the animal form onto the libidinal human body, which is explored in detail in his essay on the "Ear". In this short prose piece the figure of the ear is used to collapse the privileged status of the reasoned, knowing subject, promoting instead the labyrinth, desire and immanence. The Abbess, who, we are told, enjoys many names and nationalities (91) is another of the novel's hybrid female monstrances; her other identities include her cross-dressing escapades as a bearded Cavalier who infiltrates the secret echelons of the male church hierarchy and her final reincarnation as the huge Queen Bee.

Conclusion

In Bataille's and Carrington's texts, parody functions as a literary form of transgression, one which performs a kind of violence in its revisionist strategy. As Carrington parodies Surrealism's cult of the beautiful, young muse by replacing the *femme-enfant* with her plethora of geriatric and monstrous heroines, Bataille defiles the purity of Breton's conception of love with his parodic sexual quest. But if transgression and taboo are formulated through a relationship that is symbiotic ("parody depends on the original for its logic"), Bataille's work makes clear how "parody, as the literary form of transgression, like all transgression, may work to reinscribe the ideology and authority of the discourse parodied" (Boulder, 2000:167). Both these texts, then, reveal a certain ambivalence in their relationship to the revolutionary tenor of Surrealism by foregrounding the rhetorical nature of literature and myth, investing literary transgression with a wider political and social meaning.

In the contemporary work of Foucault and Deleuze there is an uncovering of the 'silent' violence at the heart of institutional forms and practices, one which works to denaturise all hierarchical boundaries. In the work of Bataille and Carrington a similar strategy is employed, one which questions both the literary and cultural boundaries of institutions, including that of Surrealism. The presence of the "double" in their fiction and their use of the alter-ego, attests to the duplicitous nature of the unconscious mind – the privileged site of creativity – in its relation to the everyday. Like many of the transgressive characters of the novel, Carrington's text effects a
complex rupture of thematic and generic unity, one that repeats in the texture of its narrative a strange hybridity of feminist and Surrealist ideological positions. As Suleiman has argued, the novel is "both a prolongation of and a (feminist) divergence from Surrealist aspirations" (1990: 173). Satiric, humorous and iconoclastic, Carrington's novel challenges, as it evokes, the boundaries of canonical Surrealism and the privileging of transgression as a male avant-garde practice.

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1 There seems to be confusion as to when the novel was actually written. Suleiman suggests that it was written in the early 1950's when Carrington was in her early thirties (1990: 144), while Helen Byatt suggests sometime in the late 1940's or early 1950's. In her interview with Paul de Angelis for her catalogue, The Mexican Years, Carrington dates the novel from the 1950's, suggesting that she wrote it when
she was about forty (1991: 40). If the novel was written in the early 1950’s then Carrington would have been in her mid thirties since she was born in 1917.

2 An interesting contemporary comparison to Carrington’s revisionist novel is Kathy Acker’s Pussy, King of the Pintos, which tells the story of a group of prostitutes who set fire to their brothel, destroy the city and incite revolution.

3 Critical readings of this work have tended to stress its feminist mythological framework. While I concur that this is certainly present, I also want to suggest that the novel has a dark comic edge that resists a purely celebratory feminist reading. Of course my own reading emerges from a moment in which feminism itself has taken on a self-critical approach in terms of its own privileged institutional authority.

4 In an interview with Paul de Angelis, Carrington speaks of the novel’s emergence out of her collaborative phase with Varo: “I wrote it [The Hearing Trumpet] for fun. Remedios and I used to write a lot of stuff together. But that must have disappeared into someone’s garbage can many years since. I would write a chapter, but I wouldn’t tell her what it was. She would write the next chapter, and when we’d written about five chapters, we’d put them together and it was very funny. But with The Hearing trumpet, I just sat and wrote it” (1991:40).

5 Indeed the novel’s collage effect is reminiscent of Ernst’s pictorial collages whereby hybrid forms are created out of the animate and inanimate, the animal and human, the old and the new. Thus literary and pictorial collage invites us to read rhetorically.


7 The second phrase is Breton’s description of Carrington in his introduction to her short story, “The Debutante” in his Anthology of Black Humour, which I discuss in Chapter Two.

8 Written in 1929 but not published until much later.

9 Here Breton accuses Bataille of being a pathological “case”: “What is paradoxical and embarrassing about M. Bataille’s case is that his phobia about “the idea”… can only take an ideological turn… Here in fact is someone who propounds as a principle that “horror does not lead to any pathological complaisance and only plays the role of manure in the growth of plant life…”” (184).

10 Stoekl also reminds us that Bataille’s theoretical obsessions are not simply “reducible to a putative “origin” in neurosis or psychosis…” (5), which as I argue is one of the central parodic themes of the novel.

11 While Breton quietly admired Bataille’s novel, by the time he came to write the Second Manifesto he had become increasingly hostile to Bataille’s dedication to a transgression which manifested itself in terms of all things vulgar and base (Bolt-Irons, 1995:3).

12 The heroine of Bataille’s later novel, Madame Edwarda, also shares similarities with Carrington’s representation of femininity. In this novel Edwarda, the prostitute and madwoman who triumphs over the world of the novel. For a counter reading of Bataille’s representation of women, see Susan Rubin Suleiman’s “Bataille in the Street: The Search for Virility in the 1930’s”(1995). Suleiman critiques Bataille’s essentially conservative obsession with virility arguing that “[a] concept, virility took shifting forms in Bataille’s thought. His continued use of the word, however, locked him into values and into a sexual politics that can only be called conformist, in his time and ours. Rhetorically, ‘virility’ carries with it too much old baggage. Bataille’s male protagonists may be sexually equivocal, possessing feminine traits and female soulmates; but his rhetoric of virility does not follow them” (43).

13 Foucault’s own interest in Surrealism, in Bataille and the avant-garde, suggests his own commitment to the importance of experience to thought. See intro article in Interviews.

14 My title references Barthes’ reading of the chain of metaphor that the eye instigates in Bataille’s text, and the way in which it unfolds in the manner of a haruspex (121).

15 For example, Eliot’s “The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock” uses the trope of lepidoptery to convey an image of the lover’s sense of a violent scrutiny.

16 The sexual connotation of this coupling registers the erotic element of Surrealist experimental techniques such as frottage, decalcamania, collage etc...
Within Surrealism the alter-ego became an important facet of identity and self-representation and were cultivated by Ernst, Carrington, and Duchamp, among others.

Bataille had reviewed this work shortly before he published his “Dictionary” in Documents.

The text was accompanied by eight lithographs executed by André Masson, a close friend of Bataille’s.

Set something here about the date of this addition to the text—what suggests that it reads as a later response to the exploration of the analytical subject in Nadja.

Martin Jay contends that Bataille has a strong identification with certain maternal values such as the “earth” as opposed to those of the sun and the sky.(217)

Andrea Dworkin reads Bataille’s work in the same context as any form of pornography. Sontag had warned of this kind of reading in her 1967 essay The Pornographic Imagination when she wrote: “What makes a work of pornography a part of the history of art rather than of trash is not distance, the superimposition of a consciousness more comfortable to that of ordinary reality upon the “deranged consciousness” of the sexually obsessed. Rather it is the originality, thoroughness, authenticity, and power of that deranged consciousness itself, as incarnated in the work.” Sontag’s essay, “The Pornographic Imagination” is reproduced in the Penguin edition of Story of the Eye.(94)

The page numbers for Barthes essay “The Metaphor of the Eye” are in the Penguin edition of Story of the Eye.

Suleiman defines Bakhtin’s carnival as “the heterogenous, multivoiced, multilingual... discourses of medieval and Renaissance popular culture, and their gradual integration into the high-cultural genre of the novel” (142).

Susan Stewart suggests that “the literary’s nostalgia for oral forms is a nostalgia for the presence of the body and the face-to-face, a dream of unmediated communication that, of course, could never be approximated even in the oral – a dream of an eternalised present, a future-past” (1991: 90).

See also André Masson’s 1938 painting, Labyrinth in which the inner organs of a strange hulking mass are a series animate and inanimate labyrinthine forms and which capture the full horror of the war to come and the destruction of physicial form. The family connections between Bataille and Masson are, ironically, very labyrinthine: Masson was closely connected to Bataille through his marriage to Rose, who was Bataille’s wife’s sister. Bataille’s wife, the actress Sylvia Makles, would later marry Jacques Lacan.

Sauteau further notes that “To play, to really play, for Breton, was a special way of galvanizing the mind to make sorties into the unfamiliar and the adventurous in spirit would usually fall in with his challenge.... Charades by analogy, Murder, and a game in which a person takes on the identity of an object, as well as the exquisite corpses – these were some of the forms of serious play to which Breton invited his friends”(124).

In her autobiography, Peggy Guggenheim records Max Ernst’s obsession with collecting Kachina dolls and masks.(1987: 265).

The landscape of Andersen’s tale is evoked in Carrington’s portrait of Max Ernst, in which he appears as Loplop, the Bird Superior, in an arctic landscape, in the background of which is a frozen, icicle covered horse. The horse was one of Carrington’s alter-ego symbols.

Carrington’s love of the outmoded reminds us of Benjamin’s comments on Breton in his essay on Surrealism: “[Breton] was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies in the ‘outmoded’...(1978:182)

Probably the most familiar example of this is Magritte’s paintings in which text and image are used to create meaning as well as draw attention to the discrepancies between different mediums of representation. Other examples include Ernst’s collage novels.

Carrington’s use of the hybrid form, in both her painting and fiction, forms a striking parallel with Masson’s late New York works, which Sawin argues replaces a more explicit violence with “a morphology of nature and the theme of regeneration” (114). Although there is a lot of violent imagery in The Hearing Trumpet its dominant mood as I have suggested is one of regeneration, a celebration of Carrington’s new collaborative relationship with Varo.
33 See Rachel Carroll's "Something to See: Spectacle and Savagery in Leonora Carrington's Fiction" for an illuminating discussion of the feral woman in Carrington's fiction.

Chapter Five
Fashioning the Lesbian Subject of Surrealism:
Claude Cahun's Self-Portraits

The invention of photography has delivered a mortal blow to the old forms of expression, painting as well as poetry for which automatic writing, appearing at the end of the nineteenth century, is a true photography of thought."
– André Breton, “Max Ernst”, Les pas perdus

Odd that no one has thought of the disturbance (to civilisation) which this new action causes. I want a History of Looking. For the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.
– Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida

Who’s that Girl?
Hermaphrodite can visit the house of Narcissus – and introduce himself there on my behalf.
– Claude Cahun, Hervines

In looking at Claude Cahun’s self-portraits one recalls a particular kind of awe Barthes invokes when he contemplates the simple and profound meaning of photography; its necessary challenge to the reductive claims of authenticity; its disturbance of boundaries; its labelling and obscuring of the subject; its moments of loss and mourning; its uncanniness. For while the subject of photographic portraiture can be read as the index of the real, it also constitutes the dismemberment of the real, what Barthes calls “a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity” (Barthes, 1980:12). This disturbance that Barthes suggests constitutes the deconstruction of the visual field by photography is registered in Cahun’s self-portraits through the constant interrogation of the self via disguise and distortion. The way Cahun looks at us (her gaze) and to us (her appearance) reminds us of the splitting of the ego into the conscious and the unconscious. To photograph the self as (if it were) someone else creates a strange ambiguity between artist
and subject, self and other. But that quality of disturbance describes the very process of self-portraiture, a medium in which the primary mode of engagement is one of identification with the self as other; to be both the subject and the object of the gaze, to project it and to return it. Moreover, the variations of Cahun’s vestimentary style, the use of mirrors and masks to create illusion and fantasy, the employment of assorted photographic techniques to manipulate and distort the image and the use of dolls and mannequins to create a sense of the uncanny – all these shape the complex representation of subject formation, of gendered and sexual identity in the portraits. Here we witness the transformation of the subject into an object of consumption, but rather than simply objectify her body as a static image, Cahun’s self-portraits perform a series of visual tropes that continually renegotiate the boundaries of subject and object, viewer and viewed, the authentic and the copy. By donning a variety of theatrical and professional costumes – some masculine, others feminine – Cahun illustrates the performative nature of gender and sexuality; its very constructedness, the way that it can be arranged and rearranged, played with, made to appear theatrical and performed.

Given the portraits’ overt themes of masking and performance, many recent critics have read them in the context of Judith Butler’s work on the performativity of gender and its reliance on a theory of masquerade. My next chapter will take up Butler in a reading of the work of Cindy Sherman – an artist whose work in many ways is pre-empted by Cahun. Here I want to frame my discussion around Sedgwick’s interrogation of what theory thinks it knows unconditionally.¹ If, as Sedgwick suggests, much contemporary theory conceives itself as something of the present, its ideas framed within the rhetoric of the revolutionary and the utopic, how do we read these portraits without losing the force of their transgression? What constitutes a sense of disturbance in these portraits is their raw but astute knowingness of contemporary theory. Or to reverse the historical force of this proposition, what these portraits give us is a sense of the trajectory of theory in the last hundred years. Given the range of professional, gendered and stylistic identities developed in the self-portraits, Cahun’s photographs illustrate Sedgwick’s seemingly banal axiom, “People are different from each other” (1990: 22). Contained within this statement, however, is the underlying ambiguity of the self-portraits: that people are different from each other but also different from themselves. Sedgwick argues that while contemporary theory has put difference and the “deconstruction of the category of the individual” at the very centre of its epistemological project, this has amounted to a certain bland representation of many of its critical insights. She writes:
Deconstruction, founded as a very science of differ\(\text{e}(\text{a})\text{n}ce\), has both so fetishised
the idea of difference and so vapourised its possible embodiments that its most
thoroughgoing practitioners are the last people to whom one would now look for
help in thinking about particular differences. (1990: 23)

If, as Sedgwick argues, difference has become so overdetermined within contemporary
theory as to be almost meaningless, what do Cahun’s images offer us in terms of identity
politics and the theorisation of the subject? What they provide us with, I hope to show, is
a critical and multivalent engagement with the historical contingencies of questions of
difference. Her photographs force us to historicise the very categories that the present
takes as self-evident realities.

In her introduction to Subversive Intent, Susan Suleiman suggests that the relationship of
past and present is central to the concepts of both the avant-garde and feminist theory.
And yet, she argues, there is often a certain blindness about the past attached to these
discourses. Framing her own project through a conception of the avant-garde as trans-
historical, Suleiman asks how are we to read the present while still acknowledging the
past, without falling into the “impasse of recuperation”? Her solution in the end is to opt
for a methodology grounded in “internal divisions and double allegiances” (Suleiman,
1990: xvii). In the context of Cahun’s work, how do we read the past from the moment of
knowingness in the present, and retain the sense of an emerging dialogue around sexual
identity that we now take for granted? When we look at the explosion of work on the
body and on gendered and sexual identity in the 1980’s and 90’s we often find an implicit
connection to work produced in the 1920’s and 30’s. Indeed the psychoanalytic roots of
Butler’s work on gender may be traced back to this period, to both Lacan and Riviere.
Moreover, queer theory’s deconstruction of “identity politics” is in some ways a reaction
to early sexology’s reading of homosexuality as gender inversion. Many of the themes that
Cahun explores – such as masquerade and the performance of gendered identity and
erotic style – have a familiarity that we have come to associate with the work of Cindy
Sherman. Rather than simply claim the past as groundbreaking and the present as
recuperation, I want to return to Suleiman’s contention that the notion of the future is in a
sense foundational to the very concept of the avant-garde, always a movement that blinds
itself to the past in order to rejuvenate the dream of change. In queer theory the desire for
change is a desire for the breaking down of rigid categories of definition and self-
definition. As such, costume and style as well as everyday practices or lifestyle choices
have often been seen as an important feature of queer practice and politics. Similarly, in

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Cahun's work, the dream of change is realised through the rhetoric of costume and erotic style as well as through political agitation and experimental writing. Of course there are important distinctions to be made between Cahun's work and contemporary queer theory and aesthetics. The historical context of Cahun's self-portraits is integral to how we read them from the present. Suleiman's methodology—of internal divisions and double allegiances—allows a reading that brings to the fore the competing range of discourses in the work, and the very important ways in which Cahun's work and personal style fans out into a range of disparate areas. The air of perception and play that the portraits give off recalls Sontag's definition of the photographer as someone whose relation to the world is enmeshed in both knowledge and power. To photograph, she argues, is to appropriate, so that the camera becomes "the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood" (Sontag, 1973/1979: 3-4). Acquisitiveness defines not simply Cahun's engagement with the world as a photographer but her engagement with the world per se. Her desire to "not be an artist" (Lebovici, 1995: 17) can be read as "not just an artist" and reflects a series of other oppositional categories that would categorise and reduce her life and work: "not heterosexual", "not woman", "not man" etc.... But to revert to the logic of originary causes for one moment, it seems that we can situate Cahun as a pioneer of queer practice if only to recognise that queer itself is part of a larger distillation of attempts to formulate new ways of thinking the relationship between politics, sexuality and artistic expression.

Sedgwick is useful in my reading of Cahun's work, not only because she draws our attention to theory's conception of itself as something always of the present, but because she locates knowledge in modernity around questions of sexual knowledge, around "the crisis of homo/heterosexual definition" (1990:1). Like sexual knowledge, the photograph is structured around a dynamic of what is known and what is unknown, what is revealed and what is concealed. The self-referentiality of the photographic self-portrait produces a hermetic circle of narcissistic desire, so that we become voyeuristic intruders into the world of Cahun's self-transformations. What the portraits continually play out is a self-consciousness around the spectacle of gender; an erotics of appearance and disguise that intersects and disturbs the clearly defined parameters of male and female. As such the photographic self-portrait becomes an exemplary way of representing a crisis of definition; both sexual and aesthetic. Cahun's use of "the double", of mirrors and of masks, discloses a deliberate narcissism. In taking on a series of fetishised personas – the dandy, the sailor, the aviator, the boxer, the vamp, the exotic oriental woman, the actress or female performer, the Aryan blonde maiden and so on – Cahun discloses the narcissism of commodity fetishism. Each persona represents a culturally constructed social identity,
professionally coded through its highly visible appearance and performance. Her use of doubling and repetition conveys an interrogation of the Cartesian subject as well as referencing the narcissism of a psychoanalytical representation of homosexuality – with Cahun’s close artistic collaboration with her lover and step-sister, Suzanne Malherbe subtly disclosed in some of the portraits. And yet in her appropriation of these personas, Cahun does not produce mere replicas. Rather, the images contain an ironic relationship that borders on a camp aesthetic. Defining camp as dandyism in the age of mass culture, Susan Sontag (1964/1999: 63) reveals camp’s proximity to 19th century commodity culture and the spectacle of the dandy. Cahun’s own cultivation of a dandy aesthetic, evidenced in many of the early self-portraits and in descriptions of her during the 1920’s, reflects the cult of the mannish woman within lesbian coteries of this period. But while some of the portraits can be read within the rubric of the lesbian dandy or as proto-camp, Cahun’s representation of costume and style engages with a multivalent politics and aesthetics of costume and cross-dressing. Many of the portraits take their cue from a Surrealist exploration of fashion as an exemplary instance of the everyday made strange; the transformation of the domestic item into enigmatic spectacle. They also pay homage to Dada performance with its uncanny use of dolls, puppets and absurd and highly theatrical costume.

Looking at the self-portraits that Cahun produced over a twenty year period – across the 1920’s and 1930’s – together with some of her writing, both journalistic and experimental, one has a sense of how her work repeatedly engaged with Surrealism and thus, implicitly, the two grand narratives of her day, Freudianism and Marxism. Aside from the immediacy of these narratives, the work also includes more minor but equally important influences – the role of sexology and fashion or costume in constructing the increasingly visible persona of the lesbian. As such the portraits perform and deconstruct questions of identity across the boundaries of political activism, aesthetic practice and personal and erotic style. As Laurie Monahan suggests: "For Cahun and other leftist intellectuals... a potential space of disruption was the subject transcending its own bounds. In a society where the coherent subject was central to social stability – its structure, moral codes, rules – a radical reconceptualisation of the self promised fundamental change” (1996:132). In Cahun’s self-portraits the subject is never stable but undergoes a series of radical transformations effected through various vestimentary codes and photographic techniques, a subject that is continually “radically reconfigured” (132). Cahun appears before us in an assorted array of guises and roles, all of which reveal an obsession with masks and costume and performance and identity. Throughout this chapter I examine the
way in which political and cultural ideology is mediated through self-transformation and representation, exploring a number of cultural sites where costume and style, performance and masking and its expression through photography become key moments in the reconceptualisation of the self within a specifically avant-garde culture as well as within the emerging social and sexual category of the lesbian. As a lesbian who adopted a non gender-specific name and frequently cross-dressed, and as a Jew, the question of identity for Claude Cahun was certainly crucial. Moreover, Cahun’s ways of looking offer a counterpoint to a more canonical and penetrative Surrealist politics of the visual.

Born Lucy Schwob in Nantes in 1894, Cahun was the daughter of the publisher Maurice Schwob and the niece of the prominent Symboliste writer and critic, Marcel Schwob. In 1918 she changed her name to the sexually ambiguous “Claude Cahun”, possibly to escape any connection to her famous literary and publishing family. Cahun spent much of her early life between France and England before taking up philosophy at the Sorbonne; she never completed her studies but rather took up journalism and became active in various avant-garde circles, including both the Dada and Surrealist movements. Under the pseudonym “Claude Cahun” and other male nom de plumes, she began writing for various newspapers and avant-garde journals: she reported on the trial of Oscar Wilde for the reputable and more mainstream *Mercure de France* as well as the newly established and controversial homosexual review *L’Amitié*. In fact she contributed to and collaborated on many of the important avant-garde journals of the day – *Minotaure, Cahiers d’art, Philosophies* and *Le Journal littéraire*. She wrote a satirical piece on great heroines of history, which was serialised in *Le Mercure de France* and *Le Journal littéraire* in 1925 and she translated and published – under her original name, Lucy Schwob – Havelock Ellis’s *La femme dans la Société, Vol.1 of L’hygiène sociale: Etudes de psychologie for Le Mercure de France* (1929). Often seen sitting in the company of her stepsister and life-long lesbian partner in the Café Cyrano, her hair cropped “mannelishly” short and died bright pink or green (after Baudelaire’s own striking tonsure), her skin stained by semi-permanent tattooing, her thin birdlike frame draped in outlandish batik clothing, Cahun’s presence would have created a spectacle – even in the context of Parisian bohemia in the 1920’s and 30’s. Although a friend and colleague of André Breton, the spectacle of the strangely adorned Cahun, in the company of her twin-like lover, was too confronting for the homophobic leader of the Surrealist movement, who would avoid his favourite cafe so as not to be seen in public with them.
The private and undisclosed world of the self-portraits – it appears that they were not exhibited in her lifetime – contrasts with her extremely active role in the political side of the Surrealist movement. Her dislike of coercive politics and conservative political regimes played an important part in her life: she was active in the French resistance during the war; she was a member of the anti-fascist political group, Contra-attaque, formed by Bataille and Breton and she was instrumental in defending avant-garde art practice from communist party denunciation. In a pointedly titled essay, “Poetry Keeps Its Secret”, part of a report that Cahun prepared for the literary section of the Association of Revolutionary Artists and Writers (Association des Artistes et Ecrivains Révolutionnaires, or AEAR), she argues for the revolutionary potential of “avant-garde” art over and above a social realist aesthetic. Above all she suggests that poetry (and aesthetic practice in general) has an intrinsic importance in human psychic life, and that as a “need” it is undoubtedly linked to the sex drive (Cahun cited in Rosemont, 1998: 54). Here she also provides a nuanced discussion of the role of avant-garde art within a communist political program, claiming that it is precisely the self-reflexive quality of poetic language that makes it an important revolutionary practice but also an unpredictable medium for political propaganda. In a wonderfully surreal passage in this essay, Cahun poetically captures the operation of deconstructive practices and Walter Benjamin’s concept of the optical unconscious:

A man believes he has photographed the hair of the woman he loves, mingled with bits of straw, as she sleeps in a field. But in the developed snapshot there appear a thousand divergent arms, shining fists, weapons; we see that it’s a photo of a riot (Cahun, cited in Rosemont, 1998: 55).

In a description of the photographic process that resonates with a Surrealist aesthetic awareness of the optical unconscious and the role of chance in the creation of the aesthetic object, Cahun imparts the provisional and unintentional status of all meaning – and therefore the difficulty of using art as pure propaganda. Defending what she calls “the dada-surrealist experiment”, Cahun argues for a more nuanced appreciation of the political and the revolutionary, one that incorporates the effects of chance and desire in the construction and reception of the aesthetic object. She concludes by arguing that it is impossible, except very crudely through psychoanalysis, to gauge the revolutionary “effect” of a poem or work of art since its “effects” will always produce an individual affective response. Here the “secret” of poetry, of the photograph, hints at the indeterminate nature of semantic meaning just as the identity of the subject in her self-
portraits is always in flux. In her description of the photograph’s secret, rhetorically elaborated as poetry’s secret, Cahun reveals its homology with Walter Benjamin’s explication of the optical unconscious in photography:

Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking, if only in general terms, we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second when a person steps out. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. (1931/1979:243)

Both Cahun’s and Benjamin’s relationship to Surrealism becomes extremely suggestive in these two passages: their conclusion that we cannot necessarily master all that we see divulges a strong distrust of the empirical.19 For Benjamin this was part of a shift in the pictorial schema that the new technologies of modernity – photography and cinema – had brought about. For Cahun, the photograph had enabled the production of a kind of radical personal style, which displaced the question of the subject’s identity into the realm of the aesthetic and the performative.

Mary Ann Caws presents Claude Cahun as a Surrealist heroine, who, like Nadja, is ultimately too strange and confronting for canonical Surrealism; her polymorphous instability and unpredictability as well as her lesbian sexuality at odds with Breton’s homophobic idealisation of heterosexuality. Caws writes: “No one had more ways of looking than Claude Cahun ... Cahun is masquerade itself ... she is camp as camp can be. Masks and half-masks” (1998:95). Carolyn Dean also argues that Cahun’s displacement within the Surrealist movement reflects the way in which – despite its revolutionary anti-bourgeois rhetoric – canonical Surrealist constructions of gender and sexuality often replaced old dichotomies with new ones:

[Breton’s] problem with bourgeois morality was that it was not moral or pure enough, and he countered it with an idealized, liberated, natural heterosexuality purged of the tainted, repressed, and hence compromised bourgeois ideal of love that produced adultery, treachery, and presumably homosexuality. (78)

Michael Richardson (1998: 390) has also noted that since homosexuality in this period was defined in terms of its opposition to normative bourgeois sexuality, Breton pitted a
Surrealist notion of purified heterosexuality directly against homosexuality. In essence, then, their revolutionary conception of sex hinged on the way in which they came to define the notion of purity. Dean reinforces this when she argues that “Purified magical heterosexuality (Breton termed it l'amour fou) replaced homosexuality as the site of opposition to bourgeois culture” (1996: 78).

A close examination of the Surrealist’s investigations into sexuality elaborates Dean’s and Richardson’s argument. Originally published in La Révolution surréaliste (no.s 10-11, 1928), the “Recherches sur la sexualité” provide formal evidence of the movement’s attempts to collectively formulate knowledge of the self and its “experience” within everyday practices. But while its aim was to open up discussion on sexual practices and experiences, to gather some kind of material evidence around this subject, the discussions soon collapsed into disagreement over the appropriateness of certain topics. In particular, it is on the subject of “normalcy”, both of sexual practices and desires, that the discussion begins to splinter. And it is Breton who defends most vehemently the concept of “a normal man”. In the initial stages of the discussion, many of the participants, led on by Breton, express moral repugnance toward homosexuality, especially in men. But when some of the members of the group attempt to defend the moral right of homosexuals and describe their own ‘imagined’ homoerotic desires, Breton threatens to abandon the discussion altogether. Aragon responds to Breton’s threats by asking him if he condemns all sexual perversion to which Breton replies that he condemns no form of sexual perversion other than homosexuality.11 In her reading of these discussions Sarah Wilson concludes that the Surrealist’s investigation into sex “was a stunning instance of purported textual “openness” actually revealing closure” (1997: 140).

The irony of Breton’s virulent homophobia is that his own style of leadership often involved the “seduction” of both men and women into the group; he used his personal charms to attract new members in order to rejuvenate and bolster the movement. This then becomes a classic case, according to Wilson, of the link between “homsociality (boy-talk) and homosexual panic – the potential fear that suppressed homoerotic/homosexual relation will become explicit” (1997: 140). While there is some semblance of a discussion on the nature and types of sexual perversion experienced by the participants in Breton’s circle, what the discussion soon reveals is an overriding obsession with establishing “evidence” of romantic love between a man and a woman, including how to establish evidence of a woman’s orgasm and whether a man is able to tell if a woman is faking. Although perhaps unique in its inclusion of desire and sex in its efforts to create a
link between art practice and the notion of the desiring subject, the discussions reveal a level of homophobia that diminishes the terms of the inquiry – that of radical investigation. More recently, Michael Richardson has argued not all together convincingly that Breton’s homophobia was directed not so much against particular sexual acts but against the lifestyle of homosexuality:

... it should be pointed out in all fairness that Breton’s attitude is in part to do with the fact that during the 1920’s homosexuality was a fashion among the modish set that Breton despised – his rejection of it is not so much a rejection of a particular sexual activity but lies in an equation he made between it and attitudes of superficiality and affectedness which he loathed. (390)

Richardson usefully points out that the slippage in translation between homosexualité and pédérastie makes our reading of Breton’s homophobia more complex than it first appears:

What is discussed is not homosexualité (that is homosexuality as a sexual penchant) but pédérastie, which has a wider range of associations than in English, meaning both pederasty and more specifically the culture of homosexuality which also identifies homosexual behaviour with superficiality and which was a prevalent attitude among French intellectuals at the time”(390).

I would argue, however, that what Breton expresses in these discussions is disgust at the very thought of the homosexual act; a disgust that certainly may have coincided with his dislike of the cultural manifestations and institutions of homosexuality.12 Richardson’s point, however, reminds us of the complexity of Surrealism’s – in particular Breton’s – attitude to sexuality. While Breton’s views on sex, generally, tended toward the puritanical, as indicated by his call for the closing of all brothels, the investigations reveal an opening up of discussion on sexuality, in the context of aesthetic practice, that is also historically significant.

The Surrealist’s investigations into sexuality discloses an ongoing discussion of sex that had been formally precipitated by both sexology and psychoanalysis. The rise of a sexual science at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the twentieth reflects what Foucault calls a discursive explosion on the subject of sex. In charting the appearance of “peripheral sexualities” at the beginning of the 19th century, Foucault suggests that sexual practices began to be “entomologised”, labelled and classified. This focus on new kinds of
sexual practices aimed not simply to repress them but to give them "an analytical, permanent reality... to incorporate them into the individual" (1976: 44). Sexuality came to be redefined as central to our experience of modernity, indeed to the concept of ourselves as modern enlightened subjects. In the History of Sexuality, Vol. 1 Foucault explores how the detail of sexual activity came to dominate not just our experience of sexuality but the core of our identity; the detail of descriptions of sexuality, the labelling of bodies, the will to knowledge about sex became integral to the concept of the modern subject. Foucault's insights are exemplified in the work of Havelock Ellis and the wider project of sexology and also in the Surrealist's investigations into sex.

It is in this context that Cahun's work needs to be read. Rather than associate her with the abjected figure of Nadja or the reviled homosexual figure of Bretonian Surrealism, I want to suggest that her workinserts into the Surrealist project an important rethinking of gender, sexuality and representation, interrogating the rigid categories that often define and implement a Surrealist politics and aesthetics: the polemical categories of male and female as well as heterosexuality and homosexuality. Indeed many of Cahun's concerns self-consciously play out what Eve Sedgwick has referred to as "the crisis of individual identity and figuration itself" (1990: 83). In connecting artistic production with sexual identity in her aptly titled essay "Poetry Keeps Its Secret", Cahun establishes her interest in philosophical debates on sexuality, in particular contemporary discussions on "sexual inversion" within the framework of her aesthetic and political allegiance to Surrealism. As well as reporting on the trial of Oscar Wilde, Cahun contributed an article to L'Amitié as part of an ongoing discussion on the subject of "sexual inversion". She also frequented the bookshops of Adrienne Monnier and Sylvia Beach (she was fluent in French and English), two women who played an important role in the Parisian lesbian literary scene. Indeed, until the war forced her to flee Paris, Cahun had led a remarkable double life; as a man and a woman, as a photographer and journalist, as a lesbian Jew who managed to traverse a number of disparate avant-garde coteries. Given the extraordinary details of Claude Cahun's life, it is uncanny that her work, as well as the details of her identity, passed into complete obscurity after the second world war. It seems extraordinary that someone whose appearance was as remarkable as Cahun's and whose work engaged with some of the most important philosophical and aesthetic issues of her day, could pass into complete obscurity. For many years critics were unsure as to whether Cahun was a man or woman and many of her self-portraits have only been recovered in the last decade. Since the rediscovery of these works Cahun has been recognised as one of the most
important Surrealist photographers, as well as one of its most inspired female theorists and political activists.

Although there is no evidence that Cahun's photographs were ever publicly exhibited, the sheer volume – nearly 300 of them have survived – together with the techniques she employed and subject matter chosen, make them interesting and valuable examples of Surrealist photography. To look at them solely through the lens of Surrealism limits their nuanced articulation of other cultural and political themes. Cahun's photographs include a range of different styles from documentary style portraiture to theatrically constructed self-portraits and the incorporation of manipulated techniques such as photomontage and double exposure. Although most are self-portraits, Cahun also photographed the world of experimental theatre (which she participated in) as well as some of the most notable figures of the Parisian avant-garde, including André and Jacqueline Breton, Robert Desnos and Sylvia Beach. It is in the large collection of self-portraits dating from the 1920's through to the 1930's that Cahun renders the philosophical questions of identity, spectatorship and desire as instrumental to her political and aesthetic praxis; in her hands the photographic self-portrait becomes the exemplary medium to explore the indeterminacy of gender; to interrogate and represent the masks, costumes and performances of both masculinity and femininity. Within the context of an orthodox Surrealism, with its fetishisation and dismemberment of the female body and its explicit homophobia, the works address the crisis of identity and self-definition for women (and) homosexuals within the movement. The dynamic of resistance and complicity that I have explored in my reading of Carrington's own relationship to Surrealism is slightly different in this context. For although she was committed to the Surrealist movement, Cahun also engaged with other political and aesthetic contexts. Therefore any reading of her work must involve an understanding of the importance not only of a Freudian sexual economy but of the influence of sexology in the creation of a newly emergent lesbian identity and indeed the cultural milieux in Paris and London that helped to shape this visible lesbian subject. I will first examine the performance of identity in the photographs before moving on to look at what might have informed such representations.

What Do You Want From Me?

In a self-portrait from 1928 (see fig. 13), Cahun appears side-on in front of a mirror wearing a black and white checked shirt. Her hair is cropped close to her head and her
face, caught from both the front and the side, is beautifully chiselled. The image plays with reality and illusion by revealing two different angles of her face; although both images represent the one subject, they appear before us as two quite separate expressions. While the image in the foreground looks straight at us, directly engaging our gaze, the image reflected in the mirror is turned away, furtively avoiding our gaze. In this self-portrait the strategy of doubling references both the narcissism of the mirror and the medium of self-portraiture – and the ambiguity of their status as mediums that confer authenticity. The appearance of two subjects in the portrait is an illusion since the furtive gaze is merely the “other” side of the subject staring directly at us, the side we wouldn’t be able to see without the use of the mirror. So although the mirror provides us with a reality that would otherwise be lost in the two-dimensionality of photographic portraiture, it distorts the image through its reflection of the other side of the face. By using the mirror Cahun points to the blind spots of the photographic image, to the side of the self that would otherwise be obscured and in the process deconstructs the ontological stability of the photograph as a medium of truth. In revealing what would otherwise be the concealed side of her face, Cahun presents us with a distortion or at least a confusion. Here “the double” sets up a dialectic of self and other, of subject and object which is reinforced by the black and white checks of Cahun’s shirt which also references the photographic process itself: the positive and negative of a photographic image, one necessarily being the same but also the reverse of the other.

The theme of the double returns in another portrait, dated from the same year, Que Me Veux-Tu? [What Do you Want From Me?] (see fig. 14), one of the few self-portraits to be titled. Here again we are presented with two images of the same subject, one looking over its shoulder at the other with an expression of self-observation, a haunting of one self by another competing self. Instead of a mirror, Cahun uses montage to duplicate the subject and in the process captures a surreal sense of the split subject, hinting at both its conscious and unconscious dimensions. In posing the question “What Do You Want From Me?” as a moment of self-interrogation, Cahun registers the opening words of Breton’s own self-interrogation, “Who am I?”, at the beginning of Nadja. But here Cahun shifts the question from “Who am I?”, an interrogation that belongs in the case of Nadja to the uncertainty of the autobiographical project itself and the connection between subject formation and a Freudian understanding of the uncanny as the return of something familiar that has been repressed, to an awareness of the multivalency of the subject, and to a Freudian explication of narcissism as the subject’s search for an ego ideal. In his essay “On Narcissism” (1920) Freud develops an account of the importance of narcissism
14. Claude Cahun, *Que me veux-tu?* 1928
to self-development, noting that "we must recognise that self-regard has a specially intimate dependence on narcissistic libido" (PFL, Vol 2: 1991: 93). Cahun's frequent use of the double as well as her development of a rhetoric of make-up and costume as central to the visual texture of the body's form and identity, suggests that narcissism functions here as a highly self-conscious practice of self-definition and self-creation, one which at times works against the ubiquitous Surrealist practice of repeatedly reducing women to bits and pieces, to violated and fetishised body parts. In many of the self-portraits costume becomes a phallic overdetermination of the subject, a simultaneous assertion and deconstruction of identity. Therefore, while "the double" asserts identity it also refuses any static unity of the self, acknowledging the Bretonian project of autobiographical deconstruction.

In many of the early portraits Cahun takes on the fashionable look of the dandy, drawing attention to the stylisation of her appearance through various framing devices such as mirrors, reflecting balls and pieces of draped cloth (see figs. 15, 16 and 17). Cahun's cross-dressing in these portraits unsettles a cultural assumption of sexual difference and the "truth" of sexual identity. Here the "truth" of sexual identity is played out alongside the "truth" of the photographic image so that both sexual identity and the ontological status of the photograph become unstable. In other portraits Cahun appears in highly theatrical costumes, often using masks to unsettle our reading of her gendered identity. But the hyperfemininity that she displays in many of these portraits - such as the one of her as a blonde Aryan maiden (see fig. 18) - reminds us of a man dressed in drag. The shift from a more sombre cross-dressing to a highly theatrical and often camp performance is one of the more interesting aspects of this collection of photographs, one that may suggest Cahun was moving away from a model of sexual identity simply based on "inversion".

The dialectic of self and other, authenticity and copy produced in these images coincides with Cahun's experimentation with masculine and feminine costume, both before and away from the camera. That is, the self-portraits read like a kind of visual diary, a collection of moods, erotic styles, favourite costumes, masks and identities which call to mind Cahun's anti-teleological autobiographical project, Absent Confessions, as well as the faux construction of historical female identity in her satirical work, Heroines. In a collage piece from Absent Confessions, titled I.O.U (Self-Pride) (see fig. 19), a series of cut-out heads of Cahun in different guises are stacked one upon the other, emerging from a single phallic-shaped neck. This part of the image recalls Man Ray's photograph "Anatomies" in which


the neck and chin of a female model are photographed from such an angle as to suggest a penile shaft and head. But around the edges of Cahun’s phallic collage are the words “Beneath this mask another mask. I will never be done lifting off all these visages” (cited in Blessing, 1997: 37). Here the self is constructed as an endless play of masks, reminding us of Riviere’s suggestion that there is no difference between the mask and what lies behind it; that the mask itself is a trope for the “absence” of woman from signifying cultural practices. But the subtitle of this piece, “Self-pride”, suggests that the image functions as a celebratory totem pole of identities that are both the same and different, a homage to the theme of narcissism that is at once antidote to, but also sign of, a crisis of self-definition. My reading of this portrait is informed in part by the knowledge that Cahun’s lifelong lover and step-sister, Suzanne Malherbe, played an important part in facilitating the self-portraits. Does the “I.O.U” of the portrait’s title function as a homage to Malherbe, a recognition of the “other” in the collaborative act of the portraits as well as Malherbe’s implicit presence in the autobiographical project? Elsewhere in this image a pyramid structure containing father, mother and child refers to the violence of the oedipal family, with each joined at the stomach like Siamese twins, the father’s hand violently holding the child up by the hair in a simultaneous embrace of the mother. A banner with the words “La Sainte Famille” hovers above them, mocking the deification of the bourgeois family despite the reality of its incestuous violence. Behind the pyramid are a set of Russian doll-like figures, inside of which are foetuses in various stages of gestation, from the smallest to the largest. Lined up together, the foetuses suggest the narcissism of the bourgeois family: its desire to reproduce itself, over and over. But the dolls also reference the process of transformation implicit in identity formation and represented by the cascading collage of Cahun’s heads. Another triangle with three different “masks” of Cahun mimics the pyramid of the saintly family as if to play up Cahun’s own creative and fecund powers of self-reproducability. In Chapter Two, in the context of Carrington and Riviere, we saw how the mask of femininity is a symbol that serves both to uphold the myth of phallic power as well as to undo it. In Cahun’s work, lesbianism comes to represent a “masquerade” that deconstructs heterosexuality and the bourgeois family.14

The repetition of the mask theme is evident in another portrait (see fig. 20) where Cahun appears in a doll-like mask wearing a black cloak, to which are attached various other theatrical masks. The repetition of masks on the cloak invokes the elaborate and theatrically-inspired costumes of the fancy-dress party, which, according to Janet Flanner reached a peak of enjoyment in Paris during the 1920’s and early 1930’s.15 Flanner herself was photographed by Berenice Abbott in the late 20’s, elegantly dressed in a suit and top
hat. Around her hat are two masks, one black and one white, which gives this otherwise “classic” portrait its air of ambiguity. Since the masks in this portrait don’t actually conceal her face, they become mere representations of disguise. As such Flanner’s cross-dressing highlights the ambiguity of appearance and disguise in the representation of the self. In general, though, masks convey a sense of ambiguity through their act of concealment and through their suggestion of a hidden “truth”. The plethora of masks in Cahun’s image recalls the collage of identities in “I.O.U”. This theme is taken up yet again in one of the most extraordinary portraits Cahun produced of herself, the doll and dresser self-portrait (see fig. 21) from 1932. In this image Cahun transforms herself into a life-size doll, lying on the shelf of a large open Victorian wardrobe (an image which renders literal Sedgwick’s epistemology of the closet argument avant la lettre). Here Cahun’s own body becomes an automaton-like creature, an Olympia yet to be woken by its master, one arm hanging limp over the edge of the dresser drawers ready to be brought back to life. Cahun’s compact and fragile body contrasts with the ornate and imposing solidity of the Victorian closet which partially conceals and frames it. This self-portrait forms an interesting comparison with an image from Hans Bellmer’s Poupée Series, in which one of his mannequin dolls is placed in the open section of a kitchen dresser (see fig. 22), rendered as a strangely out of place object of a sexually perverse domestic voyeurism. In Bellmer’s image, which is dated a few years after Cahun’s, we are confronted with the uncanny fusing of the domestic and the everyday as well as the arcane and perverse. The strangled torso and limbs of Bellmer’s doll sits awkwardly with the domestic utility of the kitchen dresser, establishing a Surrealist sensibility of disjunction as well as the uncanny. As a whole, Bellmer’s doll series represents the return of the childhood nursery; as the ultimate plaything the doll signifies both the world of dream and the world of desire in the childhood act of dismembering and assembling. In Cahun’s image the violent juxtaposition of distorted limbs and domestic object is absent; instead the doll and the wardrobe symbolise the child’s love of self-transformation, of dressing up, of becoming who it wants. Indeed the strange serenity of the photograph invokes the sense of a child, exhausted by its dressing up, having fallen asleep in the midst of play. The portrait’s lyricism thereby encapsulates the memento mori effect of the photographic image, its ability to halt time and encrypt its subject in a death-like pose. The doll’s limpness becomes a sign of impending rigor mortis, the closet shelves its coffin.

The Surrealist fascination with the automaton or doll, and the mask, is a fascination with the unconscious as well as with the uncanny. Hans Bellmer’s Poupée, inspired by Offenbach’s Tales of Hoffmann – which itself forms a central part of Freud’s essay on the
uncanny – is a particularly striking example of the operation of the uncanny in Surrealism. Describing the uncanny as the return of the familiar in an unfamiliar form, Freud suggests that the uncanniest objects are “wax-works figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata” (“The Uncanny”, 1929: 347), precisely because they invoke an indeterminacy that unsettles our normal understanding of what they represent. Freud’s elaborate discussion of the etymological significance of the term unheimlich reveals that “heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich” (347). Therefore, heimlich means not only homely and familiar but also hidden and secret. Freud suggests that like the double, automata are uncanny because they remind us of the return of something from an earlier period of time, either an infantile narcissism or a primitive animism, that should have been overcome in the course of social and individual development. The uncanny is that which should have normally remain repressed and part of the unconscious but which has surfaced. In her reading of the importance of the uncanny to Surrealism, Elizabeth Wright suggests that the doll Olympia in Hoffman’s story “serves as an ideal mirror image by means of which the suffering protagonist unsuccessfully tries to reconstruct his shattered self-image” (1990: 272). She argues that just as “the favoured object turns into an object of fear...the beautiful Olympia... turn[s] into a rigid automaton which [is] dismembered before the protagonist’s eyes” (272). The doll and the mask thus become harbingers of death: as inanimate objects that take on animation they remind us of our own trajectory toward death thereby tracing the etymological trajectory of the word heimlich toward its opposite, unheimlich. It is precisely in this scheme of things that the familiar can become unfamiliar and terrifying.

Bellmer’s dolls thus reflect the world of the unconscious, of imagination as a primordial return to the assembling and dismembering of childhood play. In his discussion on Bellmer’s dolls, Hal Foster argues that they are exemplary of the Surrealist principle of convulsive beauty “since they restage primal fantasies and/or traumatic events concerning identity, difference and sexuality” (1993: 102). And in doing so the childhood fantasies become sadomasochistic events in which “construction as dismemberment” – Krauss’s term – “signifies both castration (in the disconnection of body parts) and its fetishistic defence (in the multiplication of these parts as phallic substitutes)” (1993: 103). In suggesting that the key to his own work lies in the anagram: “The body is like a sentence that invites us to rearrange it” (Cited in Foster, 1993: 103), Bellmer points to the significance of the uncanny in the very conception of his dolls. It is precisely their anagrammatic quality (“construction as dismemberment” and its opposite) that performs
the trajectory of the *heimlich* into its opposite. In becoming the stage on which male aggression and sexual fantasy are performed, the shattered and reassembled female body serves as a reminder of the male subject's own fragmentation and the threat to his bodily boundaries. As phallic substitutes, the dolls reveal the threat of castration and the ambivalence of sexual difference. But in their unveiling of a castration anxiety they reinforce stereotypes of women as masochistic, as infantilised objects of desire. On the other hand, Cahun's human doll, through its memento mori effect, stages its own death as a reminder of renewed life, of the possibility of change and transformation. Like her masks and costumes, Cahun's human doll registers the commodification of experience: the transformation of the self into a work of art and the fantasy of self-renewal this entails. For if the uncanny represents the return of the repressed, its ultimate subversion is the possibility of the redirection of desire. As Wright argues, the uncanny may represent that moment in which we come to the realisation that the old repression has ceased to be of value and that a redirection of that desire is needed (1990: 275). In presenting us with a doll-like human, rather than the more ubiquitous human-like doll – the avatar of the uncanny – Cahun defamiliarises the uncanny itself, redirecting our reading of it, away from a Surrealist uncanny immersed in the violation of the female body. Within both Freud and Bellmer's illustration of the uncanny, the doll represents the passive feminine object who merely reflects male desire and identity, albeit one in crisis. Cahun's Olympia, however, is no "object to be destroyed"**, but rather it captures the fragility and vulnerability of the subject as well as her potential for self-mastery and self-transformation.

In the context of the other self-portraits from this period which develop an elaborate rhetoric of costume, the closet or wardrobe in this image becomes symbolic of masquerade itself. The inert body of the doll-like Cahun is literally framed by the open shelves of the Victorian closet so that body and closet resonate in a series of binaries: photograph and frame, inside and outside, open and closed, concealed and displayed, familiar and strange, figurative and literal. Through the intimation of what lies hidden in its drawers and behind it doors and what lies outside the photograph – the masks and costumes, the secret desires and identities that will be constructed and reconstructed, performed and paraded in a myriad disguises and costumes, male and female, theatrical and workaday – the closet and its (hidden) contents become a trope for identity itself. Even as the portraits shore up oppositional categories as implicit to identity formation, they also reveal the instability of those categories and the cultural imperative to maintain them. Cahun's question "What do you want from me?" stages an implicit identity crisis: the self's internal drama between the narcissistic desire for an ego-ideal and the subject's

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sense of impending fragmentation. Breton's question "Who am I?", however, framed within the context of the great men of history as he ponders the similarities between his and Rousseau's projects, already assumes a certain stability of identity outside the text. For Breton the question is, who am I in terms of a writing self and what unique contribution, along with the other great men of history, can I make to the history of the self-examining writing subject?

Fashioning the Lesbian Subject of Surrealism

There is no such thing as a true self
Claude Cahun

Rebel, you've torn your dress
Rebel, your face is a mess
Rebel, how could they know?
Hot tramp, I love you so!

You've got your mother in a whirl, 'cause she's
Not sure if you're a boy or a girl
Hey babe, your hair's alright
Hey babe, let's stay out tonight

David Bowie "Rebel Rebel", 1974

In 1926 Janet Flanner wrote: "Women have looked the same for two years. By day they look like boys and by night they look like female impersonators" (17 April, 1926). Flanner's observation captures the sense in which fashion and style, in Paris at least, had undergone a significant change since the war. In various sites of popular culture such as women's magazines and fashion as well as within the avant-garde, the instability of gender identity finds its full expression during the late 1920's and early 1930's. Rather than read Cahun's portraits as a straightforward engagement with an avant-garde political aesthetic, as Rosalind Krauss does (1999), I want to suggest that the portraits traverse a number of different cultural and intellectual sites, including the science of sexology with its labelling of new kinds of bodies and desires, and the shifting appearance of women within metropolitan public life. Important here is the role that photography, as well as sexology, play in the construction of the new modern subject. As a translator of Havelock Ellis's work in the late 1920's and as an ongoing contributor to L'Amitié, Cahun is an important participant in the emerging debates on sexual and political identity. In

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using photography to explore the self within this context, her work produces an interesting overlapping of the new technologies of photography and sexology within a period where fashion continually redefined gender boundaries. In tracing the rise of photography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, John Tagg points to the contradiction between photography as a technology of surveillance and its more democratic presence in an ever wider amateur market. Increasingly portrait photography became a new form of consumption, one which confers particular kinds of social status. Tagg suggests that the photographic portrait functioned as “a sign whose purpose is both the description of an individual and the inscription of social identity” (Tagg, 1988: 37 [my emphasis]). In this context, Elizabeth Wilson argues that the widespread consumption of fashion photography through magazines as well as the ubiquitous rise of the snapshot in amateur photography contributed to a more self-conscious individual, one who was ultimately more attuned to her or his appearance, self-presentation and performance in public life (Wilson, 1985: 158). In the lesbian communities of Paris and London, clothes functioned as an important feature of identity and erotic style. As well as reading Cahun’s portraits within the context of Surrealism, I want to explore their connection to the emergence of a lesbian subject within photographic portraiture and the connections between gendered and sexual identity and the relatively new science of sexology. But first of all I want to provide a tentative account of the importance of fashion and costume to the construction of sexual and erotic style and gendered identity in this period.

The variety of costumes in Cahun’s self-portraits reflect a popular and widespread shift in women’s fashion and the disruption to the reading of dress codes as signs of sexual identity. During the 1920’s female fashion garments and style were increasingly becoming masculinised so that by the late 1920’s the figure of the masculine woman had become a ubiquitous style among fashionable heterosexual women. Therefore female masculinity was not always linked or associated with same-sex desire or lesbian behaviour. In her recent article “Passing Fashions: Reading Masculinities in the 1920’s”, Laura Doan reveals how style and fashion for women in the decade after the war became particularly ambiguous. Looking at a fashion spread from a 1926 issue of Eve: The Lady’s Pictorial Doan writes:

Eve depicts a virtual panorama of what might be called the “passing fashions” of the 1920’s: active women moving into the once exclusively masculine preserve of motorboat racing and yachting, rakishly boyish society women, a cross-dressed artist [could be Cahun], and an actor posing as a tomboy (1998: 667).
Doan, therefore, warns against interpreting the performance of masculinity within popular fashion culture as a sign of sexual subversion since fashion-conscious women of all sexual persuasions were obliged to “cross-dress” to a certain extent by cutting their hair short and donning boyish or mannish attire. But prominent alongside the figure of the mannish or boyish woman is the figure of the female dandy, whose adoption of a highly stylised masculinity is differentiated from that of the generally androgynous fashions of the period. The figure of the female dandy was perhaps immortalised by Radclyffe Hall: throughout the 20’s and 30’s Hall commissioned a number of photographic portraits of herself dressed in the impeccable manner of the dandy which came to represent a uniquely lesbian style. While I want to return to what Terry Castle calls Hall’s “lesbian high style” and its connection to Cahun’s own construction of a lesbian identity, firstly I want to explore the meaning of costume in relation to Cahun’s portraits.

The panorama of “masculine identities” available to the readers of Eve is interesting in light of Cahun’s own donning of numerous costumes and her mimicry of various professional roles, both masculine and feminine. In a portrait from 1920, Cahun appears in the costume of a sailor (see fig. 23); legs astride in the wide-leg trousers typically worn by sailors, hands on hips, wearing a white polo-neck jumper and a sailor’s hat. Here Cahun appears as if modelling for a fashion spread such as the one described in Eve. In this portrait is Cahun simply masquerading as a sailor, her costume and stance performing the concomitant masculine attributes of freedom and independence, or simply representing the new kinds of “fashions” and “roles” available to women? In another series from 1927 (see fig. 24), Cahun camps up the professional costume of the boxer or gymnast. Appearing with a hand painted dumb-bell, kiss curls framing her face and love hearts painted onto her cheeks, the words “Do not kiss me, I am in training” written across her chest, Cahun in camp theatrical style appears to be “showing up” the “show-off” boxer or sporting man.⁷ In another portrait Cahun dons a pair of aviation goggles (see fig. 25) revealing a wry similarity to Man Ray’s portrait of Breton in aviation goggles. However, this image also recalls pioneering women such as Amelia Earhart and the frequency with which images, such as those of Earhart photographed in her flying suit and goggles, were becoming a regular feature of the daily press. Women’s participation in a wide range of recreational activities – such as motoring, flying, boating, tennis and walking – contributed to the development of a whole new style of dress that became known as sports or leisure wear. Earhart’s own flying suit was marketed as a fashion item, though it failed to become popular.⁸ Cahun’s parade of costumes reflects the New Woman’s

burgeoning spirit of adventure if only to play up sardonically her own erotic style of quotation and mimicry.

In these images Cahun renders fashion as an instrument for manipulation and playfulness but underscores its importance in establishing for women the freedom of both body and psyche. Like the fashion models in the pages of *Eve*, Cahun experiments with a range of "professional" and "recreational" costumes, connecting the performance of masculinity with erotic style and a certain freedom for the New Woman. Within both Cahun's self-portraits and the pages of a popular English fashion magazine, fashion signals some complex questions around the performance of gendered and sexual identity, reminding us of Virginia Woolf's comment that "we are what we wear, and therefore, since we can wear anything, we can be anyone" (Doan, 1998a: 667). In referencing the transexual heroine of her novel, *Orlando*, Woolf connects who we are with what we wear, and in so doing, reflects a contemporary obsession with the meaning of clothes, in particular the association of the changing style of women's fashion with her newfound political freedom and social independence. As such Cahun's work bears some connection with J.C Flugel's important psychoanalytical study of clothes, which was published in 1930 by the Woolf's Hogarth Press in association with the Institute of Psychoanalysis. In *The Psychology of Clothes* Flugel provides an analysis of the way in which political change effects vestimentary codes and the functioning of the self in relation to these changes. In its time Flugel's work was the definitive study on identity, politics and fashion within the context of psychoanalysis.

Written throughout the 1920's – and inspired by the dramatic change in women's clothes after the war – Flugel's charmingly astute account of the meaning of clothes is contemporaneous with Cahun's self-portraits. Noting how sartorial extravagance is encouraged in women and not men, Flugel traces the decline in male sartorial display from the end of the 18th century under the label of "The Great Male Renunciation". Since the beginning of the 19th century, he argues, men's clothes have become increasingly uniform and sombre; a shift he links to changes in class relations and the democratisation of society since the industrial revolution. But the central part of his thesis is an account of the psychoanalytical vicissitudes that have resulted from this renunciation. Firstly, Flugel notes how men's new plainer style of dress has suppressed or at least diverted their narcissistic and exhibitionistic tendencies. In his extremely astute portrait of the contemporary male, Flugel reveals how previous exhibitionistic desires which were expressed through the sumptuousness of aristocratic costume, are now channelled into a
professional display of "showing off" – through spectator sports such as boxing in which the power and display of the masculine body becomes a vicarious moment of exhibitionistic behaviour. As a result, Fluger argues, men's psychoanalytical make-up has shifted from "(passive) exhibitionism to (active) scopophilia (pleasure in the use of vision) – the desire to be seen being transformed into the desire to see" (1930: 118). Flugel's argument that men now gain pleasure through looking at women (and at certain types of men) rather than in their own self-display offers a fairly radical reading of scopophilia, one that suggests a phallic overdetermination for women at the expense of phallic loss for men. Moreover, Flugel's account carries the implicit assumption that like femininity, masculinility is a form of masquerade.

In what is an interesting piece of historical coincidence – or perhaps not – an early version of Flugel's argument appeared in the same issue of the Journal of Psychoanalysis that carried Joan Riviere's "Womanliness as a Masquerade." What is interesting about Flugel's work, in relation to Cahun's portraits, however, is the way in which increasingly clothes were seen to both reflect and confer political and sexual identity rather than class status. Likening fashion to a neurotic symptom, Flugel claims that the wearing of clothes becomes a perpetual compromise between modesty and eroticism. Since our society represses overt sexuality, fashion becomes the medium in which to reveal it covertly and secretly. Flugel's comments are suggestive of the way in which clothes often function as a signal of sexual orientation. While it is important not to collapse the figure of the mannish lesbian or the lesbian dandy with the general "boyish" or androgynous fashions of the late 20's and early 30's, both suggest a shift in the social status of women more generally and the increased visibility (both textual and photographic) of the lesbian as readable subject. Cahun's self-portraits thus reveal a number of inconsistent and competing narratives: while some use unambiguously "straight" portraiture as a means to an increased visibility of the mannish lesbian and the New Woman, others lean towards experimentation with photographic technique as a way to disrupt the seamless construction of subjectivity and the "truth" of sexual orientation.

Tagg's comments on photography remind me of the way Cahun's portraits always describe a particular kind of individual (the aviator, the wrestler, the oriental woman, the Aryan maiden etc...), who in turn points to particular kinds of social and political inscriptions that are performed through the construction of subjects before the camera. But here the portraits also reveal Surrealism's own fascination with fashion as an exemplary moment of the everyday as art, the familiar object made strange through disfigurement and
embellishment; the body veiled and unveiled, concealed and revealed. In fashion photography, the subject is transformed into an object on display, so that in the terms of commodity fetishism, identities become spectacles and fetishised merchandise. As both an object of consumption and an art form, fashion, for the Surrealists was an instance of the everyday made marvellous. The formal relations between fashion and Surrealism can be seen in the work of Man Ray and Lee Miller as well as Elsa Schiaparelli's collaborations with Jean Cocteau, Leonor Fini and Salvador Dalí. In many of Schiaparelli's collections throughout the late 20's and early 30's, the Surrealist-inspired object becomes the focus of her designs; examples include the "Shoe Hat" and the "Tear Dress". The Surrealists, however, were not the only avant-garde Parisians interested in fashion. Shari Benstock notes Gertrude Stein's interest in fashion and how in her later years she was dressed exclusively by one of the leading young couturiers of Paris, Pierre Balmain. Attending his first Paris showing in the company of Cecil Beaton – as though it were one of the many art openings she had visited in her life – Stein was moved enough to write an article for Vogue on his costuming genius (Benstock, 1986: 183). In her other writing on fashion, Benstock reveals how Stein reads cultural identity through fashion, seeing in fashion and clothes a reflection of the changing roles of men and women. For Stein, and other avant-garde women, fashion plays a crucial role in conferring a particular kind of sexual and cultural identity, one which coincided with an ever burgeoning investigation of sexual identity.

The legacy of the 19th Century psychomedical construction of sexual identity, exemplified in the work of Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter and Kraft-Ebing, also has an important place in the work of a generation of lesbian writers and artists, women such as Radclyffe Hall, Natalie Barney and Vita Sackville-West – and also Claude Cahun. Like many lesbian women of their generation, they included themselves as the subjects of photographic portraits dressed in a range of male and female costumes – from the famous dandy-esque portraits of Radclyffe Hall to the highly lyrical costumes donned by Natalie Barney in her series of masquerades of heroes and heroines of history. Portraits of women passing as men, or in masculine clothing are particularly common in the decades between the wars; the painted portraits of women by Romaine Brookes as well as highly stylised photographic portraits of Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge dressed in fashionable and slightly theatrical male costume point to the increasing visibility of the mannish lesbian. As a result of the widespread consumption and availability of sexological tracts, in particular the work of Havelock Ellis, the figure of the mannish lesbian was increasingly eroticised and internalised during the 1920's. It came to dominate both textual and visual
representations of female homosexuality, one of its most famous examples found in Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*. One of Hall’s biographers, Michael Baker, suggests that in preparation for *The Well*, Hall read widely in the work of contemporary sexologists which confirmed her view of her own sexuality as in-born rather than acquired. Her novel explicitly takes up the theories of both Ellis and Kraft-Ebing, at times almost reproducing particular descriptions of lesbians from their case studies: “the air of degradation and vice that hangs over the lesbian fraternity in Stephen’s story is a vision of homosexuality which smacks strongly of Kraft-Ebing’s morbid case histories” (Baker, 1985: 218). Moreover, Hall’s description of her heroine, Stephen, confirms Ellis’s own portrait of the female invert as “a nervy artistic type, boyish in manners and looks, deep voiced, capable of whistling, and prone to deeply felt attachments” (Ellis cited in Baker, 1985: 218). Kraft-Ebing appears in the novel as the distinguished father of sexology; his work, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, discovered by Stephen in her father’s study after his death, her name inscribed by him in the margins of the text.

In fashioning her central character from the texts and theories of the psychomedical fraternity, Hall’s novel reveals the strange interconnections between literary text and psychosexual constructions of sexual identity. The central argument of Ellis’s “Sexual Inversion in Women” is the assumption of an essential masculinity in all female inverteds. It was this association of masculinity with lesbianism that Hall believed confirmed her own belief that sexual inversion was congenital. Despite Ellis’s (and Hall’s) tendency to eclipse a multivalent notion of homosexual desire (for example he failed to account fully for masculinity that is present in non-homosexual women or those inverteds who although not masculine themselves are nevertheless attracted to masculine women), he was sympathetically viewed by many homosexual men and women between the wars, including Cahun, who found in his work the terms of reference for a homosexual self-fashioning. By incorporating the work of the sexologists into her novel, Hall hoped to give it a verisimilitude that would ultimately serve its polemical purpose. In a letter to her editor, Hall defended her manuscript in terms of its groundbreaking and didactic importance: “So far as I know, nothing of this kind has ever been attempted before in fiction... I have treated it as a fact of nature – a simple, though at present, tragic, fact. I have written the life of a woman who is a born invert...” (Baker, 1985: 202). Intent on cementing the ties between her didactic lesbian novel and the semi-respectable science of sexology, Hall asked Ellis to provide a preface for the work. Although Ellis was at first reluctant since *Sexual Inversion* (1897) had been banned for obscene libel in 1898, he finally
consented to a “Commentary” which forever connected Hall’s novel to the wider project of sexology:

I have read The Well of Loneliness with great interest because – apart from its fine qualities as a novel by a writer of accomplished art – it possesses a notable psychological and sociological significance. (cited in Baker: 207)

Strangely enough it was this very emphasis on explaining her character within the terms of early 20th century sexology that caused such a hostile reaction from otherwise sympathetic contemporary reviewers, including the derision of Bloomsbury and the Parisian lesbian literary scene. Reflecting on the novel in later years, Janet Flanner described it as “a rather innocent and confused book” and remarks that Hall’s “whole analysis was false and based on the fact that the heroine’s mother, when expecting her, had hoped for a baby boy, which as a daughter, Miss Hall interpreted literally”(1973: 48). Flanner’s comments play up the absurdity of Hall’s essentialist argument in the novel but reveal her own glossing of the historical importance of the work.19 More recently Esther Newton has argued that “by endowing a biological female with a masculine self, Hall both questions the inevitability of traditional gender categories and assents to it”(1989: 291). Moreover, Baker informs us that Hall had read the work of Colette and Natalie Barney before coming to write her novel, and was familiar with the lesbian scene in Paris. Indeed The Well includes thinly disguised portraits of both Romaine Brooks and Natalie Barney(Baker, 1985: 216). Despite the essentialist nature of her views on sexual orientation, Hall’s verbal portraits of lesbians in The Well provided a verisimilitude that contributed to an increasing visibility of the lesbian subject, and gave rise to her ever bolder presence in public life. After the publication of The Well, Hall’s own appearance became more masculine and her male clothes more theatrical and elaborate. As Hall became engaged in debates and discussions of homosexuality, her erotic and vestimentary style became increasingly flamboyant and visible. Her sexuality becomes readable through her costume just as Stephen’s sexual attraction in the novel is mediated through her masculine clothing.

Although the ease with which Hall passed as a man was facilitated by her class position, it is interesting to note that the confluence of political belief and erotic style enabled the development of the highly performative figure of the female dandy. In photographs throughout the late 20’s and 30’s Hall adds to her clothing repertoire such elaborate items as a brocaded silk smoking jacket, an astrakhan coat, a black sombrero and cape, a
monocle and a smoking pipe – items she purchased from Nathan’s theatrical costumier in London. This list of clothing accessories records the decadence and theatricality associated with the late 19th century figure of the dandy. But in adopting the persona of the female dandy Hall represents the lesbian self in far more ambiguous terms than one of simple inversion; an ambiguity that is also present in the portrait of Janet Flanner that I mentioned earlier. Although Flanner incorporates into her costume typically masculine features such as a top hat and cuff-links, her overall style is soft and feminine, creating an ambiguity of gender that is reminiscent of the dandy’s fusion of masculinity and femininity. Abbot’s portrait bears out Benstock’s reading of Flanner as someone who cultivated this ambiguity: “That Flanner herself was a lesbian is carefully hidden behind her professional role as a journalist and beneath a smooth and sometimes ironic prose style” (1986: 115).

As the cultivation of personal style, the roles of gender, spectacle and theatricality become crucial to our understanding of the dandy. As such the dandy was often connected to male homosexuality: indeed the dandyism practiced by Oscar Wilde, Jean Cocteau and Marcel Proust was often read as a form of arrested narcissism, a desire to stay young forever and to avoid the responsibilities of the adult world. But the dandy was also a rebel, a figure in which contradictions abounded. Although the dandy drew attention to an innate femininity in men, he also mimicked femininity through his creation of artifice and spectacle. In his discussion on the figure of the dandy in contemporary 19th century culture, Baudelaire famously insists on women’s incapacity for dandyism: “Woman is ‘natural’, which is to say abominable, therefore she is also always vulgar, which is to say the opposite of a dandy” (cited in Garellick, 1998: 34). How do we reconcile Baudelaire’s exclusion of women from the category of the dandy given the examples of Hall and Cahun? The female cultivation of dandyism might suggest a desire to step away from traditional notions of masculinity as well as femininity. In a self-portrait (see fig. 12) dated from 1921, Cahun appears in male attire, dressed in a dark suit with a white cravat, her hair cropped close to her head. In this image Cahun is framed by a dark piece of cloth which hangs on a light coloured wall. The strong contrast of black and white in both the background and foreground suggests a certain kind of style indicative of a modern urban aesthetic. Compared to many of the later photographs that incorporate a surrealist sensibility and take up the theme of gender in an increasingly playful way, this one reads as “straight” portraiture, similar in style to the portraits Hall had commissioned of herself in male theatrical costume. The fixed stare of the subject’s gaze, together with its pose – one hand on the hip, the other loosely clenched – suggests unambiguously a
masculine style. In this image cross-dressing does not appear to symbolise the playfulness of masquerade and gender fluidity but rather the power-play of passing as well as a bold assertion of the subject’s lesbian identity and erotic desire, in the cliché terms of early 20th century sexology – the figure of the mannish lesbian.

Like the portraits of Hall, however, this image also invokes the figure of the dandy: the immaculate suit, the cravat, the style of a clothes loving man. There are no fancy Surrealist tricks, no doubling, no mirrors, rather a straightforward masquerading of “straight” portraiture. Like Hall, Cahun was fascinated by costume and intellectually responsive to the work of Havelock Ellis, but, although these similarities are striking, there are a number of marked differences that separate the aesthetic and political world of these two women. Cahun’s commitment to avant-garde politics and the left contrast to Hall’s conservative values and fascist sympathies. But in both their work the appearance of the self fashions political and sexual identity in a way that recalls Foucault’s appreciation of the dandy as a symbolic figure of modernity since he [sic] “makes of his body, his behaviour, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art” (Foucault cited in Feathertone, 1991:67). In effect, Foucault argues, after Baudelaire, that the dandy is “the man who tries to invert himself”. As a category of sexual identity the female dandy performs a double inversion, disturbing both masculine and feminine stereotypes. But if we take the general definition of the dandy as a clothes-loving man, how are we to theorise historically the female dandy given women’s so-called natural love of clothes and the masculine woman’s dislike of the feminine? It is contradictions such as these that sexology failed to accommodate in its endeavours to taxonomise sexual desire. Its portrait of the mannish lesbian underscores Foucault’s insight as to the way knowledge operates as both a repressive and liberatory mechanism. For while this early portrait of Cahun’s seems to internalise to an extent sexology’s portrait of the mannish lesbian, it also disrupts that process by introducing the ambiguity of gender inherent in the dandyesque effect. More significantly, like many homosexuals of her generation, Cahun found in Ellis and the project of sexuality, a lively and important debate on same-sex desire, a conversation that was violently repressed within the Surrealist movement.

Alongside attempts to pathologise and fix sexual identity, there emerged, according to Foucault, counter practices that incorporated but also destabilised these new classificatory labels. Foucault writes:
There is no question that the appearance in the nineteenth century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and "psychic hermaphrodisism" made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of "perversity"; but it also made possible the formation of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturality" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. (1984: 101-102)

Foucault's argument suggests ways in which the often proscribed discourses on sexuality – by Ellis and the Surrealists – were reinscribed by artists such Hall and Cahun, according to their own desires and political aspirations. It also allows us to see Hall's work as both conservative and radical. As Newton cogently argues, Hall's heroine is "a double symbol, standing for the New Woman's painful position between traditional political and social categories and for the lesbian struggle to define and assert an identity" (1989: 289). While there are marked differences in their understanding and representation of sexual identity, what connects Cahun and Hall is their utilisation of both sexology and photographic portraiture as a way to make visible new kinds of erotic styles and sexual identities, ones that I think, in the end, both conform and resist sexology's portrait of the mythic mannish lesbian. The very title of Cahun's autobiography – "absent confessions" – reinscribes the notion of avowal and disavowal that is central to both her thematic concerns and formal practices; and which is foundational to Foucault's understanding of the way in which modes of knowledge and power interact. But Cahun's notion of "identity politics" is historically and culturally specific. The title of her autobiography engages with a Surrealist appreciation of disjunction. As an oxymoron "Absent Confessions" appeals to a Bretonian celebration of disjunction, to such terms as "mad love" and "convulsive beauty". If read as a visual diary, the self-portraits become explicitly confessional in their illustration of desires, moods and fantasies; sometimes theatrical and camp, sometimes sombre and "straight". If the early self-portraits explore a less ambiguous, more forcefully masculine, erotic style, the later ones take up an increasingly multivalent representation of erotic style, including a more playful and ironic representation of the performance of masculinity and femininity. In her employment of mirrors, masks and in the use of double, Cahun explores the very terms that would describe the lesbian subject within the fields of sexology and psychoanalysis – as inverted, arrested and narcissistic. The mirror, the mask and the double, however, also belong to a Surrealist pictorial vocabulary in which identity becomes atomised and the autobiographical subject deconstructed. As a body of
By Way of Conclusion: Krauss and Cahun

In the last part of this chapter I want to take up Rosalind Krauss's attempts to situate Cahun's work within a canonical Surrealist framework. Moreover, I examine why Krauss chooses Cahun to mount a defence of her own critical practices, in particular her reading of the violence of much Surrealist imagery within the rubric of an "ungendered sadism". While I agree with Krauss that Cahun's work occupies an important place within the Surrealist movement, I argue that it does so as part of a wider engagement with questions of sexual politics and erotic style implicit to and explicit in her own experience as a lesbian. As I have indicated, Cahun's life and work forms a matrix of varying discourses and competing narratives and cannot simply be read within the context of a Surrealist avant-garde aesthetic. But in order to understand Krauss's reading of Cahun's work, I think it is important to revisit her extremely finessed reading of Surrealist photography.

As I have already noted, Benjamin in "A Short History of Photography" reveals photography's uncovering of the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis discloses the instinctual unconscious. Taking up Benjamin's critique, Rosalind Krauss suggests that Surrealist photography introduces a kind of temporal deferral through its use of montage and other distorting techniques. In her discussion of the ubiquitous use of the double in Surrealist photography, she writes:

The double is the simulacrum, the second, the representative of the original. It comes after the first, and in this following, it can only exist as figure, or image. But in being seen in conjunction with the original, the double destroys the pure singularity of the first. (Krauss, 1985: 109)

According to Krauss, the frequent use of "doubling" within Surrealist photographic images represents the "blind, irrational space of the labyrinth", an optical unconscious that goes "against the grain of modernist opticality" (1993: 21). In her article on Cahun, Krauss suggests that Cahun's frequent "doubling" of her various identities and personae represents a kind of Deleuzian "fold", whereby the process of masking and doubling interrogates both the gaze of the viewer as well as the static positioning of the subject.
Although Krauss’s words illuminate the wider project of Surrealist photography, I think that Cahun’s use of “doubling” alongside other photomontage techniques such as blurring and distortion reference a crisis of identity and representation, one that destabilises the centrality of heterosexuality within Surrealist politics and aesthetics. What seems to be missing in Krauss’s account of Cahun’s photomontage self-portraits is Cahun’s own representation of the figure of the lesbian dandy, which alongside her interest in contemporary sexological discussions of “sexual inversion”, contests a straightforward incorporation of Surrealist aesthetic practices and sexual ideology. Certainly there is a sense of gender fluidity at the heart of Cahun’s aesthetic practice, one that refuses the static positioning of the subject. But Cahun’s repeated construction and scrutiny of her own body infers a political and aesthetic reversal of the heterosexist eroticisation and commodification of the female body within Surrealist art practice and its avowedly strong reliance on a Freudian psychoanalytical economy. In collapsing the relationship between artistic and bodily performance, Cahun demands that we address all that she is: photographer, Surrealist, lesbian, actress, political activist, journalist etc... and all that she possibly could be – sailor, aviator, wrestler etc....; that is, she demands that we attend to the shifting registers of identity and subjectivity and to the competing disciplinary boundaries of her art practice and intellectual and political concerns.

In her reading of Cahun’s portraits, Krauss sees them as an attempt to “declassify”, in a way that is similar to what she calls Bataille’s obsession with “formlessness”, with “a kind of categorical blurring” (1999: 5). I would argue that Cahun is acutely interested in the process of classification and photography’s role in rendering the subject’s proximity to the work of art and the consumer object. Although Cahun points to a sense of crisis for the modern sexual subject, she does so without resorting to the violence implicit in more canonical Surrealist representations of the subject’s fragmentation. Furthermore, in reading the gender instability of the sexual organs in Giacometti’s sculpture “Suspended Ball”; that is, the representation of the alternating forms of the female-labial and the masculine-phallic, Krauss wants to render the violence of much Surrealist iconography – from the slit eye in Bunuel and Dali’s Un chien Andalou to the repeated violent displacement of body organs in Bataille’s Story of the Eye – as an “ungendered sadism”. More specifically, she sees Bataille’s work as centred around the violent and destructive nature of formlessness, the horror of “a labyrinthine loss of distinction” (7). Cahun certainly employs Surrealist techniques and subject matter, incorporating many of the techniques that Krauss suggests distinguish the Surrealist photographer – double exposure, montage, solarisation, sandwich printing etc... – techniques that function, according to Krauss’s now well-
rehearsed argument, as the "other" of straight photography, what she calls "a perverse feminization ... of the masculinist values of "straightness" itself: clarity, decisiveness, visual mastery - all of them the source of the photographer's authority" (1985: 95). But by incorporating the lesbian subject into her portraits, Cahun performs both "straight" masculine and hyper feminine roles before the camera, and therefore her photographs more than feminise the masculinist nature of "straight" photography. The "straight" portraits of herself cross-dressed tap into a popular representation of the New Woman, comfortable with a more liberated and assertive femininity, as well as a more coded representation of lesbian identity. Many of the early portraits do not employ Surrealist distorting techniques, rather they emphasise the importance of clothes in registering the subject's identity and thus retaining the "authority" (albeit transgressively since she is in drag) of traditional portrait photography. In particular Cahun's the self-portrait with cravat reveals a similar "classic" and formal quality to Berenice Abbott's portrait of Janet Flanner and the many classic-styled portraits of Radclyffe Hall. Here it is the photograph's "realism" that marks its authority and not a celebration of "sur-reality". The photograph's ability to play with gendered identity proved to be increasingly tempting for a lot of women photographers as well as the subjects of photography. Thus Cahun's portrayal of lesbian identity suggests a model of sexual and gendered identity that is inherently unstable; one that mimics straightness but also distorts that straightness. The panorama of disguises Cahun adopts, from dandy, boxer and sailor to vamp, actress and so on, does perhaps speak to "a kind of categorical blurring", a loss of stable identity for the subject and the object. But while some of Cahun's portraits "master" Surrealist photographic techniques, others "mimic" the authority of straight photography. As such Cahun's photographs seem to question any complete loss of form, and any complete evacuation of subject/object boundaries, but dwell in the possibility of the subject's transformation, its difference from the Other and its difference over time. Thus, what they repeatedly play out is Sedgwick's prosaic axiom.

The portraits illustrate the very constructed and performative nature of such categories as "masculine", "feminine" and "lesbian" within the context of a movement that often defined itself in terms of the purity of the heterosexual encounter and the fixity of gendered identity. Like Judith Butler, Cahun seems to imagine a world where identity does not fix the individual but radically transforms the culture that would define us. Krauss's refusal to read the politics of gender into Cahun's work (or indeed into any Surrealist work) is to deny the multivalent possibilities opened up by her self-portraits and their modifying presence within canonical Surrealist photography. Indeed Krauss

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appears to close down questions of gender and sexuality in much the same way that Breton attempted to silence discussion on homosexuality in his well-publicised investigations into sex. And although I don’t want to discount completely Krauss’s otherwise inspiring insight into Surrealist photography, I think it is important in the case of Cahun’s work to place questions of sexual difference and sexual orientation at the forefront of an analysis of her work. The fortuitous discovery of Cahun’s extensive range of photographic portraits and self-portraits radically transforms how we might read the sexual and aesthetic codes operating within the Surrealist movement and indeed how we might attempt to come to terms with a more nuanced understanding of the politics of the sexual within Surrealism. Cahun’s camp representations of erotic style offer an important rebuttal to Breton’s violent foreclosure of discussion on homosexuality. As Breton was boisterously “silencing” discussion of homosexuality, Cahun was determinedly working away at questions of sexual identity within the framework of a Surrealist aesthetic and political practice. For if we read anything into these portraits, it is their “investigative” properties, their extreme openness to the question “Who am I?”

1 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins” in Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader.
3 In order to shield her from a wave of anti-Semitism sweeping France at the time, Cahun was sent to boarding school in Surrey, England. See Gunther Stuhlmann, “Who Is Claude Cahun?”.
4 Rosalind Krauss tells us that Cahun’s uncle Marcel Schwob had helped to establish the Mecure de France and that for one of Cahun’s first pieces to be published, in 1914, she adopted the pen name Claude Courlis. It seems probable that Cahun’s adoption of a pseudonym was in part an attempt to escape connection with her famous literary family. It perhaps follows that her cross-dressing served a similar utilitarian dimension, since she moved in the still highly masculinised worlds of journalism and political activism. This is not to discount, however, the adoption of male costume as part of her experimental performance of erotic and vestimentary style. See “Claude Cahun and Dora Maar: By Way of Introduction.”
5 For an excellent discussion of Cahun’s account of this trial, see Carolyn Dean, “Claude Cahun’s Double”.
6 Herodias is translated and published in its entirety for the first time in Inverted Odysseys.
7 It seems significant that Cahun would use this name to publish her translation of Ellis’s work.
Despite this, it appears that his wife Jacqueline became quite close to Cahun, visiting her in the Channel Islands with her daughter Aube in the summer of 1939 (Sawin: 1997,56). Cahun’s portrait of Jacqueline, framed by an open window, her breasts bared, was possibly taken on this visit and contrasts strikingly to the elaborate costumes and effects of Cahun’s self-portraits.

In his autobiography, Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism Breton recommends this report, Les Paris sont ouverts as “a truly evocative image of that period” (133).

Susan Sontag echoes Benjamin and Cahun when she suggests that “Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise” because “Surrealism has always courted accidents, welcomed the uninvited, flattered disorderly presences. What could be more surreal than an object which virtually produces itself, and with a minimum of effort?” (1977,52).


Martica Sawin reports an incident in which Breton struck Ilya Ehrenburg, Paris correspondent for Izvestia, for referring to Surrealist activity as “pédérastique” (55).

Dean notes Cahun’s exclusion from Whitney Chadwick’s survey of women surrealists, Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement. She also reveals that one of Cahun’s pieces, which had been displayed in the 1936 Surrealist exhibition of objects in London, was attributed to “Anonymous” in the Exhibition Dada and Surrealism Reviewed, held at the Tate Gallery (London) in 1978. In their book on Surrealist photography, L’Armour Fou: Photography and Surrealism, Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston speculate that Cahun may have died in a concentration camp since they could find little detail of her life. Dean concludes that Cahun’s displacement (or misplacement) from feminist histories of the Surrealist movement stems in part from the fact of her lesbianism, which Dean argues sits awkwardly with a movement that tied many of its aesthetic ideas to the maintenance of normative heterosexuality (1996).

It seems that there is much work to be done on the collaboration between Cahun and Malherbe. Although there has been a great deal of emphasis on Surrealist collaboration, it has largely been in terms of a heterosexual configuration partnership. See Suleiman (1994), Hubert (1994) and Chadwick and de Courtivron (eds) (1993).

In a piece titled “Fancy-Dress Balls” from 1930 Janet Flanner gives an elaborate description of the balls and fancy-dress parties of that year, with “young men about town who appeared as some of the best-known women in Paris” as well as a party in which “Miss Dolly Wilde [dressed] in the habiliments of her uncle, Oscar Wilde” (1973: 68-69). Cahun was related to Oscar Wilde through her uncle and therefore may have known Dolly Wilde.

After Lee Miller left Man Ray, as act of revenge, Man Ray cut out a photograph of Miller’s eye and attached it to a metronome, calling it “Object to be Destroyed”. This surrealist object suggests the very real sense in which art became the theatre for the sadistic sexual fantasies of male surrealists. Of course the destruction of the eye suggests castration anxiety which becomes literal when we remind ourselves that Miller’s desire to leave Man Ray was in part to distinguish her own career as a photographer from his.

Cahun’s image reminds me of the Dada boxer and poet, Arthur Craven, whose performances inside and outside the ring, seem at once to satirise and celebrate the “showing off” capacity of the boxer. Craven’s boxing matches were renowned for their performative quality.

In her article on Amelia Earhart’s flight into the world of fashion and her own creation of a fashion label, Karla Jay reveals how this little known detail of Earhart’s life has been glossed over and forgotten in an attempt to mythologise her status as an intrepid heroine (or spy?). The incongruity to that mythology of her interest in developing a line of clothes for women that would be both fashionable and comfortable reveals the disjunction between Earhart as intrepid aviator and her indulgence in the “feminine” world of fashion and clothes consciousness.

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In her reading of Flanner’s treatment of Hall, Shari Benstock speculates that Flanner “was annoyed, perhaps embarrassed, by Hall’s emotional and stylised reenactment of lesbian relationships”(115).

Dean notes that “Cahun (along with Havelock Ellis and others) contributed a response to a “poll” conducted in the first issue [of L’Amitié] that asked writers (rather ironically) if and why they found the review offensive”(77).

Although I have in this section traced Cahun’s fashioning of the lesbian subject within Surrealism, I also concur with Dean that Cahun represents lesbian desire – particularly in the later portraits – “as the undoing rather than the fashioning or production of identity”(86). But I would argue that it is also precisely because of the lesbian subject’s undoing of normative sexuality, that the portraits so remarkably unfix a centred, stable, heterosexual subject. In this sense, self-fashioning highlights the performative nature of gender and sexuality.
Chapter Six
Post-Surrealism: The Disintegration of the Subject in the Photographs of Cindy Sherman

... for the modern artist the past imitates the present far more than the present imitates the past.
– Matei Calinescu *Five Faces of Modernity*

I am trying to make people recognise something of themselves rather than me.
– Cindy Sherman, 1986

Introduction

The appearance of Madonna and Cindy Sherman in *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1997 (see fig. 26) marked a typical postmodern encounter between art and popular culture. The occasion for the meeting between these two blonde icons was Sherman’s retrospective exhibition of her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) at the Museum of Modern Art, which was sponsored by Madonna. Madonna’s well known promotion and collection of art – by Robert Mapplethorpe, Frida Kahlo as well as Sherman – reveals a penchant for a particular kind of work. I want to speculate that Madonna’s interest in these three artists, and Sherman in particular, reveals her fascination with the fetishised body of the other: of women, eroticised black men, and the cultural exotic. Madonna’s own changing personae correspondingly manifest an all pervasive fetishism – from the commodity fetishism encapsulated by her namesake, the material girl, to the sexual fetishism unfolded in the pages of her book, *Sex*. The photograph of Madonna and Sherman therefore begs the question, to what degree has Sherman’s work influenced Madonna? What is most interesting, however, about this photograph of Madonna and Sherman is that it uncannily reproduces one of Sherman’s own Film Stills, *Untitled #13* (see fig. 27). In this image a female college student or librarian reaches for a book from a library shelf; but having her attention suddenly distracted by something above her, she turns to face the camera and is caught in that moment of knowing that she is being watched. In the photograph of Sherman and Madonna, artist and pop singer pose against the backdrop of what appears

27. Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #12 (1978)
to be the MOMA library offices, against a row of books that resemble the library shelf in the original, exchanging broad and knowing grins. The uncanny – or canny – reproduction of this image as well as the doubling of Sherman and Madonna as stand-ins for the blonde woman in the original, evokes a particular kind of circularity and quotation that reflects Madonna’s own series of performing personae as well as the endless circularity of copy and original in Sherman’s film stills. The photograph also serves to remind us of Sherman’s mass appeal and the increasing commodification of her work, and the discomfort this has caused some feminist critics.¹

I want to use this image of uncanny doubling to frame my close critical reading of Sherman’s images within the context of feminist theory’s own troubled relationship with the feminine subject. In examining the female body as aesthetic and cultural fetish within the history of visual culture, Sherman’s work reveals a very specific engagement with the past. While the strategies of quotation and parody are central to a postmodern aesthetic practice, and to Sherman’s work in particular, they are not confined to postmodernism. They are strategies that are also crucial to the modernist work of Cahun and Carrington. In The Hearing Trumpet and in Cahun’s self-portraits parody is employed to counter the taken-for-granted gender and sexual norms underlying canonical Surrealism as well as the privileging of transgression as a male avant-garde aesthetic practice. In the Sex Pictures, which form the focus of my discussion, Sherman confronts the structuring dynamic of nostalgia and violence that informs Hans Bellmer’s doll series. In this chapter, I want to ask what kind of dialogue, imaginary or otherwise – to again invoke Suleiman’s phrase – is being staged here between Sherman’s work and her male and female Surrealist predecessors. I argue that Sherman’s engagement with Surrealism posits the relationship between modernist and postmodernist culture as generative and vital in ways that foreground the political immediacy of the image and the ambivalence of reading practices then and now. I have already argued that in different ways Carrington’s and Cahun’s work points to a crisis of representation in relation to the construction of the female subject within Surrealism. Sherman’s images continue to raise complicated issues around the question of female identity and representation, bringing to the fore her own troubled relationship to feminism and to Surrealism. In this final chapter I conclude by way of drawing out the obvious and tentative links between modernist and postmodernist practice by looking at Sherman’s own avowed engagement with Surrealist photography, in particular the work of Hans Bellmer.
Central to my discussion is the cultural and historical context of Sherman’s and Bellmer’s work within the broader question of the relationship between modernist and postmodernist art practice. The controversial nature of their work reinforces its complicity and resistance in relation to the cultural codes and practices in which their work arises. While Bellmer’s and Sherman’s work stages a certain resistance to authoritarian cultural narratives and traditions, it does so at the risk of internalising the very ideologies they set out to critique. Feminist critics confronted with Bellmer’s creations and images have been both fascinated and disturbed by them. Sherman’s work likewise has aroused varying responses; while some feminists venerate the work and its contribution to an understanding of women’s identity within mass culture, others suggest that it capitulates to a homogenised and fetishised depiction of women. Feminist criticism of Sherman’s work reveals the problematic nature of the representation of the feminine subject within feminism itself, as well as feminism’s ambivalence toward mass culture. The contested readings of Sherman’s work are mirrored by Sherman herself, who, although clearly acknowledging the cultural context of the work, including feminist theory’s important contribution to understanding the cultural construction of female identity, refuses to tie its meaning to a single ideological reading. In examining why Sherman returns to the representation of the female body within Surrealism to continue her engagement with questions of representation and female embodiment, I want to argue that much of her work stages a grappling with the nature of this ambivalence; her own ambivalence in the creation of the work and our ambivalence as critics and viewers of it. Laura Mulvey argues that Sherman’s work is inconceivable “without a prehistory of feminism and its theorisation of the body and representation” (1991: 138). Although Sherman’s work clearly emerges out of a feminist and postmodernist matrix in which questions of the psychic construction of female identity and representation have been crucial, I also want to suggest that Sherman’s refusal to grant her work a coherent political reading should be taken seriously for it discloses the very structure of ambivalence that the images themselves invoke. The nature of this ambivalence is articulated by Sherman herself:

Even though I’ve never actively thought of my work as a feminist or as a political statement, certainly everything in it was drawn from my observations as a woman in this culture. And a part of that is a love-hate thing – being infatuated with make-up and glamour and detesting it at the same time. (“Interview, 1997: 80)”

The ambiguity of the work itself and the hesitancy of Sherman’s critical reflection on it seems to permeate feminist critical responses. Moreover, Sherman’s strategic refusal to
label her work feminist and her “love-hate” relationship with postmodern culture – and her identity as a woman within that culture – mirrors the strategies of complicity and resistance that I have suggested function in Carrington’s, Cahun’s and Riviere’s work in relation to the disciplines in which they operated; Surrealism and psychoanalysis. Her work extends an investigation of particular themes which have been central to a modernist critical and aesthetic enterprise: masquerade, self-representation and performance, fantasy and female subjectivity. I argue that the entirety of Sherman’s work can be read as an ironic reflection of the fetishisation of the female body within Western visual culture and that it neither internalises the repressive model of woman as fetish object, nor simply provides a polemical critique of it. Rather, the work stages the phantasmatic structure of the female subject’s representation within both past and present cultural practices. As such her work proves exemplary in exhibiting the tension and correspondences between modernist and postmodernist aesthetic practice.

In a recent interview Sherman indicated that the Sex Pictures began as a response to the increasing climate of censorship and the moral panic surrounding an exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe’s work in the early 1990’s and the ensuing debates about funding for the National Endowment of the Arts (Fuku, 1997: 125). The issue of censorship surrounding Mapplethorpe’s work invokes Sherman’s own experience of censorship over the Centrefold series in the early eighties. As such her work epitomises the contested debates that have circulated within postmodernist and feminist art practice and theory over the last three decades. In revisiting some of the most controversial Surrealist work, by Bellmer and others, Sherman tackles head on the question of complicity and resistance in any art practice and the dynamic of ambivalence in viewing and reading practices. In engaging with the violently erotic themes in Bellmer’s images in the context of her own alarm over censorship and the ensuing debates about political correctness in the United States in the 1980’s and 1990’s, Sherman collapses modernist and postmodernist aesthetic practice in a way that shifts the focal point of the censorship debate from the “here” and the “now” to the “then” and “always”. Furthermore, her engagement with Surrealist photography – like her exploration of postwar cinema’s visual style and female stereotypes – unfolds a psychoanalytic reading of the aesthetic object, one which registers the significance of desire and the “complex structure of feeling” evoked by both Bellmer’s and Sherman’s images – and indeed Mapplethorpe’s. My reading of Bellmer’s and Sherman’s work explores the importance of fetishism and the uncanny to the complex nexus between postmodern art practice, Surrealism, and psychoanalysis in the relationship between subject and object, viewer and image.
Sherman has persistently explored, often parodically, the aesthetic representation of the female body in both high and popular culture. In the early Film Stills she makes explicit the relationship between female identity and masquerade, inviting comparisons with Cahun’s experimentation with costume and disguise, with visual style and performance. While Cahun’s images emerge, as I have argued, from the conjunction of a new lesbian self-fashioning and experiments with the medium of photography, Sherman’s frame of reference is postwar film and television and the proliferation of feminine stereotypes and performances within these mediums. Like Cahun, however, Sherman presents us with a range of feminine types such as the teenage runaway, the librarian, the off-duty nurse, the housewife, the college student, the bit-part actress and so on. These early images suggest the way in which gender itself is always a matter of style so that – as Riviere contends – all women, whether inside or outside representation, become subject to codes of masquerade. While Cahun’s photographic self-portraits emerge from the codes of gender and sexuality located within her historical participation in Surrealist and lesbian coteries of the 1920’s and 1930’s, and the emerging cultural institutions of sexology, photography and fashion, Sherman’s work often turns to and plays with genres and visual styles of the past: 40’s and 50’s cinema and television, fairy tales, Horror and Gothic genres, and the overt sexual violence of Surrealist imagery. Sherman’s recycling of the film still genre and her use of retro clothing to recreate generic scenes from postwar cinema reveals a postmodern strategy of parody and pastiche. Sherman creates her Untitled Film Stills at the precise moment in which these cultural icons no longer serve their original function, becoming instead collectable souvenirs. As such, it is not just the content of the work but the medium or genre itself which takes on the structure of fetishism and generates a sense of nostalgia. As Susan Stewart has suggested in relation to the souvenir, it is in the “gap between resemblance and identity that nostalgic desire arises” (1993: 145). In the Untitled Film Stills Sherman performs a variety of roles and feminine types, revealing how the identities of her “characters” are in a sense already known to us; they are familiar feminine types caught performing familiar feminine roles.

In quite tantalising ways Sherman’s work, both early and recent, epitomises Judith Butler’s theorisation of gender performativity and parody. In conclusion to this chapter – and to this thesis – I want to take up Butler’s work on gender, masquerade and parody in order to argue that Sherman’s work resists phallocentric structures of representation by exposing the phantasmatic construction of all identity (Butler, 1990: 30-31). Sherman’s work, in its parodic revision of representational “identities” exposes the original as itself “a parody of
the idea of the natural and the original" (31). Thus Sherman’s strategies of aesthetic appropriation disclose the mechanics of repetition and citation that Butler suggests underscore the very construction of cultural and social norms. Moreover, I want to use Martha Nussbaum’s recent vituperative disparagement of Butler in order to examine feminist criticism and censorship of Sherman’s work — in particular Mira Schor’s attack on Sherman in the late 1980’s. The controversy surrounding Sherman’s and Butler’s work unravels the problematic nature of the feminine subject within feminist theory and art practice as well as feminist theory’s own practices of inclusion and exclusion. Both Schor’s and Nussbaum’s criticism obviates the deep division in feminist theory about what constitutes the “real” and the difficulty faced by those who, either through theory or art practice, attempt to analyse and critique the construction and operation of the category of the “real”.

Although I want to primarily provide an examination of the Sex Pictures and their relation to Bellmer’s work, I will preface my discussion with an introduction to Sherman’s entire oeuvre because it imparts a trajectory that is important to how we read the later work. Like Cahun, Sherman’s images stage a tension between subject and object, the real and the copy, which sets up a certain distance between our immediate sense of the work and their complicated coding within a popular and aesthetic visual and cultural context. As a postmodernist artist Sherman engages with the history of visual material that has preceded her: Hollywood and European film, pornography, television, traditional western portrait and still-life traditions and Surrealist photography. In the Untitled Film Stills Sherman performs before the lens of her own camera, creating highly fetishised feminine stereotypes who seem to be locatable within scenarios of visual style that are already familiar to us. Here Sherman stages the many masks and roles of femininity so that the photographs implicitly draw attention to the question of authenticity and our own voyeuristic implication in the roles performed: if Sherman reveals the self performing over and over again in different roles, what then constitutes the “real” Cindy Sherman, what lies behind the mask? In this body of work Sherman exposes the logic of feminine masquerade through repetition and parody, revealing Butler’s own contention that the materiality of the surface of the body can become “the site of a dissonant and denaturalised performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself” (1990:146). Similarly, the narrative scenarios that the images invoke are repetitions of gendered performance: although Sherman has suggested the Untitled Film Stills are completely invented scenarios and identities, our sense of having seem them before reveals the powerful operation of the performative in her work. In the History Portraits,
Sherman adopts both male and female roles in order to reveal historical and aesthetic styles of gender representation. Reinterpreting a series of Old Master paintings, Sherman uses make-up and prosthetic devices to create hammed-up and disfigured replicas of these masterpieces. Here Sherman reproduces parodic replications of canonical portraits, so that, like the film stills, they embody the uncanny since they are both familiar and unfamiliar, producing a shock of recognition that is also an experience of disorientation.

In the Detritus and Disaster Series Sherman begins to explore the representation of the "ruined" female body within cultural and aesthetic ideology. With these images Sherman instigates the tension between resistance and complicity in terms of what they reflect about traditional representations of the female body. They draw out a response that forms the crux of a Surrealist aesthetic: fascination and horror, desire and disgust. In the Disaster series trauma, and its traditional association with female experience, becomes central to the work. In the Detritus images from the 1980's and early 1990's the female body is exploded out of its carefully defined cultural and aesthetic boundaries, formed into a series of abject narrative and abstract still-life images. The very disjunction between the "still-life" as an aesthetically pleasing and "high art" genre, and the visceral disgust of Sherman's images, recalls the shock effect of much Surrealist art. For Sherman, however, this shock effect comes with a certain postmodern parody. While the Surrealists mined the female body for its erotic and transgressive effects, Sherman reminds us that their transgressive forays are nevertheless aesthetically coded and pleasing, since to produce an erotic female body is coterminous with a desirable and aestheticised one. In a notebook entry, Sherman muses on the relationship between her own work and theirs and also the effect that much Surrealist work produces for a contemporary audience:

I don't want to be purely decorative and make pretty, odd images. If anything, that would be my criticism of much of the old Surrealist stuff. It is really about esthetics, which, at that time was groundbreaking in itself, but now looks merely beautiful and stylish. Whenever there is a female figure, she's still always beautiful. (180)

If the aesthetic concept of convulsive beauty came to define the particular disjunctive shock produced in much Surrealist imagery, then Sherman's work reveals the way in which traditional beauty and its counterpart, aesthetics, was still very central to its revolutionary rhetoric. Moreover, Sherman reminds us of the way in which the avant-garde aesthetic object will always lose its shocking and confronting value. In Sherman's
detritus images beauty is stripped of its surface effects, leaving us instead with the visceral products of the convulsing, climaxing or wounded body. If theatrical performance—constructed around the to-be-looked-at nature of femininity—underlined the essence of the Untitled Film Stills, here it is the other side of female performance that Sherman displays; the bulimic or anorexic body, the labouring body, the lactating body, the raped and traumatised body. Many of the images reproduce the visceral substances that remind us of our “other” experience of femininity: vomit, afterbirth, menstrual blood, milk and other bodily secretions. In some of these images the body disappears altogether into the sum of its visceral parts: shit, mucous, vomit, snot, blood, intestines and bodily organs.

In works such as Untitled #175 (see fig. 28), we are presented with a lurid scene of abandoned objects among left-over cake, piles of vomit and cosmetic lotion oozing from a plastic bottle. On closer inspection the sunglasses reflect an image of a naked woman lying horizontal, her mouth agape as if screaming or vomiting, her nose possibly enlarged by injury or else the distortion of the reflection. Here the inside and the outside merge into a scene of domestic disaster; the sunglasses, rather than shielding the eyes, are abandoned in a heap of gunk, only to reflect back to us an image of a traumatised woman lying in a quagmire of her own vomit and left-over food. If we were to construct a narrative of this image, it would include scenarios of the sexually assaulted or bulimic woman, late 20th century stereotypes of traumatised female identity. The disturbing nature of this image is its problematic recreation of a scene of trauma—one that underlies Sherman’s strategies as both complicit and resistant to feminist accounts of the body. In recreating scenes of women as victims, Sherman both reinscribes the pervasive image of the “ruined” woman as well as drawing attention to its construction within cultural experience. In this image the categories of the natural and the cultural, the artificial and the real, the inside and the outside of the body, merge into an undifferentiated mass of cultural and bodily waste, reminding us of the cultural construction of “beauty” and its abject other—dugst. As an image of the grotesque female body it belies the “beauty” of much Surrealist imagery.

In Sherman’s Disgust pictures we are reminded of the culturally coded nature of the female body as cohesive, masked and contained if only because of the very absence of any such mask. In Untitled #177 (see fig. 29) we are presented with a close-up of a pair of buttocks covered in oozing pustules, framed by a layered cotton and tulle petticoat, out of which black insects crawl. In the background is the blurred but startled image of a woman’s face, her mouth disappearing behind the petticoats. While the buttocks appear
28. Cindy Sherman. Untitled # 175, 1987

30. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée (The Doll)*, 1938
artificial, they are nevertheless a reminder of the abject body that the lacy petticoat is designed to counteract, setting up an immediate disjunction between the abject reality of the "natural" body and its frilly, "feminine" outer layering. The pustulant buttocks of Sherman's mannequin recall a photograph of one of Bellmer's dolls from 1938. In this image (see fig. 30) two pairs of the dolls' legs are joined together at the torso, creating a mutant-like form that references the widespread presence of the double within Surrealist iconography. The buttocks and legs of the doll are covered in red blotchy pustules which create a sense of the dolls as mutant and diseased.

In Untitled #239 (see fig. 31), any sense of narrative hinted at in the other images has been abandoned. Here we are left with an abstract tableau of putrid, oozing substances left to decay and grow mouldy. The absence of narrative or recognisable form in this image is suggestive of a Bataillean celebration of formlessness as well as abjection. The contrast between fresh and decaying matter registers the line between the living and the dead which draws attention to the troubling paradox of the abject as both the condition and obliteration of the feminine subject. In contrast to the body's smooth masquerade in the film stills, here Sherman spills the body out into a nauseating mass of bodily waste and the detritus of consumer culture's by-products. These images go beyond the inside/outside demarcations of the cultural body, revealing the phantasmagorical nature of femininity. Reading these works Laura Mulvey suggests that "in the last resort, nothing is left but disgust - the disgust of sexual detritus, decaying food, vomit, slime, menstrual blood, hair" (1991: 144). Mulvey contends that this is the body that cosmetics and masquerade are designed to conceal. While the dejecta contained within these images reinforces the materiality of the body and the traditional association of the female body with degradation, pollution and defilement, it also disturbs the traditional sublimation of the abject by including it in a "high art" tradition. The feelings of disgust and repulsion that the images evoke as well as their lack of form or narrative function creates for the viewer a sense of their own impending confusion and fragmentation.

In the Disaster series Sherman ironically reflects on the cultural and aesthetic obsession with the figure of the "ruined" woman. Untitled #153 (1985)(see fig. 32) stages a fictionalised narrative of the female corpse. In this image we are presented with a close-up of a dead woman's face and left shoulder, her eyes wide open staring blankly out toward the viewer. While the image presents a disturbing scene of trauma, it also parodically reproduces the aesthetic detail of her "ruined" state: the slight grazing of her cheeks as well as the wet soil and gravel clinging to her skin and rumpled blouse remind us of the

cosmetically detailed body. Here the narrative of the murdered or raped woman is exposed in lurid detail, while the cropping of the photograph diagonally from the neck hints at the corpse’s decapitation, reminding us of the memento mori effect produced by photography, as well as the commodification of the female body within consumer advertising and fashion photography. In later versions of the disaster theme, in Untitled #240 (see fig. 33), large close-ups of decomposing body parts and wounds recall the grotesque minutiae in the series of close-up photographs of toes by Boiffard that accompanied Bataille’s essay “Big Toe” in Document. An explicit representation of trauma and decay in this work moves toward Sherman’s exploration of the grotesque and the carnival in the Fairy Tale series. In these images the incorporation of artifice and schlock horror to create outlandish hybrid and grotesque bodies similarly heralds the darkly parodic and unsettling nature of the Sex Pictures. As such, both the Detritus and Fairy Tale series have important ramifications for Sherman’s increasing interest in Surrealist photography. If the Untitled Film Stills present the female body as a highly fetishised product of visual and consumer culture, then here the body is violently stripped of any such encoding to the point that it becomes the site of abjection and trauma. The Untitled Film Stills together with the Disgust and Disaster series reflect women’s contradictory status as beautiful and fetishistically intact, and as abject and ruined, a contradiction which underlines a Surrealist representation of the female subject. However, in Sherman’s work, the grotesque female body circumvents a desire for the female body as erotic or sexually available. Rather it serves to remind us of the phantasmatic structure of the female body as already traumatised by her figuration as beautiful and abject.

Tracing Sherman’s work from the Untitled Film Stills and the Centrefolds through to the Disaster and Fairy Tale Series and finally the Sex Pictures reveals the degree to which her work stages an ongoing crisis of representation for the female subject. Sherman’s work arrived at a time – the late 1970’s – in which the female body had become unpresentable within feminist art practice unless framed by feminist theory (Mulvey, 1991: 138). According to Mulvey “the representability of the female body underwent a crisis”(138) during this period, so that Sherman’s introduction of a heavily masqueraded and fetishised female body in a sense recuperated “a politics of the body that had ... been lost or neglected in the twists and turns of seventies feminism”(138). In the Untitled Film Stills and Centrefold series Sherman produced a body of work that attracted both scorn and praise from feminist audiences. The specific controversy over her Centrefold series reinforces the extent to which her work went against the grain of an orthodox seventies feminist theoretical position in terms of the representation of the female body.
Commissioned in 1981 to do a two page colour spread for *Artforum*, an art magazine committed to publishing and supporting artists who produced so-called difficult or controversial work, Sherman created images of herself in large close-up horizontal formats, using glossy, vibrant colour and strong lighting. In these images the female subject is often represented in a state of reverie or confusion, which gives them a quality of ambiguity and uncertainty. This series, however, was twice rejected from the magazine on the grounds that the images could be misconstrued as “real” centrefolds.²³ Twenty years later it is hard to believe that these images could have caused so much controversy. The fully clothed female subject in these images is often caught in a moment of domestic melodrama as though she has been literally stunned by the intrusiveness of the camera (see *Untitled #93* and #96, figs. 34 & 35). The air of surprise and confusion in these images provides an ironic commentary on the intrusiveness of the pornographic/photographic gaze, rather than capitulating to it. The rejection of the Centrefold series was in many ways a mark of the feminist cultural and political mood of the late 1970’s and 1980’s and the climate of political correctness sweeping through art critical circles and the academy in general.

I want to argue that it is within this context that the dialogue between Sherman and Bellmer must be situated. In returning to the confronting nature of Surrealist art practice Sherman gestures toward her own – at times – problematic reception within a feminist theoretical framework. The trajectory of Sherman’s works into the realm of the grotesque, and the various readings of them as pro, anti and post-feminist, reveals the problematic and unstable nature of the female subject within feminism. The censorship of her work as well as criticism from feminists over her complicity in reinscribing negative stereotypes of women, precipitated Sherman’s move toward an examination of the abject and the grotesque female body. Similarly, Sherman responds to the censorship debates over Robert Mapplethorpe’s work by exploring the sexually explicit and violent images of Surrealist photography. In providing a critical reading of Bellmer’s work in the context of their political and aesthetic location within Nazi Germany alongside Sherman’s recent engagement with this work, I argue that Sherman’s work functions as part of a complex terrain of political and aesthetic strategies which cannot be reduced to a single ideological position. Although this body of work interrogates the gendered and aestheticised violence in Surrealist photography, it also discloses the affective ambivalence governing the production of images.
34. Cindy Sherman *Untitled #93*, 1981

The relationship between Bellmer's and Sherman's images is in some way paradigmatic of the relationship between modernist and postmodernist theory and praxis. In the Sex Pictures (1992) and the Horror and Surrealist Pictures (1994-1996), Sherman explicitly confronts the violent eroticism of Surrealist imagery, in particular Bellmer's *Poupée*. Incorporating parodic effects into graphic and disturbing images of anatomically detailed mannequins, often with enlarged or distorted genitals, and hybrid male and female body parts, Sherman reproduces the transgressive eroticism of Bellmer's dolls, but also counters his straightforwardly misogynistic reading of the female body. In many ways Sherman's work constitutes what Calinescu suggests characterises a contemporary avant-garde practice: the revisiting of the past, rather than its total negation, opting for a "lively reconstructive dialogue with the old and the past"(1987: 276). If a great deal of Surrealist work implies a negation of what had come before it (modernist formalism, bourgeois cultural institutions of family and religion etc...), in contrast, Sherman's work confronts the claims of Surrealist art practice through a direct engagement with its themes and forms. Indeed Calinescu seems to succinctly define Sherman's relationship to Surrealism when he writes:

... there is a larger moral and aesthetic sense in which postmodernism's loss of innocence goes beyond "the already said" to relate to the darker, savage, unspeakable side of a modernity.... (277)

In the Sex Pictures series Sherman uncannily exhibits the process by which contemporary questions of desire, representation and subject formation have their antecedents in a modernist aesthetic practice and its incorporation of psychoanalytical theories of perversion. In some of the more dissident Surrealist work, perversion becomes a means of challenging or twisting the traditional function of both sexuality and literary or aesthetic style. In Bataille's and Carrington's novels, perversion and parody serve to undo the binary oppositions on which cultural meaning rests. In Bellmer's *Poupée* and Sherman's Sex Pictures, perversion becomes a strategy of resistance to cultural norms in an escalating climate of cultural conformity and censorship. In Bellmer's work, perversion unfolds the drama of filial rebellion against the fascist father and the violent and repressive surveillance of the Nazi state. Correspondingly, Sherman's Sex Pictures emerge out of the
contested debates over the censorship of her own work, by both the left and the right as well the controversy over Robert Mapplethorpe’s exhibition of black male nudes. Like Sherman’s, Mapplethorpe’s work plays with the surface of the body, unfolding its connection to both commodity and sexual fetishism. In its homoerotic fetishisation of the black male body, Mapplethorpe’s work both resists and complies with traditional constructions of race and sex. In producing work that is confronting and shocking and, at the same time, comic and parodic, Sherman’s Sex Pictures draw out the very nature of complicity and resistance in both Mapplethorpe’s and Bellmer’s work. Confronting the erotic and pornographic nature of Surrealist visual and literary practice in the context of the moral panic that erupted over an exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic images in the United States, Sherman opens up the debate by connecting the complicated functioning of fetishism in her own work as well as in Bellmer’s and Mapplethorpe’s. In speaking of this period, Sherman has suggested that the withdrawal of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts by Congress in many ways precipitated her exploration of aberrant figuration. In response to increased censorship and a very public debate now referred to as the “culture wars”, Sherman became intent on making her work explicit and confronting. At the same time Sherman reveals that she also wished to make her pictures politically “incorrect”; so that the meaning of her images are not hermetically sealed but rather reflect an ambiguity implicit in her subject matter. As such her work from this period must be read within the debate about censorship and political correctness circulating in America throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s. Likewise, Bellmer’s work forms a rebellious response to the repressive social forces embodied in German Nazi culture. Drawing attention to the controversial nature of his work, Bellmer has commented that “If the origin of my work is scandalous, it is because for me, the world is a scandal” (in Lichtenstein, 2001: 5-6). Reading Sherman’s and Bellmer’s images alongside each other reveals a connection between modernist and postmodernist aesthetic production which is important for how we read from the present as well as how we understand the specific cultural context of a particular art practice or image.

Throughout the 1930’s Bellmer constructed two different dolls, which he photographed in over a hundred different poses and settings. Looking at the plethora of images of the dolls, one is struck by the range of atmosphere and emotion that they evoke. In this suite of images the doll becomes a corpse-like figure, with various body parts of the doll’s anatomy rearranged and manipulated from image to image just as the doll is seen in a
range of different interior settings. In one of the images (fig. 36) – the fourth in the book – the doll is completely disassembled, neatly laid out as a collection of fragmented body parts in the manner of a decorative still life. In the next image (fig. 37), perhaps the most haunting of the series, the doll is reassembled and propped up against a wall, her head turned so that she is coyly looking over one shoulder; rendered ambiguously as both victim and seductress. In this image it is the single upturned eye of the doll, caught at such an angle that it directly captures our gaze, which makes her appear at once coquettish and vulnerable, seductive and deranged. While the doll's surface is rough and brittle, evoking a sense of decay and ruin, the folded layers of her cotton undergarment pulled up over her buttocks, and the long tangled mass of hair draped over her back, give her a disquieting erotic and lifelike air. Despite or because of the crudity of the doll’s form – her crumbling buttocks, her armless torso and a left leg composed of a metal rod – Bellmer's doll in this image incites the spectre of the uncanny, through its fusion of the animate and the inanimate.

In other photographs from the book (see figs. 38, 39 & 40), the doll appears in various fragmented forms, surrounded by different kinds of fetishised feminine and domestic items: a cotton lace petticoat, tulle, muslin cloth, an embroidered lace bed cover, mattress ticking, artificial flowers, a female shoe and human hair. The display of the doll’s sex alongside these fetish items flagrantly stages the themes of eroticism, death and fetishism as intrinsic to the artist’s creative practice. Like the child at play, Bellmer rearranges and recombines the objects of his world, mastering a fantasy game of mutilation and destruction as well as its opposite, imagination and creation. The fascination and the horror that the dolls evoke reminds us of Bataille’s conceptual representation of transgression in *Story of the Eye*.15

The photographs of Bellmer’s first doll creation were published in 1934 as *Die Pupée*, a booklet of ten black and white images accompanied by a small essay “Memories of the Doll Theme”. In this essay Bellmer transfers his own memories of childhood onto the fantasies of his alter-ego doll. The doll’s construction becomes a conscious resistance to the normative codes of work and leisure underpinning the moral structure of Nazi Germany. According to Bellmer, the doll functions as both an object of joy and fear: “Would it not be in the very reality of the Doll that the imagination would find the joy, the ecstasy and the fear that is sought?”(Webb,1985: 34). The first doll series was also published in the Surrealist journal, *Minotaure* (December 5, 1934) as “Doll: Variations on the Assemblage of an Articulated Minor” to great acclaim. Although still living in
36. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée* (The Doll), 1934

37. Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe* (The Doll), 1934
38. Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe (The Doll)*, 1934-36

39. Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe (The Doll)*, 1934

40. Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe (The Doll)*, 1934
Germany, this event marked Bellmer’s entry into the Surrealist movement and precipitated his eventual move to France and a lifetime association with the group. The Surrealists were very much taken with Bellmer’s creation and what it revealed about the nature of desire. Likewise, Bellmer’s doll photographs were perfectly suited to Minotaure, the most lavish of the journals associated with Surrealism. Originally founded in 1933 by Albert Skira, Minotaure from its inception had hoped to be an elegant artistic and literary review. Like Document, a journal that it modelled itself on in many ways, Minotaure often included extravagant photographic reproductions of macabre and disturbing themes. As such the journal was a perfect vehicle for Bellmer’s photographs and one that he would contribute to frequently over the years. In the same issue that contained Bellmer’s second doll series, in 1936, Maurice Heine published an imagined dialogue between the Marquis de Sade and Jack the Ripper, which was illustrated with graphic photographs of Jack the Ripper’s disembowelled victims. In his history of Surrealism, Marcel Jean noted that Bellmer’s dolls did indeed have “an air of lewd abandon that one might associate with a victim of Jack the Ripper” (1960: 241), therefore acknowledging the violent dismemberment of the body in Bellmer’s dolls as uncannily evocative (see fig. 41).

In 1935 Bellmer constructed his second doll, utilising a series of ball joints to give it added mobility and manipulation. Over a hundred photographs were taken of this second doll in a range of settings, both indoor and out. A few years later Bellmer wrote “Notes on the Ball Joint” which would accompany his series of hand-tinted photos of the doll as well as poems by Paul Eluard in the booklet, The Games of the Doll, not published until 1949 because of the war. The second doll series elaborated and expanded the terms of reference of the first but here the atmosphere becomes increasingly disturbing and sinister. In an image from this series (see fig. 42) the doll is propped against a stairwell, a piece of rope tied around its knee, one leg amputated and the fingers of a hand poking through the gaps in the banister. The head of the doll hangs down exposing a giant hair bow which contrasts with the forlorn expression on the doll’s face. The doll’s general demeanour suggests complete exhaustion if not death, the body’s twisted form as well as the ominous lighting of the photograph hints at torture and sexual violation. In many of the photographs from this series the doll’s legs are splayed open, so that our gaze is directed toward her genital area; often lying twisted and deformed, the doll arouses feelings of empathy as well as sadistic fantasies. For this second doll Bellmer constructed a number of extra limbs and body parts so that they could be substituted and arranged, invoking uncanny double forms. In one such image (see fig. 43) two sets of limbs and buttocks are joined at the torso and share a single stomach. Propped up against a tree in a forest
42. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée (The Doll)*, 1935/1945

43. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée (The Doll)*, 1936
setting, the doll seems even more vulnerable than in its more familiar interior setting. In the background, behind another tree, a dark male figure spies on the doll. In this image the bright hues of the tints used to colour the photograph, together with the half-concealed male figure create a lurid voyeurism reminiscent of the lewd fantasies used to illustrate pulp fiction covers.

While many of the photographs stage scenes of sadomasochistic fantasy and fetishistic desire, the doubling and rearrangement of the body also propounds a childhood world of games; of play and manipulation, of substitution and rearrangement. Bellmer’s lifelong identification with the world of childhood emerges in both his doll photographs and in his drawings. Many images of the dolls include childhood toys such as spinning tops and hula hoops. The doll’s childlike status is further evoked through fetishistic details such as the Mary Jane shoes and white ankle socks that the doll frequently wears. These items contrast to the voluptuous, almost maternally round, body of the doll, which reinforces the powerful effect of her sexuality. Bellmer’s images also often capture the awkwardness of female adolescence, a period of transition from puberty to womanhood; as such they become evocative of the femme-enfant, a figure which is also both childlike and seductive.

In many of the photos domestic items are included in a way that resonate with the disjunction between adult fantasy and childhood play. In several images an ornate carpet beater appears across the photograph as a strange fetishistic device (see fig. 44), suggesting both childhood fantasy play (like the witch’s broom) as well as adult sado-masochism. As such many of these images collapse the imaginative world of the child into the sadistic sexual fantasy world of the adult. Moreover, the “game” in the collection’s title suggests the world of childhood play as well as the Surrealist love of games, and the element of chance that games provoke. In some ways Bellmer’s dolls are like three dimensional exquisite corpses. The substitution and manipulation of body parts reflected in Bellmer’s dolls mirrors the manipulation of the customary lexicon of the body in the pictorial exquisite corpse. The most famous of the Surrealist parlour games, the exquisite corpse created a hybrid metaphorical body that introduced a new kind of aesthetic language, a language of desire and chance that replaced mimetic language and formal structure.

Many critics have noted that two important factors precipitated Bellmer’s construction of his first doll in 1933: the rise of Hitler and National Socialism and Bellmer’s attendance at a performance of Offenbach’s Tales of Hoffman. Before turning to the importance of the uncanny in Bellmer’s work, I want to discuss the political and social context out of which the dolls emerge. This context is important because it serves to mediate the meaning of
44. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée (The Doll)*, 1935/1949
the work, directing it away from the immediacy of an affective response grounded in the sadistic violence of the images. While I do not want to expunge the possibility of the work’s inherent misogyny, I do want to suggest that the complex range of emotions produced by the work reflects the competing identifications and narratives operating in it. Moreover, I hope that the process of contextualising Bellmer’s work within its complicated social, political and personal framework provides an insight into Sherman’s engagement with these images in her Sex Pictures, and the context out of which they emerge. Bellmer’s work and the critical responses to them also become an important optic through which to gauge critical responses to Sherman’s own work.

In his rebellion from his father and the dominant Nazi culture of the period, Bellmer came to identify with the female subject position.19 This is made clear in his prose poem, “The Father”, written in 1936 and later published in Le Surréalisme, même (1958). Here Bellmer recalls the gulf that lies between his father’s power and austerity and his brother’s and his own childhood pranks:

We learned quite early on how to protect ourselves, and, in fact, even more. What we thought of while our teeth chattered persisted until the onset of sleep: rebellion, defence, attack…. In fact we were probably rather adorable, more like little girls than the formidable boys we would have preferred to be. Yet, it seemed to be more fitting than anything else to lure the brute out of his place in order to confuse him. (177)

In this piece Bellmer reveals the rigid and reactionary nature of his father, contrasting his unemotional and sterile world to his own sense of childhood imagination and play:

It goes without saying that the pretexts of education, the principles of obedience and supervised work, all reinforced his attitude. And it was obvious that we vaguely questioned ourselves about the inadequacies of the entire class that he represented and that hindered him from understanding that the abolition of play is not beneficial to goodness and a sense of equilibrium. (176)

Here the world of the father and the world of the child elaborates a series of dichotomous terms and emotions, which Bellmer exhibits and explores in his construction of the dolls, and which in turn also structure the doll’s relationship to the world: childhood exuberance and fantasy versus adult repression and rigidity, the unconscious and the conscious,
masculine identity versus feminine identification, the inside and the outside, the whole and the part, construction and destruction, desire and prohibition, empathy and violence, and so on. This series of oppositional categories suggests a complex drama of filial rebellion that mirrors the operation of transgression and interdiction in Bataille’s work. Sue Taylor argues that “a world of joy, games, song and laughter and that of obedience, supervision, oppression, and self-satisfied power – are conventional tropes of the avant-garde for the free-spirited artist pitted against the corrupt bourgeois” (2000: 21). Like Bataille, Bellmer uses the female body to stage his aesthetic and social rebellion against a repressive, autocratic, bourgeois father and culture. Their work reveals the degree to which the female body becomes the site on which male avant-garde culture exhibits its struggle for mastery. The gendering of violence in Bellmer’s work also unfolds the complicated process of self-identification with the feminine other that is clearly performed in the work.

In this sense the doll becomes both fetish object and alter-ego figure; an object that wards off castration but also allows those fears to be openly staged. The importance of Freud’s theory of fetishism seems particularly pertinent to Bellmer’s construction of the doll figure for it underscores the structure of perversion in relation to sexual difference and gendered subjectivity. In his essay “Fetishism” (1927) Freud notes that the fetish represents both the recognition and disavowal of the threat of castration for the male subject. Therefore the fetish object is both adored and abused since its status as a substitute serves to compensate for the threat of castration but also to act as a constant reminder of it. In its representation of a traumatic loss, the fetish is also imbued with the logic of nostalgia. In reading Bellmer’s essay “Memories of a Doll Theme” (1934) Therese Lichtenstein argues that “Bellmer’s deep attachment to nostalgia seems to reflect a wish to re-create the yearning he experienced as a child” (2001:144). In many ways the dolls are like souvenirs of childhood which reveal the very structure of nostalgic desire. In this sense they resemble Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills, which are both objects of nostalgia but also objects that reveal the logic of nostalgia as an ambivalent “love-hate” of the past and its evocation in the present. Like the souvenirs of childhood that Bellmer collected, the dolls represent both fetishistic desire and nostalgic longing. As Susan Stewart suggests the very nature of the souvenir itself discloses the origin of the fetish:

The souvenir generates a narrative which reaches only “behind,” spiralling in a continually inward movement rather than outward toward the future. Here we find the structure of Freud’s description of the genesis of the fetish: a part of the
body is substituted for the whole, or an object is substituted for the part, until finally, and inversely, the whole body can become object, substituting for the whole. (1993:135)

The dolls become a projection of Bellmer’s sadistic fantasies as well as a reflection of his vulnerability and sense of persecution. The aggression and hostility exposed in the doll’s creation implies a narrative of deviant subjectivity and desire, that registers a catalogue of perverse desires and fears: sadomasochism, fetishism, castration anxiety, and incest. As in Bataille’s exploration of transgression, Bellmer’s dolls stage a rejection of bourgeois family arrangements and the procreative function of its sexuality, exploring instead the loss of self and the fusion with the other in both fantasy and eroticism. But the infusion of the dolls with a sense of nostalgia also creates a contradictory sense of longing for the familial arrangements of a bourgeois childhood.

Similarly, while Bellmer self-consciously casts himself as the perverse, degenerate artist rebelling against the image of the healthy Aryan body that came to dominate a German National Socialist cultural policy throughout the 1930’s, the dolls also reflect on one level the internalisation of fascist ideology. The fascist celebration of the mechanical or robotic body suggests its own contradictory relationship with the feminine and with mass culture. The mannequin figure – invariably female – was a ubiquitous symbol of mass consumer culture within modernity; its serialisation reinforcing fantasies of the voracious commodification and feminization of culture. As with the spectral figure of the zombie in Carrington’s Down Below, the automaton or doll is also frequently associated with the mass political subject of fascism, a subject that came to define the Nazi propaganda machine with its reliance on public rallies and mass spectacles and its program of assimilation. Throughout the 1930’s Nazi ideology was constructed around a dichotomy of normalcy and degeneracy (Lichtenstein: 2001). In this arrangement the healthy, robust Aryan body was pitted against the degenerate bodies of homosexuals, Jews, blacks, the insane, avant-garde artists, communists etc. In contrast the ideals of femininity were embodied in the figure of the innocent Gretchen maid, often portrayed with two long blonde plaits, and the maternal house Frau, the child bearer who would guarantee the continuation of the Aryan race. Often depicted as fragmented and in decay, or in surroundings that are themselves suggestive of a ruin, Bellmer’s doll explicitly rejects the ideals of the healthy Aryan body. And yet the violence exhibited toward the doll figures also invokes the violence embedded within practices of assimilation and extermination within fascist culture.²⁰
Bellmer was also fascinated with the body’s interior. In a number of early and late drawings the exterior surface of the body is peeled back to reveal the internal cavities and organs: “I want to reveal scandalously the interior that will always remain hidden and sensed behind the successive layers of the human structure and its last unknowns.” (Bellmer in Webb, 1985:11). Throughout his life Bellmer was also obsessed with the image of the little girl and in a drawing from 1935/6, Rose ouverte la nuit, Bellmer depicts a prepubescent girl folding back the outer layer of her skin to reveal the internal organs and rib cage. Peering inside of herself with a curious expression, the image of the self-flaying child creates a haunting quality that disturbs her otherwise embodied innocence. In this image the girl’s innocence is literally torn away in a moment of self-obsessed curiosity and sadistic voyeurism. Here her curiosity for the unknown becomes a narcissistic desire to see inside herself, a move which will also ultimately destroy her. In this image, Bellmer projects his own curiosity and desire to penetrate the surface onto his girl subject so that she becomes a representation of sadomasochistic desire. In a curious way this image is a metaphor for Bellmer’s own art practice, particularly the construction of his dolls. In his desire to penetrate the surface of the body, to reveal its unconscious and to unravel his own desires and fears, he must destroy something of its wholeness, of its identity. 21

Bellmer’s doll is in essence an embodiment of fantasy: desire represented as an object. This accords with Bellmer’s retrospective reflection on the dolls as an attempt to explore “the physical unconscious”(Webb, 1985:38). The notion of the physical unconscious is extremely important for an understanding of the dolls and also the pornographic drawings that Bellmer executed over the years. Like the psychic unconscious, the physical unconscious in Bellmer’s works reveals a disturbing undercurrent to the sealed and contained body of idealised bourgeois femininity. The somatic structure and surface of the doll suggests a series of encrypted signs that uncover a narrative of libidinal desire. 22 The notion of the physical unconscious is elaborated by Bellmer’s comparison of the rearrangement and deconstruction of the doll figure with the anagrammatic quality of a sentence. Reflecting on this comparison later in life Bellmer says:

I tried to arrange the sexual elements of a girl’s body like a sort of plastic anagram. I remember describing it thus: the body is like a sentence that invites us to rearrange it, so that its real meaning becomes clear through a series of endless anagrams. (cited in Hans Bellmer: Photographs, 1991: 42)
Here the comparison between anatomy and syntax recalls Bataille's "Dictionary of Organs" and the perverse play of metonymic and metaphoric objects in *Story of the Eye*. As in Bataille's use of transgression, Bellmer's dolls stage the familiar Surrealist representation of the female body as both transcendent and debased, a contradiction which Sherman's work explicitly takes up. The doll's uncanniness evinces its liminal status on the border between life and death, the real and the imagined, staging the enigma of femininity as both an image of revulsion and an image of desire, as passive victim and an enchanting seductress. Like the photographed hysterics in Charcot's hospital, the dolls are at once disturbingly vulnerable and enchantingly desirable. Bellmer's dolls thus raise complicated questions about male fantasies of erotic domination and manipulation that are central to a Surrealist aesthetic practice.20

The significance of the uncanny in much Surrealist art becomes especially evident in Bellmer's work. While Bellmer's visit to a performance of Offenbach's opera, *Tales of Hoffman* inspired his creation of the first doll, Freud's development of the uncanny hinged around his reading of the doll Olympia in the tales of Hoffman, whom he regards as "the unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature" (1919/1985: 355). According to Freud, the automaton or doll figure unsettles our everyday expectations of the real and the imagined, the living and the dead. Therefore the uncanny is evoked when "there is an intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when the inanimate object becomes too much like the animate one" (354). The uncanniness of Bellmer's dolls lies precisely in their evocation of human emotion; feelings of degradation, humiliation, shame, vulnerability, and exhaustion. But Freud goes on to contradict this first assumption about intellectual uncertainty concerning the status of the automaton by reminding us that the "living doll" is not really a fear of childhood but rather a desire:

We remember that in their early games children do not distinguish at all sharply between living and inanimate objects, and that they are especially fond of treating their dolls like live people.... The source of uncanny feelings would not, therefore, be an infantile fear in this case, but rather an infantile wish.... (355)

In connecting our adult fear of the automaton with our childhood desire that the inanimate come to life, Freud encapsulates the ambiguity of Bellmer's doll: the fascination and the terror that they evoke in the viewer. This ambiguity is reinforced by Freud's conclusion that
we can understand why linguistic usage has extended *das Heimliche* ['homely'] into its opposite, *das Unheimliche*; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. (364)

In staging the return of childhood play in the form of sadomasochistic desire, Bellmer’s dolls reveal the subject’s experience of imaginary identification embedded within the trajectory of the uncanny. As Elizabeth Wright argues, what gives much Surrealist art its ‘shock’ effect is the return of the (un)familiar fantasy world of childhood into the domesticated world of familiar objects and things. But here fantasy is not understood as a straightforward wish-fulfilment but rather “as something that a subject constructs in order to get closer to what it desires or dreads” (1990: 273). The uncanny is important to Surrealist and postmodernist aesthetics because it contests the instrumental function of representation, and “makes us see the world not as ready-made for description, depiction, or portrayal (common terms used to say what an artist or writer does), but as in a constant process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction” (265). In Sherman’s work the uncanny is evoked through the representation of the precarious boundaries between the living and the inanimate as well as the familiar and unfamiliar. As ironic recreations of Bellmer’s own images, the Sex Picture’s stage the return of the (un)familiar, while the Untitled Film Stills produce an uncanny effect through what Freud calls the effacement of “the distinction between imagination and reality” (367). The very act of leaving all her work untitled – recalling Cahun’s untitled photographs – further enhances the uncanny nature of the images. Here the process of un-naming reveals a conscious resistance to categorisation, to the classificatory act of interpretation. To leave them un-named is to locate the meaning not only within the photographic frame, within the image itself, but also within the wider sphere of cultural production, drawing attention to the way in which identities are themselves – in Butler’s terms – a product of cultural citation and reiteration. In refusing to assign titles to her work, Sherman throws their meaning back onto the viewer, divesting her own power of authority over them, foregrounding the active force of the viewer’s gaze. This opens up the image’s ambiguity, divesting it of a single or coherent meaning or any exact locatable reference, while making it generic.

In the Sex Pictures and other images inspired by Surrealism and Gothic horror, Sherman employs plastic mannequins purchased through medical supplies’ catalogues, as well as props and prosthetic devices from sex shops and novelty stores, to produce a body of work that confronts the disturbing quality of Bellmer’s images. Conflating the
pornographic and medical gaze, Sherman’s hybrid and grotesque bodies reflect Bellmer’s creation and manipulation of his doll. While some of Sherman’s images ironically reflect Bellmer’s general strategies of violent rearrangement and displacement, others closely cite particular images. In Untitled #263 (see fig. 45) Sherman reproduces Bellmer’s hybrid doubles, but in a much more graphic way, fusing male and female forms. In this image the genital region and upper legs of two mannequins are joined together producing a parodic replica of Bellmer’s doubled pair of legs. Joined at the waist with one side representing male genitals and the other female genitals, Sherman introduces the figure of the double as a hybrid of sexual difference. In contrast to Bellmer’s doll image, there is a disquieting and unerotic effect produced here. In contrast to the smooth pre-pubescent genital region of Bellmer’s dolls, the genital region of Sherman’s female mannequin is excessively hairy, and out of its vagina hangs the string of a tampon, which serves to remind us of the bleeding and wounded body. As Suleiman argues, “Sherman’s truncated, parodically androgynous doll repels any attempt at penetration or phantasmatic possession” (1998: 139). The similarities between this image and Bellmer’s interchangeable doll is reinforced by the elaborate ribbon tied around the torso. A frequent motif on Bellmer’s dolls, the ribbon in Sherman’s image is decorated with a series of swastika-like shapes, echoing Bellmer’s own incorporation of the swastika configuration in his arrangement of a double pair of his doll’s legs. In Sherman’s image the sumptuousness of the ribbon is further enhanced by an abundance of draped silk-like fabric surrounding the hybrid mannequin. Draped silk or satin fabric or an abundance of hair are constant motifs in this series, highlighting the fetishistic reference of the work. Beside the double jointed genital form are two decapitated heads, one male and the other female, matching their corresponding anatomical forms. While the face of the female is partially obscured from our view, the male face is scarred and cracked, suggesting a demented or ecstatic expression.

In Untitled #258 (see fig. 46), the metaphorisation of the female genitals as wound or “hole” is made literal. Lying face down, a plastic mannequin is positioned so that she reaches back behind her, framing the large open gaping hole that stands in place of more detailed anatomical representation of the anus and vagina area. The dark genital “hole” at the centre of the image suggests that something is “missing”. Here the missing female genitals in the narrative of sexual fetishism are parodically displayed as a sign of the “artificial” status of female identity and embodiment within a masculine and heterosexual economy of sexual desire. In this sense Sherman’s work reveals strategies of critical subversion that Butler locates in the process of staging the parodic:

The critical task is ... to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by... constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the imminent possibility of contesting them. (1990: 147)

In recontextualising Bellmer's own sadistic manipulation and construction of his dolls, Sherman uses the deviant body of avant-garde aesthetic practice in order to reveal the historical authorisation of transgression as a male avant-garde practice. Moreover the "nothingness" of the genital region is uncannily repeated in minute form as a single eye peering out at us from the top right hand corner of the image. The lighting in the photograph produces a stylisation of the eye that renders the iris area as a stark black void. The vagina as eye, a ubiquitous Surrealist pornographic trope, and a constant theme in Bellmer's work as well as central to Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, reminds us of Freud's suggestion that the female genitals may invoke uncanny feeling. Indeed Freud likens our relationship to the uncanny with the adult male's relationship to the female genitals: once the birth canal and origin of the self, they embody the uncanny's development in the direction of ambivalence by becoming the primary sexual object and staging the objectification of the other. The eye as vagina is again taken up in *Untitled #261* (see fig. 47). Here a partially decapitated mannequin lies with its head upside down, one eye staring from the bottom of the image directly into our gaze. The partial decapitation of the head is mirrored by the amputation of the legs, at the genital region. On top of the mannequin sits a pair of detachable breasts. The fragmentation and displacement of the bodily forms explicitly mirror the effects of displacement and disintegration in Bellmer's dolls. But again Sherman makes much more explicit the sexual manipulation and decapitation of the doll. Again the draping of red silk fabric beneath and around the doll parodically highlights the fetishistic status of the image while the doll's partial decapitation and amputation reminds us of the structure of the fetish as substitute for, protection against and reminder of castration.

In creating artificial hybrid monstrosities, that foreground the fetishistic nature of representing genitalia, Sherman's work parodies and questions the normative structure of the gaze in Surrealist aesthetic practice. Her monstrous hybrid sex dolls parody the hermaphroditic body and its attempts to obscure sexual difference while also disclosing gender and anatomical difference as specific operations of cultural constructions of sexual bodies, be they grounded in pornography, medicine or art practice. In a series of notebook
47. Cindy Sherman, Untitled #261, 1992
entries, recently published as part of an exhibition catalogue, Sherman reveals how she began to think of ways in which to disengage her own physical presence from the camera lens, which coincided with an escalating interest in Dada and Surrealist photography. In an entry about her Sex Pictures Sherman exhibits her unfolding frustration and ambivalence in relation to this body of work:

Should move towards terror. The shock (or terror) should come from what the sexual elements are really standing for – death, power, aggression, beauty, sadness, etc... It's easy to make a funny or shocking picture based solely on the appearances or revelations of the sex organs (esp. these organs). The difficulty is making poignant yet explicit imagery("Notebooks": 1987: 180).

Attempting to eke out the distressing nature of her subject matter and her desire to produce a range of emotions within the images, Sherman constructs some hauntingly surreal images. In Untitled #257 (see fig. 48) the parodic tone of earlier images is replaced with a scene of sordid horror. Here the head of a female mannequin, again cropped at the neck to suggest decapitation, lies below a pair of buttocks which appear to be squatting over her open mouth. From between the buttocks of this squatting figure the light faintly captures a drop of clear bodily fluid falling from a shape that suggests either a penis or a nose. The expression on the mannequin's face is one of terror and/or sexual ecstasy. Behind her head lies the dark genital region of another body, the texture of its artificial skin also caught in the light. The use of stark lighting in this image produces an ambiguity of bodily forms and emotions which together with the presence of bodily fluid and the textures of skin, hair and teeth, create a powerfully uncanny ambience. In this image Sherman produces a disturbing atmosphere of violence, desire and sexual trauma as well as disgust and repulsion.

While Sherman's work explicitly confronts the pornographic gaze of Bellmer's work, it does so by reflecting on the complicity of our own gaze. In Bellmer's La Poupée series, the doll becomes a kind of alter-ego, an erotic object on which Bellmer's sadistic fantasies are played out. In imitating this process Sherman makes us reflect on those strategies of desire and complicity in Bellmer's images and in our own viewing of them. But rather than reveal a narrative of identification, as Bellmer does in relation to his dolls, Sherman evokes an "ambivalent structure of feeling" that reverberates with the viewer's fascination and disgust at her parodic versions of Bellmer's images. The comic and grotesque effect produced in the Sex Pictures invokes what Butler calls "a subversive
laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects” (1990:146).

While Bellmer’s use of the doll figure captures both the Freudian and avant-garde representation of the automaton as a category of ambiguity and contradiction, Sherman’s sex dolls stage a postmodernist investment in parody. For Sherman, there is a sense of self-irony and the comic in representing graphically sexual images, ones which go beyond Bellmer’s aesthetic constructions of transgressive eroticism. But in the very act of parody, Sherman imparts a dynamic of complicity and resistance that constitutes all actions of transgression and parodic subversion:

I can’t seem to keep from making everything have a sexual, “political”, or ‘heavy” edge, which I don’t exactly want. If anything, I’d rather make the work seem politically incorrect. I was thinking how the surrealists were very much into de Sade and thus misogynistic which rather intrigued me, I guess because the main thing that bothered me with their work was in the beautification of the women used, not how they were used. (Not to mention however, how these men, themselves seemed rather piggish the way girlfriends, wives, etc... seemed to have been treated, passed around, used as models, while these women were, often, artists themselves and much younger). (“Notebooks”: 1987: 184-85)

Sherman’s words seem a little belated but they also serve to remind us of the disjunction between the Surrealist woman as practicing artist and the Surrealist woman as a figure of representation; a disjunction that instils in the work of women Surrealists what I have called a crisis of representation: an aesthetic engagement with a Surrealist construction and representation of both femininity and female identity. This crisis itself comes to haunt Sherman’s parodic revisions of Surrealist representations of the female body. Sherman’s comments serve to reinforce the dynamic of complicity and resistance as central to the aesthetic and political tensions in the work of women Surrealists such as Carrington and Cahun, as well as Sherman – and indeed our own critical reflection on it. Thus Sherman’s comments further reflect on how her own work continues to stage a crisis of representation in a contemporary context. This series of images becomes a heuristic model of how feminist and postmodernist accounts of the female body and representation serve to both guide and restrict Sherman’s own response to Surrealist images. Although countering the misogyny of much Surrealist art, Sherman suggests that the works are politically “incorrect” too:

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... I had wanted to explore a violent misogynistic direction, a la de Sade and the boys; instead everything seems too "loaded" about sex/violence. I guess that the successful surrealist ploy here would be to diffuse the ugly-reality of misogyny by bursting the reality-surreal! — voilà! ("Notebooks", 1987:184-185)

Here Sherman reveals a frustration and an anxiety at the heart of her art practice: a desire to deploy the codes of violence and sex at the heart of Surrealism to undo the very categories that those codes construct, at same time engaging with the force of their aesthetic and political meaning. Sherman articulates her strategy as an attempt to unfix the "ugly-reality of misogyny" in Surrealist art practice without simply making her work a crude political statement, one which falls into the trap of a right-wing political censorship agenda.25 Instead her works suggests an engagement with the representation of violence and eroticism and its replication of those themes within the social and gendered relations of the group; to draw out the correspondence between the gendered representation of violence and eroticism and the physical exchange of women’s bodies, as wives, models, lovers, muses etc. But the tension for Sherman here is also her desire to remove her work from a more dogmatic feminist polemic, one that might seek to contain the aesthetic function of her images within a static and homogenous political reading, one that loses the ambiguity of the aesthetic function of the image.

While in the Disgust series the female body disappears into the sum of its parts, in the Sex Pictures, the human female body is reduced to medical prosthesis and the sex prop. But in this series the male body and in particular its genitalia, are introduced into the narrative frame. Here male and female no longer remain simple opposites, reflections of each other. In creating monstrous hybrid bodies in which there is a complete interplay and rearrangement of phallic objects and their placement in a number of different orifices, Sherman parodies the violated body of the female doll in Bellmer’s images. However, Sherman’s hybrid sex dolls provide a much more radical rearrangement of the body, one which unsettles a Surrealist avant-garde violation of female form. But Sherman also wants to make latent the political and aesthetic force of Bellmer’s work — and by implication her own. Confronted with Bellmer’s and Sherman’s images, we cannot remain passive viewers. Our own desires and our own bodies are caught up in the contradictions that abound in these representations. The sense of crisis that these images provoke is exactly our own sense of crisis as to how we are implicated in their social and aesthetic ramifications; questions of beauty, gender, sexuality and identity which we cannot escape.
In her late Surrealist work, Sherman investigates "the darker, savage, unspeakable side of a modernity" that has come to invoke the parodic nature of much postmodernist art. Sherman’s work continues the exploration of female identity and representation that was ubiquitous within the work of the women Surrealists. Like Carrington and Cahun, Sherman focuses on the ways in which to explore the social "contractedness" of female identity and the representation of the body. While the Untitled Film Stills remind us of Cahun’s series of masquerades, latter work such as the Disgust series and the Sex Pictures, reference the hybrid and grotesque female body, so central to Carrington’s fiction.

Mulvey’s suggestion that the Untitled Film Stills arrived on the art scene at a time when the female body was unrepresentable unless framed within the context of feminist theory invites us to read them in part as a critique of feminist theories of the body up until that moment. By reading Sherman’s work within the context of Butler’s disarticulation of the traditional link between sex and gender within feminist theory, I want to suggest that Sherman’s images and Butler’s theories render visible the phantasmatic structure of identity in order to counter the prescriptive discourse on sexuality that had dominated feminism up until the early 1980’s. In her re-reading of Riviere and Lacan, Butler returns to modernist conceptions of gender and masquerade in order to articulate her theory of gender performativity, while Sherman engages with her Surrealist predecessors in order to unravel questions about her own art practice. Each of their projects – one philosophical and the other aesthetic – returns to an earlier modernist moment in order to conceptualise the relationship between feminine subjectivity and identity. Butler and Sherman foreground the materiality of the body as it is defined and made within culture. Both have contributed significantly to postmodernist accounts of the body and female subjectivity.

In her chapter on masquerade in Gender Trouble, Butler begins her interrogation of the feminine subject of feminism with the question of the naturalisation of the heterosexual matrix; how sex/gender and nature/culture dualisms are constructed and naturalised in and through one another (1990: 36). Following Lacan, Butler argues that women represent "the reality" of the self grounding postures of the masculine subject, a power which, if withdrawn, would break up the foundational illusions of the masculine subject position" (1990: 46). Butler reveals how women are compelled to "be" precisely what men are not or rather they must pose as if they were the very lack which confirms the primacy of the male heterosexual subject position. To provide an analogy Butler suggests that Lacan’s reading of the relationship between masculine and feminine subject positions, as well as the relationship between culture and nature is akin to the Hegelian master/slave
dichotomy; a dichotomy in which the master is beholden to the slave since only through his reflection is the master’s identity made certain (1990: 440). This, Butler contends, has important ramifications for how Lacan understands the position of women. If women are the “reflection” of the Phallus that guarantees that men “have” the Phallus, then it is at the cost of their own desire or rather their desire is appropriated as a guarantor of the primacy of masculine heterosexual desire. It is in this sense that Butler suggests, following Lacan, that men “have” the phallus but can never be it. Woman, on the other hand, engages in a “masquerade” of being the Phallus (1990: 47). And yet, as Butler argues, the terms “appearance” and “masquerade” are paradoxical since, on the one hand, they suggest that there is something prior to this appearance, this masking:

a feminine desire or demand that is masked and capable of disclosure, that, indeed, might promise an eventual disruption and displacement of the phallogocentric signifying economy. (1990: 47)

On the other hand these terms suggest that all identity is masquerade, since nothing but “lack” comes before the mask. As we saw in the last chapter, this is exactly what Cahun’s work exhibits. Her parodic representations of the body signal the instability of gender codes by foregrounding the way in which erotic style fashions subjectivity.

Butler’s work on masquerade is also suggestive of the way in which Surrealist aesthetic ideology naturalised feminine sexuality as transgressive; indeed the way in which the female body and female desire came to be a “reflection” of male aesthetic practice. Sherman’s work responds to this process of cannibalisation, through a kind of parodic re-cannibalisation. Her images disrupt a Surrealist commodification and visual penetration of the female body by “unmasking” a (male) Surrealist reading of the erotic feminine as “naturally” transgressive. In the Disgust/Disaster series as well as in the Sex Pictures women’s status as cultural other is ironically foregrounded to the point where the body as a coherent social mask collapses altogether into the sum of its visceral, and comically sexual, parts. Sherman’s work displays what Butler calls the phantasmatic structure of identification (30-31), disrupting the illusion of the coherent and stable body, one that is subjected to rigidly defined cultural and aesthetic codes. Throughout her work Sherman continually raises questions about the construction and representation of gender and sexuality in our culture; how femininity is coded according to regulatory conditions of identity and the ways in which those codes are disrupted.
As with the reception of Butler’s work on gender, feminist responses to Sherman’s work have been notoriously polarised. While some critics claim that her work critiques the fetishisation of the female body, others contend that Sherman herself has fallen prey to this process of fetishization, reproducing stereotypical images of women that reinscribe their denigration within culture. Rosalind Krauss suggests that even when feminists embrace Sherman’s work

they have been disgusted by its consumption as myth. For such consumption, they point out, inverts the terms of Sherman’s work, taking the very thing she is holding up for critical inspection and transposing it on the grounds of praise. (1993: 173)

Sherman’s work implicitly interrogate mass culture’s generalisations about “woman” as well as feminist responses to these. While Krauss points to the way in which Sherman’s success has in some respects cast her out from a feminist critical reading, I want to argue that it is precisely because Sherman’s work intervenes at a symbolic level that her work has been problematic for a feminist critical tradition – in the same way that Judith Butler has come under attack for her work on gender performativity and parody. Mira Schor’s hostile review of Sherman’s work in the late 1980’s and Nussbaum’s recent attack on Judith Butler share a number of important assumptions that I think indicate the closeness of Butler’s and Sherman’s work. In both Schor’s and Nussbaum’s articles a register of the “real” and the pragmatic is tied to an “old-style” feminist politics which is set up in opposition to the symbolic and parodic work of “the new feminism”. While these critiques unleash a familiar debate about the competing claims of theory and practice, or theory and experience, their reductive polemical force serves to proscribe the female subject of feminism within a rigidly defined “real”, a category which by its very insistence comes to signify an essentialist other. The critical opposition to Sherman and Butler hinges around their attempts to unravel the complex discursive formation of the category of the “real” – including its essentialist figuration within feminist discourse – as well as the way in which their work engages the complicated and often contradictory nature of representation itself, both linguistic and visual. It is precisely because Sherman and Butler interrogate the ground on which the “real” and the “experiential” are constructed that their work is labelled anti-feminist. A closer examination of these critiques will make these arguments clearer.

In “From Liberation to Lack”(1989) Mira Schor opens her assessment of the representation of female sexuality in women’s art with a catalogue of her own eclectic feminist reading.
noting how those feminist texts which once occupied a central place in her thinking have
been pushed to the back shelves or into storage in order to make room for more recent
works which adopt a psychoanalytic and linguistic approach to feminist theory.
Lamenting the fact that feminism "has little institutional memory" and no "collective
absorption of early achievements and ideas" (15), Schor inserts herself into the article as "a
living bridge across ebb tides of feminist thought" (15). Defining her role as a feminist art
teacher, Schor suggests that her first duty is to impart "the ABC's of feminist art history"
to her "unformed art students" in order to remove "the rose-filtered lenses that
camouflage patriarchal domination" (15). Implicit in Schor's tone and developed
throughout the essay is a binary apparatus of experience and theory, rhetorically
elaborated as "good" feminist art based on "personal experiences re-examined in
consciousness-raising" (15-16) versus bad feminist art such as Sherman's "tits and ass"
representations of women:

One has to see a Sherman photograph on a person's wall to understand the nature
of its appeal: a wet t-shirt clinging suggestively to breasts is la même chose, whether
you call it draperie mouillée [Kenneth Clarke, The Nude] or tits and ass. These
negative representations are disturbingly close to the way men have traditionally
experienced or fantasized women. Sherman's camera is male. Her images are
successful partly because they do not threaten phallogocentrism, they reiterate and
confirm it. (17)

La même chose, a phrase repeated twice in the essay, eschews any sense of a deconstructive
practice operating in Sherman's work or indeed an ironic reflection of the cultural material
reproduced in her images. According to Schor, Sherman's images are simply "the same
as" a traditional western nude, "the same as" a Playboy centrefold. What the essay reveals,
however, is the degree to which Schor's polemical critique of Sherman hinges around her
own aversion to and rejection of poststructuralist strategies and critiques. Decrying
deconstruction's resistance to essentialism - to the "real" differences experienced by men
and women - Schor suggests that feminist representations of female sexuality must strive
toward an essentialist practice in the face of critical censure:

Women are waved away from the door marked "essentialism" by
deconstructionist critics and by others afraid of the biologicist implications and
dangers: they altruistically warn of essentialism's error of logic, the trap door of

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binary oppositions (male/female, active/passive, culture/nature). Woman is waved back, but to what? ... to PHALLUS and LACK....(19)

Here Schor suggests that a critical interrogation of essentialism amounts to a repression of women's “real” experiences, of which she argues sexuality forms a significant part: "the injunction against essentialism seems a continuation of the repression by Western civilization of woman's experience ... and it should be denied, no matter the risk"(19). She concludes her essay by suggesting that the work of Frida Kahlo, Louise Bourgeois, and Elizabeth Murray – often labelled by postmodernist critics as narcissistic and fetishistic – is to be commended because it directly confronts “female body experience, sexuality, fruition, barrenness, and the quotidian facts of a woman's life”(19).

What emerges in Schor's essay is the degree to which her critical practice is carved out of a highly problematic notion of an authentic female “other”. Schor’s position is thus strikingly close to Breton’s own validation of an “authenticity” located within the marginalised subject of modernism. Breton’s patronage of Kahlo reflects what Alice Gambrell refers to as Breton’s late 1930’s endeavour to seek out artists and writers that “made literal” his own “carefully constructed fictions of difference and alterity” (1997: 42). By reducing the meaning of Kahlo’s work to “female body experience” and “the quotidian facts of a woman’s life”, Schor privileges Kahlo’s work as “good” feminist art in contrast to Sherman’s collaboration with the male gaze.38

Over a decade later, under the auspices of a review of Judith Butler’s four major publications to date, Martha Nussbaum launched a critical and disparaging attack on Butler under the title, “The Professor of Parody – The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler”(1999). Although the proper names are different and the context has shifted slightly, the terms of the debate in Nussbaum’s article uncannily reconstitute Schor’s critique of “good” and “bad” feminism.39 If “experience” is the defining term of Schor’s polemic against Sherman and deconstruction, in Nussbaum’s article the category of the “real” is taken up as the sign of an “old style” feminist politics versus the “the new symbolic type” of feminist thinkers – which, according to Nussbaum, Butler personifies. Lined up behind Butler are young feminists brainwashed by French postmodernist thought who produce “fancy words on paper” and think that politics involves “poking fun” at the powers that repress them. In “the new feminism”, Nussbaum argues, there is no room for large scale social change and only the “flimsiest connections with the real situation of real women”(37). Nussbaum argues that within Butler’s politics of “quietism”
and “retreat”, all that is left is to find “spaces within the structures of power in which to parody them, to poke fun at them, to transgress them in speech”(37). This contrasts with Nussbaum’s own old style feminist politics which are grounded in “the material conditions of real women”, in “real bodies” and “real struggles”(37). While Nussbaum is not the first to draw the conclusion that poststructuralism has infected feminism with its “empty” politics, what is distinctive in her attack on Butler is the sense of despair with which she launches it:

... there is a despair at the heart of the cheerful Butlerian enterprise. The big hope, the hope for a world of real justice, where laws and institutions protect the dignity of all citizens, has been banished, even perhaps mocked as sexually tedious. Judith Butler’s hip quietism is a comprehensible response to the difficulty of realizing justice in America. But it is a bad response. It collaborates with evil. Feminism demands more and women deserve better. (1999: 37)

Nussbaum restages the debate between theory and practice in terms of productive “real” politics and narcissistic symbolic poststructuralist theory. As Robyn Wiegman cogently argues, Nussbaum attempts to “retrieve a humanist subject animated by “the suffering of others”, a subject who sees the future in a “real” world now disarticulated from the academy’s illusory attachment to abstraction” (1999:130).

In their moralising critiques of Sherman and Butler, Schor and Nussbaum reproduce normative claims about the feminine and female subject of feminism, one which for Nussbaum must bear the stigmata of “real suffering” and for Schor “female body experience”. While Schor accuses Sherman’s camera of being male, Nussbaum condemns Butler for collaborating with evil. What in fact unfolds in the drama of conspiracy and accusation played out in these narratives is Schor’s and Nussbaum’s own despair at what they perceive as feminism’s narcissistic crisis. I want to argue that the hostility to Butler’s and Sherman’s work rests on its attempt to grapple with the proscribed and problematic female subject of feminist theory. Butler’s attempt to rethink earlier feminist accounts of female subjectivity and Sherman’s interrogation and manipulation of cultural constructions of female embodiment, identity and representation, unfold the contradictions inherent in the feminine subject of feminism. The development of Sherman’s images over a substantial period of time, from the late 1970’s to the 1990’s, reveals a quite persistent critical strategy in terms of their representation of the female body. Nearly every series that Sherman has produced has acted as a kind of meta-
commentary on the prevailing aesthetic and cultural climate or on her previous body of work. While her Untitled Film Stills appeared on the scene at a point when stereotypical images of women were shunned by feminist art critics, the Detritus and Disgust Series inaugurated a move away from the heavily masqueraded body of her earlier work by exposing the phantasmatic structure behind the mask of femininity. As feminist analyses became comfortable with Sherman’s early work, acknowledging her use of nostalgia and parody in order to critique male voyeurism, Sherman unmasked her own ploys of fetishism by exploding the body’s aesthetically contained surface. In the Disgust series, the cultural horror of the female body’s interior is made palpable so that a new kind of stereotype emerges. And yet critics have been less concerned with Sherman’s alignment of femininity with the grotesque and the abject, her reproduction of the “monstrous feminine”. Perhaps, coming after the Untitled Film Stills, they serve to locate Sherman’s work within a more complex critical arena. Indeed as Mulvey argues

the Untitled Film Stills may be re-read with the hindsight of the future development of Sherman’s work in mind. To return to the early photographs in this way is to see how the female body can become a conduit for different ideas superimposed, as it were, and condensed into a single image. (146)

Sherman’s images thus operate across her oeuvre as well as across the history of the female body’s representation within high and low cultural forms. By manipulating and playing with the cultural conventions of the real and the artificial, surface and depth, Sherman’s images suggest the sense in which the experience of femininity and the representation of femininity are indistinguishable. This corresponds to Butler’s contention that gendered subjectivity does not exist prior to culture nor is it a blank slate upon which culture makes its mark, but rather comes into being through performance and citation.

For Schor and Nussbaum these theoretical and aesthetic interventions amount to a crisis that is perceived, not as a critical intervention, but rather within the rubric of what Robyn Wiegman calls “the idiom of failure” (1999) pervasive to academic feminism’s perception of itself. I want to retrieve the notion of “crisis” from its sole association with failure and narcissistic danger as it is evoked in these narratives of accusation, and suggest that in Butler’s and Sherman’s work crisis marks a critical turning point, a productive moment of tension and apprehension. Thus Butler’s and Sherman’s critical relationship to feminism bears a striking resemblance to Carrington’s and Calhoun’s own attempts to represent a
more nuanced female aesthetic and political subject within Surrealism. It is the sense and
experience of external crisis that inaugurated the disciplines of Surrealism, feminism and
psychoanalysis and their radical interrogation of the humanist subject. The question of the
female subject, her experiences and representation, has become central to these disciplines
and their attempts to re-evaluate the limits of knowledge and experience. The concept of
crisis asserts itself as a moment of renegotiation, marking the dissonant mechanisms and
strategies utilised by Carrington, Riviere, Cahun, Sherman and Butler, in order to
negotiate the cultural and political imperatives of modernism and postmodernism. More
insistently the notion of crisis measures the multiple and shifting strategies of intellectual
and aesthetic negotiation taken up by these women. Their self-reflexive approaches
produce engagements with these disciplines that are both “troubled” and “troubling”. It
is this capacity for trouble that sustains vibrant intellectual debate and nurtures a
relationship between the past and the present which generates new critical positions for
the future.

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1 See Mira Schor “From Liberation to Lack”.
2 For different readings of Bellmer’s work within the general rubric of feminist analysis see Sue Taylor (2000),
Theresa Lichtenstein (2001), and Susan Rubin Suleiman (1998).
3 See Barbara L Miller’s article for a discussion of the ambivalent attitude to Sherman’s work. For two
opposing views of Sherman’s work in relation to feminism see Judith Williamson and Mira Schor.
4 Sherman’s refusal to assign a theoretical reading to her work has left her open to critical attack by critics such
as Schor who read this strategy as a capitulation to phallocratic values. I would argue, however, that the
untitled nature of the images in suggesting a variety of different narrative scenarios and emotional ranges
throws the onus of meaning on to the viewer, making us aware of our own reading practices. I agree with
Rosalind Krauss when she writes that “The idea that the artist has a responsibility to make forward with an
explicit reading of her or his work seems just as peculiar as the idea that the only way to produce such a
reading...would be through words” (1993: 207).
5 For an important discussion on the ambivalence of reading practices, see Kobena Mercer’s two articles on
Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic photographs: “Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic
Imaginary” and “Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe”.
6 Criticism of Sherman’s and Mapplethorpe’s work, by both the right and the left, reflects the way in which the
debate about ‘political correctness’ during the 1980’s and early 1990’s was itself usurped by the right. As John
Guillory argues "The phenomenon of "political correctness," recently the object of so much complaint in the right-wing media, can be seen... as the paradoxical triumph in the university of an otherwise defeated liberalism. It is not surprising that a progressive discourse, more or less routed in American culture, should find itself driven to police the borders of its diminished territory. As everyone on the left knows, the concept of political correctness was formulated within left discourse itself to critique the tendency to moralistic posturing provoked by the dire situation of an increasingly reactionary social order" (1993: 342-3).

7 In Kobena Mercer's reading of the racial fetishism in Mapplethorpe's portraits of black men, he takes up Raymond Williams's term to explore "the complex structure of feeling" evoked in these images. In a revised reading of an earlier discussion of Mapplethorpe's work, Mercer attempts to "take back the unavoidably moralistic connotation" of the term fetishism, in order to trace his own "ambivalent structure of feeling" in response to Mapplethorpe's images (1995: 179). Mercer's reading is compelling for the way in which he returns to the implications of his earlier reading practice in the context of the political and cultural censure of Mapplethorpe's work.

8 Like most of us, Sherman could not have been aware of Cahun's photographs until the early 1990's.

9 Sherman's interest in retro clothing and images recalls a Surrealist interest in the found object and the category of the outmoded or declasse as a revolutionary aesthetic strategy.

10 Barbara L. Miller writes that "In the early 70's, managers stopped displaying these images in the foyers of their theatres; any existing stills were sent to retail outlets where movie buffs could by them for pennies. The images became collectors items, fetish objects and camp commodities. It was not the content of these images but, as Sherman confessed in a 1991 interview, the "cheapness" of these now out-of-date productions that made them so exciting" (5).

11 With the publication of Gender Trouble, Butler's rise to "pop' stardom within feminist and cultural studies is matched by Sherman's own stardom within the postmodern art world.

12 Rosalind Krauss suggests that Judith Williamson was one of the first feminist critics to fully embrace Sherman's work. In her essay "Images of Woman", Williamson analyses Sherman's work in terms of visual style and performances of femininity. During the 1980's theories of masquerade and performance came to dominate discussions of film theory and gaze theory, culminating in 1990 with the publication of Butler's Gender Trouble which goes back to Riviere's essay on masquerade in order to explore the notion of gender performativity. Krauss contrasts Williamson's essay with attempts by Mulvey and Solomon-Godeau to "recast" Sherman's work within a feminist context by arguing that it goes beyond "mere" feminist polemic (41).

13 In an interview with Noriku Fuku in 1997 Sherman discusses the rejection of this work: "I got a lot of criticism from feminists who said I was promoting negative stereotypes of women as victims.... It bothered me at first when people criticised [the work]... seeing the side I hadn't intended. I finally decided it was something I had to accept" (125).

14 Kobena Mercer explains the way in which Mapplethorpe's images inscribe racial fetishism: "The scopic fixation on black skin thus implies a kind of "negrophilia," an aesthetic idealization and erotic investment in the racial other that inverts and reverses the binary axis of the fears and anxieties invested in or projected onto the other in "negrophobia" (1995: 175).

15 In 1947 Bataille provided illustrations for the second printing of Bataille's Story of The Eye. Sue Taylor argues that Bellmer had intuitively grasped many of the ideas around eroticism and transgression that Bataille explores in this novel as well as in his theoretical writings, long before he came to read Bataille's novel (136).
Ted Gott suggests that Document "is perhaps best remembered for its recognition of photography's potential for sexual totemism" (136).

Like Document, Minature was an interdisciplinary magazine, publishing criticism, philosophy, ethnology, anthropology, psychoanalysis as well as articles on music, architecture and art.


There were a number of episodes in Bellmer's life in which he cross-dressed. The most significant involved a visit with his father to Berlin in 1921. At the conclusion of their journey by train, Bellmer emerged from his cabin fully dressed as a woman, with make-up and wig. He then proceeded, much to his father's outrage and embarrassment, to walk with him through the streets of Berlin. This prank was clearly designed to annoy his father, who had accompanied him on his journey to attend engineering school, what would otherwise be a conventional rite of passage for father and son.

Lichtenstein records a particularly harrowing example of how public spectacle was employed "to enforce conformity to moral codes [which was] recorded in the August 23, 1935, issue of the London Times: The son and daughter of the United States ambassador in Berlin were among the foreigners who were in Nuremberg on Sunday August 13, and saw a girl led through the streets with her head shaved and her shorn plains pinned to a placard suspended from her shoulders which bore the words 'I have offered myself to a Jew'" (2001:130).

Sherman's interest in the abject body and its visceral mirrors a Surrealist fusion of the grotesque and the erotic, in particular in the work of the more dissident Surrealists: Bataille, Leiris and also Bellmer. In an article in Document, Michel Leiris examines the painting of a corpse by the artist Antoine Caron. In the painting a soldier shoves his fist into the stomach of the dead man. Discussing this image, Leiris notes that the internal organs have an erotic effect. In a 1930 edition of Document Leiris sets the stage for a decade to come, in which Surrealism and those on its edges would become increasingly preoccupied by erotic violence:

Masochism, sadism and almost all vices are in the end only ways of feeling oneself more human—because one is in a deeper and more direct connection with the body—such that the sight of wrinkles and viscera, terrible for some, take us a step further towards an intensification of our human consciousness ... the most atrocious visions, like the cruelest pleasures, are absolutely legitimate if they contribute to such a development of humanity. (Leiris cited in Gott, 1993:136).

Lichtenstein reveals how Bellmer was influenced by the German neurologist Paul Shildor's ideas on body image. According to Schilder our body image develops through both an individual experience of sensation as well as the perception of our body from the external world. As such our body image is in a constant process of construction and deconstruction (34).

The question of complicity and resistance in relation to Bellmer's work unfolds in two recent book length studies of Bellmer's work. In Behind Closed Doors, Therese Lichtenstein suggests that although Bellmer's dolls are certainly disturbing and confronting, the dolls' artificiality is always foregrounded so that what we get is a complicated projection of male anxiety directed against an authoritarian masculine culture. In order to arrive at this reading Lichtenstein leaves out of critical consideration Bellmer's more explicit pornographic drawings of children as well as his pornographic photographs of his various lovers and partners. On the other hand, Sue Taylor, in Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety, seems trapped within a reading of perversion rather than the images themselves. However, she makes some important points which highlight the problematic nature of how to read these images. Taylor concludes that "While Bellmer's doll photographs, with their egregious manipulations of female anatomy, may have been suspect in the sociopolitical context of Nazi Germany, they
found immediate acceptance within another patriarchal order, in France – the overwhelmingly male heterosexual Surrealist avant-garde" (98).

26 See discussion in Chapter Six.

27 For an important discussion on postmodern ambivalence see Kobena Mercer’s two articles on reading racial fetishism in Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic photographs.

28 For a more detailed analysis of feminism’s account of identity with the history of institutional knowledge, see Robyn Wiegman’s “Object Lessons”.

27 The debate between Suleiman (1998) and Krauss (1999) over Bellmer’s and Sherman’s images is a more productive discussion than either Schor’s or Nussbaum’s critiques of Sherman and Butler. But I think it, too, rests on the problematic nature of the female subject within feminist discourse and the “ambivalent structure of feeling” that Sherman’s and Bellmer’s work produces.

28 Gambrell’s fascinating essay on Kahlo argues that “a dynamic philosophical complexity underwrote much of Kahlo’s work” which modifies previous critical interpretation of her work as grounded in a “concrete reality” (1997: 43).

29 In “Remembering Women’s Studies”, Alice Gambrell observes that ‘In the present… we are witnessing the reemergence of a constant within academic feminist debate, one that reconstitutes itself every few years, each time with a slightly different terminological or methodological tonality” (93).
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