

Chapter Seventeen
In the Master's Bedroom

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for Joel Fineman

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The argument Peter Bürger makes in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* turns on the notion of institutional critique. If dada, surrealism, and the Russian avant-garde were truly radical, he maintains, this must be understood against the historical conditions that made that radicalism possible, conditions Bürger locates in the very autonomy modernism had so painfully won for aesthetic production. For if this autonomy liberated art, it did so, ironically, only into the jail of its own institutional incarceration, freeing art from that very field of social praxis that could supply it with seriousness or purpose. The independence which the institution of art now supported and maintained – an independence from the social field of the patron, the moral one of the receiver, the objective one of the referent – was the independence of a closed and self-immured system: it was the very picture of alienation and the very rootlessness of the commodity condition. The institutional form of this autonomy consolidated itself during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the opening ones of the twentieth. By the end of the First World War this institution with its dealers, its system of exhibitions, its thirst for artist-authors, its marketing of the new, had emerged as an observable entity. It was this institution, Bürger insists, that the historical avant-gardes attacked.¹

Now the institution Bürger's argument explicitly addresses is that of the visual arts: the field of creative production within which commodification occurs most spectacularly and in relation to which the spatial implications of 'autonomy' are materialized through the specific analogues of the gallery, the studio, the transportable easel painting and the independent exhibition. And indeed his examples of the avant-garde's attack on the institutional form of art are almost all drawn from visual practice: examples such as collage, the ready-made, the collectively or automatically produced object. But the avant-garde Bürger is theorizing is not a specifically visual one, for autonomy was sought earlier and more passionately in poetry than in painting; the techniques of chance, montage, and ready-made are as available to literary as they are to visual practice; and many of the situations that Bürger ends up wanting to

discuss, such as Brecht's theatre, make it clear that his avant-garde is indeed diffuse, embracing all areas of cultural practice.

If, however, autonomy meant something to the specifically *visual* practitioners of the avant-garde, it had not only an institutional form that determined the shape and consequences of its practice, but also a cognitive one, locating the grounds of its particular independence within the very conditions of the field of apperception. The idea of an autonomous vision – freed from all obligations to the object, and from all idiosyncratic definitions of the subject – becoming an abstracted sensory stratum that could be made to appear in and of itself as a kind of Kantian category, this notion of visibility was a founding conception of modernist pictorial practice, beginning in Impressionism, developing in Neo-Impressionism, and maturing in both Fauvism and Cubism.

It was this visibility, hegemonic throughout modernist practice, that certain of those artists Bürger identifies with the avant-garde did indeed act against in the period following the First World War. It was this visibility, for instance, that shaped Marcel Duchamp's disdain for the art he called 'retinal' and led to the peculiar practice of a mechanization of the visual to which he gave the name 'precision optics'.² It was this visibility that negatively set the terms of the early work of Giacometti as he sought in the conditions of the labyrinth and the necropolis an antidote to the weightless lucidity and rationality of modernist space and, in the guise of Georges Bataille's *acéphale*, the irrational, decapitated victim who has no access to modernism's imperious visual mastery.³ It was this visibility that much of surrealism scorned, installing the limitless indeterminacy of the fetish in desire's place of honour as a way of rebuking the claims of reason always to be able to set before itself clear and distinct ideas.

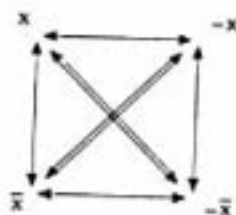
It can be argued that this tide of anti-vision was carried along by technical devices such as the ready-made, or montage or chance to which Bürger refers. But I think these devices were in turn underwritten by the logic of their attack and the nature of their target, which was not limited to the autonomy of institutional practice but included the presumed autonomy of the cognitive field. It is this logic that I want to examine in what follows.

The icons of modernist visibility present us over and over again with the erosion of that figure/ground distinction which is fundamental, I would have thought, to the very possibility of vision: vision occurring precisely in the dimension of difference, of separation, of bounded objects emerging as apart from, in opposition to, the ambience or ground within which they appear. But the logic of these icons is not to deny that these are, indeed, the terms of seeing objects in space. Rather the logic of the grid, say, or the colour-field painting, sets these perceptual terms in relation to something more fundamental, which it understands as the precondition for the very emergence of the object to vision, what we could call the structure of the visual field as such. It is according to this structure, for example, that the spatial ground or field, which is given to perception as something that occurs *behind* objects, must for cognitive space be the matrix of an absolute simultaneity; must occur, that is, fully marked by the perfect synchrony that rules within the cognitive modality of the visual. Similarly the figure, which perception locates in a space

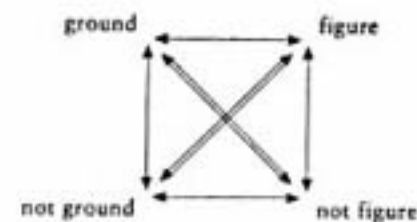
external to the beholder, must be understood as something that cognition grasps in a state of pure immediacy, yielding an experience which knows in a flash that if these perceptions are seen as there, it is because they are seen by me; that it is my presence to my own representations that secures them, reflexively, as present to myself.

If we imagine the modernist logic beginning with the opposition between figure and ground that prevails for the perception of objects and is the basis for traditional painting, we can understand that it would want to think a structure that was self-evidently derived from this first opposition – and thus obviously operating within the domain of the visual – but a structure that would project as well the way this domain is subsumed by, recontained within, and transparent to, a higher order of immediacy that is cognitive. To make a map of this set of interconnections, we could, interestingly enough, produce a schema that would configure itself like the structuralists' Klein group, with its two axes – the complex and the neutral – being the logical extensions or expansions of one another, the transformation of an original binary pair into a quaternary field that both replicates the first binary and extends its implications (Illustration 86).⁴ If the complex axis is set up as this original perceptual binary – *figure* versus *ground* – the neutral axis, a derivational rewriting of the first, would read *not-figure* versus *not-ground*. It is this involution of the original terms that then establishes a level of the structure which can be seen to reproduce the first opposition, only now, in its reflexive form.

In the Klein group the axial relations which are those of contrariety are duplicated by vertical relations of contradiction, through which each term, set along what is called a schematic axis, confronts its own inversion; but this same term is also connected diagonally – along the axes termed deixic – to that member of the group with which it is implicitly synonymous: *figure* in this case reduplicating itself as *not-ground*; or *ground* being deixically restated as *not-figure* (Illustration 87). What becomes clear from this mapping of terms is that when the background of perceptual space – with its former status as reserve or secondariness – is rejected by modernism, in favour of the absolute simultaneity that is understood as a precondition of vision, the logic of this inversion into *not-ground* invests this term with its deixic character, which is



86 Diagram of Klein group



87 Diagram of the relation of figure to ground (Klein group)

that of *figure*. In this form the *not-ground* becomes available to the modernist painter as the new order of 'figure': that is to say, a field or background that has risen to the surface of the work to become exactly coincident with its foreground, a field which is thus ingested by the work as figure.

Further, when the figure's apartness and externality is rejected by modernism in favour of a kind of unimpeachable immediacy, the condition of *not-figure* that expresses this takes on exactly the deixic character of *ground*, *ground* understood as that which sets all outsides in a necessary relation to an inside, asserting that if there is presence of something to me, it is because there is, first of all, self-presence. It is this logic of the *not-figure* that gives to the frame of the modernist picture its particular status as that boundary which is not likened to the natural, or empirical, limits of the perceptual field but is seen, instead, as the deductive result of the internal conditions of the painting analogized to a map of total self-containment and lucidity. (This very idea of the frame as absolute cognitive closure, marker of the conceptually complete, can of course be generalized to the structural schema itself, as a logic of operations that is meant to account for, and thereby to frame, its own self-containment.)

Now if modernism's 'vision as such' can be constructed along this neutral axis of the *not-ground* in opposition to the *not-figure*, it is because in this form it has become an opposition which maintains the terms of difference even while emptying out difference itself, so that a certain kind of folding back on one another occurs, establishing these terms as reflexively redoubled. And because of this redoubling, the beholder is entered on to this axis twice: first at the pole of the *not-ground*, where the place of the empirical viewer is marked by the way the empty mirror of the pictorial surface is set up as an analogue to the retinal surface of the eye opened on to its world; and second, at the opposite pole. There the *not-figure* marks the place of the Viewer as a kind of impersonal absolute, the point at which vision is entered into the schema both as a repertory of laws and as a conscious relationship to those laws which is that of the transcendental ego.

Modernist painting was not only sponsored by the logic of this structure but it also, as I have indicated, tried to reduplicate the structure's own condition as cognitive image at the level of the individual work of art. The

idea of a spatial scene which, through the painting's very appearance to its viewer, opens on to the preconditions that both must sponsor perception and to which it must be transparent, held generation after generation of modernists in thrall.

However, there are other scenes, historical ones, and I would like to pass to one of these. Yet, as I hope will become clear, even this scene suggests other registers in which it might be rewritten, for it is the setting of a peculiar encounter, one I am tempted to think of as surrealism's primal scene. André Breton describes this scene as the sudden appearance of a group of objects through which surrealism as a whole would understand something of both its identity and its destiny. The scene took place in early 1921. Breton explains:

In fact Surrealism found what it had been looking for from the first in the 1920 collages [by Max Ernst], which introduced an entirely original scheme of visual structure yet at the same time corresponded exactly to the intentions of Lautréamont and Rimbaud in poetry. I well remember the day when I first set eyes on them: Tzara, Aragon, Soupault and myself all happened to be at Picabia's house at the very moment when these collages arrived from Cologne, and we were all filled immediately with unparalleled admiration. The external object had broken with its normal environment, and its component parts had, so to speak, emancipated themselves from it in such a way that they were now able to maintain entirely new relationships with other elements, escaping from the principle of reality but retaining all their importance on that plane.⁵

An ex-soldier who could not leave Germany legally, Max Ernst was absent both from this scene and its later replay when his collages were exhibited at the bookshop Au Sans Pareil, in early May. But the explosiveness of the effect of these works is easy enough to document. Breton's reaction took the form of needing to master and recontain their impact; and to this end he went that summer to the Tyrol to meet Ernst before going on to Vienna to pay a visit to Freud. Bringing with him his volume of Lautréamont, he insisted on reading the *Chants de Maldoror* for hours at a time at a disconcerted Ernst in an effort to reassert his own authority.

Paul Eluard, who had not been at Picabia's for the unpacking of the collages, only saw them at the opening of Ernst's exhibition, but his excitement reached a pitch that was even higher than the others'. 'Eluard was the most affected', his biographer tells us. 'He suddenly understood that a brother had just been given to him.'⁶ Indeed, so strong was Eluard's experience that by the summer's end he did not wait to meet Breton in Vienna as planned, but hurried to the Tyrol to arrange to visit Ernst in Cologne as soon as the Freud pilgrimage was over. For him the encounter was to be a very powerful one indeed. The passion that was instantly set up between Eluard, Ernst and Gala Eluard inscribed itself not only on the bodies of all three but in the work of both men, and by the following September Ernst was to respond to an invitation from Eluard too strong to resist. Leaving Germany, his wife and son, and travelling on a fake passport to Paris, Ernst was to join a ménage with the Eluards that lasted 3½ more years.

There is an extraordinary image by Ernst that commemorates this meeting. Called *La puberté proche*, and bearing the dedication 'à Gala', it is like the majority of the so-called collages of Ernst's exhibition in that it is in fact not a collage but an overpainting. That is, instead of employing the additive process of gluing disparate elements to a waiting, neutral page, the overpaintings work subtractively, by taking a commercially printed sheet and, with the aid of ink and gouache, opaquing-out various elements of the original to produce a new order of image. The presence of this sheet, as the matrix or substructure of what is subsequently seen in the image, was in fact a major part of what both Breton and Aragon remarked about the works at the time they first encountered them. Aragon's account, written in 1923, notes that 'Max Ernst borrows his elements above all from printed drawings, advertisements, dictionary images, popular images, newspaper images'.⁷ And in his 1927 essay, 'Surrealism and Painting', Breton (looking back) agrees that Ernst proceeded 'from the inspiration that Apollinaire sought in catalogues'. But the term that Breton had originally used for this element is the far more suggestive word 'readymade' as, in his text for the 1921 exhibition at Au Sans Pareil, he notes that the collages are built on grounds constituted by 'the readymade images of objects', adding parenthetically, '(as in catalogue figures)'.⁸ This notion of the readymade is something to which we will return.

In the case of *La Puberté proche* the undersheet is a commercial photograph in which a nude had appeared, lying stretched out upon a couch, her head supported by one elbow. Swivelling this underlying photograph through 90 degrees, Ernst suspends the newly pendant figure in the strangely material, velvety ether of the gouache which covers the surface of the photograph like a hardened skin. Upright and headless, the nude now appears from within this thickened field as having been transmuted into the very image of the phallus: as having become, that is, the object and subject of that unmistakably Oedipal fantasy of both having and being the sex of the mother. And in the inscription with which Ernst frames this space, the froth of pleasure is invoked by the words, 'la grâce tenue de nos pléiades': as the idea of the Milky Way summons up the old iconography of the body's secretions writing themselves over the page of the heavens.

This suspended, weightless, phallic body-of-the-woman, both a part of her setting and at some kind of material remove from it, will be the thread on which the images of the collage-novel *Femme 100 Têtes* will, at the end of the decade, be strung together. Within the context of *Femme 100 Têtes* the location of this figure is unmistakably established as set within a fantasy world which is that of childhood; built, that is, on archaic foundations.

In 'Looking Back at Surrealism' in 1954, Theodor Adorno does so while obviously holding between his hands a copy of one of Max Ernst's collage novels. Setting aside much of what orthodox surrealist theory claimed for the movement's production – that it was able to manifest the workings of dreams, that it was able to produce the actual symbols through which the unconscious does its thinking – Adorno locates the accomplishment of surrealism in its uncanny staging of the archaic in the midst of the depersonalized, rationalized and commodified world of modernism. The archaic he has in mind is not that of the Greeks but rather that of childhood; which is to say, the ontogenic fact, played out in the life cycle of everyone of us, that we have a history. The

timeless uniformity which is pressed into our surroundings cannot erase the memory in each of us that we were once children. The archaic is thus to be found in children's books and in those other types of illustrated material that speak to us from out of the near distant past, a past which ties us through that childhood we vaguely remember to the world of our parents. The effectiveness of surrealist images, their ability to produce the shock to which they aspire derives, Adorno says:

partly literally and partly in spirit, from illustrations of the later 19th century, with which the parents of Max Ernst's generation were familiar ... One must therefore trace the affinity of surrealistic technique for psycho-analysis, not to a symbolism of the unconscious, but to the attempt to uncover childhood experiences by blasting them out. What surrealism adds to the pictorial rendering of the world of things is what we lost after childhood: when we were children those illustrations, already archaic, must have jumped out at us, just as the surrealistic pictures do now. The action of the montage supplies the subjective momentum, and seeks with unmistakable intention ... to produce perceptions as they must have once been. The giant egg out of which the monster of the last judgment can be hatched at any minute is so big because we were so small when we for the first time shuddered before an egg.⁹

It is undoubtedly Ernst's *Femme 100 Têtes* that Adorno is thumbing as he writes these lines, savouring this upsurge of the archaic in its concatenation of nineteenth-century source material: the line engravings of pages from the *Magasin Pittoresque*, the kitsch classicism of illustrations from *The Age of Fable or Beauty of Mythology*, the explanatory diagrams of *Physique Populaire*, the line-cuts of *La Nature's* presentation of the miraculous world of science staged either in the parlour experiments of its feature 'La science amusante' or in the laboratories of late nineteenth-century medicine, or engineering, or optics.

When the package of Ernst's collages was unwrapped that day in Paris, Picabia, Breton maliciously reported, was sick with envy.¹⁰ Looking now at most of these objects, in their somewhat frail whimsy, their rather fragile dada charm, it seems hard to understand this intensity. For the overpaintings, the majority of them cast on the pages of a catalogue of elementary and high-school teaching aids,¹¹ often deploy their added gouache planes of colour to project a shallow, stage-like space within which the images of beakers and retorts and cathode tubes can then be elaborated into the kind of mechano-morphic personages that Picabia himself had for some years perfected. The commercially-produced (and thus self-evidently readymade) object abounds in Picabia's work as the vehicle of portraiture, as in his *Ici, c'est ici Stieglitz* of 1915, or as the medium of a dada-based derision, as in *Infant Carborator* (1919).

Yet certain of these images go far beyond Picabia's notion of a mechanical being and, with a prescience that is amazing for 1920, seem to set up a paradigm for an idea of mechanical seeing: a notion of an automatist motor turning over within the very field of the visual. This idea, which operates at the centre of surrealism's critique of modernism, contests the schema of visual

self-evidence and reflexive immediacy, substituting for this a model based instead on the conditions of the readymade; these conditions produce an altogether different kind of scene from that of modernism's.

The model Ernst constructs is indeed, structured as a scene contained within a proscenium frame in a way that is like the cognitive image provided by the modernists' Klein Group. But it is there that the comparison with a modernist visual model stops. Found most clearly in an overpainting called *The Master's Bedroom* (with an inscription in both French and German that adds, 'It's worth spending a night there'), this paradigm generates a scene that is concerted to turn our very conception of space inside-out, thereby picturing automatism's relation to the visual not as a strange conflation of objects, and thus the creation of new images, but as a function of the structure of vision and its ceaseless return to the already-known.

Like its fellow-overpaintings, gouache is used in this work to cover over those parts of the underlying sheet that are to be suppressed and at the same time to project a new space in which the remaining objects – in this case animals and a few pieces of furniture – will take their places. As in the other cases also the quality of the gouache is somewhat skin-like, as though a film had congealed over the surface of the image. Unlike most of the others, however, the space projected by this surface is insistently deep, organized indeed as a full-blown perspective. The objects assembled there are not the bizarre hybrids of the other collages, but the unexceptional depictions of whale, bear, sheep, snake, bed, table, chest, and so on, the elements left in reserve from a Lehrmittel sheet on which row upon row of such animals and objects originally displayed themselves within the abstracted and grid-like circumstances of what we could call the space of inventory. From the diagrammatic, wooden nature of the poses, from the juxtaposition of the elements in rows, from their obliviousness to the demands of perspective diminution that would require the distant animals to be smaller than the near ones, and from the occasional bleed of the underlying parts of the inventory through the gouache skin, the flattened grid of the supporting sheet remains apparent across the newly wrought terms of the perspective. And it is this appearance that was, I believe, decisive for the surrealists' original experience of the image as revelatory because what is projected here is a visual field that is not a latency, an ever-renewed upsurge of the pure potentiality of the external, but instead a field that is already filled, already – to say the word – readymade.

The painter's blank canvas, the draftsman's white sheet, even if already organized by the lattice through which perspective will map the coordinates of external space, is nonetheless the index of a kind of fundamental blankness which is that of the visual field itself understood as a field of projection. It stands, that is, for what we assume to be the nature of vision's spontaneous opening on to the external world as a kind of limitless beyond, an ever-retreating horizon, a reserve assumed from the outset but never filled-in in advance. If, in traditional perspective, vanishing-point and viewing-point, horizon line and canvas surface, finally mirror one another in a complicitous reversibility, this is because they represent two funds of pure potentiality, two locations of the always-ever never-yet-filled: on the one hand, the horizon that vision probes and, on the other, the welling-up of the glance.

That the ground of *The Master's Bedroom* is not a latency but a container already filled, so that the gaze is experienced as being saturated from the very start; that the perspective projection is not felt as a transparency opening on to a world but as a skin, flesh-like, dense, and strangely separable from the objects it fixates; these features present us with a visual model which is at one and the same time the complete reversal of traditional perspective and the total refusal of its modernist alternative.

Now if, in trying to characterize the visual model that is adumbrated here, one is reminded of the particular apparatus that so fascinated Freud and about which he wrote in his 'Note on the Mystic Writing Pad', it is not of course to enter into anything like a game of sources. It is rather because the model of the *Wunderblock* (magic slate) helps to analyse the peculiar layering of experience that is put in place. The top sheet of the little device – the one that registers the impressions etched upon it – is in Freud's model analogous to the system he calls *Pcpt.-Cs.*, that is, the part of the mental apparatus that receives stimuli (either from the outside world or from within the organism itself) as a set of impressions which are not, however, permanent within this layer of the system. In the *Wunderblock* this top sheet holds the visible mark only as long as it is in contact with an underlying slab of wax to which it temporarily sticks under the pressure of the stylus; once the two surfaces are detached from one another, the marks vanish and the *Wunderblock* presents itself as a kind of slate wiped clean. But though they are no longer available to view, the lines that have been pressed on to it are in fact retained by the waxen support, forming within it a permanent network of traces. And this Freud analogizes to the mental operations of memory and thus to that part of his topological model given over to the Unconscious.

In *The Master's Bedroom* the *Wunderblock's* waxen slab finds its analogue in the underlying sheet of the *Lehrmittel* page, in its inventory-like concatenation of objects, the stored-up contents of unconscious memory; while the apparatus's top sheet appears as the perspectival covering of the gouache overpainting, the skin-like materiality of which seems to be an index of the way this receptor surface is detachable from its ground. This implication of detachment and reattachment relates to a further point Freud makes about the structure of the *Wunderblock* and its capacity to model the very nature of sensory stimulation, which he describes as pulsatile or periodic in nature, 'the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception'. This flicker or pulse, this connection and disconnection within the perceptual field, is based on Freud's theory 'that cathectic innervations are sent out and withdrawn in rapid periodic impulses from within into the completely pervious' perceptual system. 'It is as though', Freud writes, 'the unconscious stretches out feelers, through the medium of the system *Pcpt.-Cs.*, towards the external world and hastily withdraws them as soon as they have sampled the excitations coming from it'.¹² In *The Master's Bedroom* it is not that this pulsatile motion is illustrated (indeed the scene's peculiar stillness is a striking feature of the collage); rather, it is the sense of the gap, the detachment, the split which results from the pulse, that is rendered.

However, the pulse, the stillness, the visual apparatus projected within the spectacle itself as a detachable covering, and the contents of vision figured forth as originating in optical space only because they are readymade: all of

these elements are structural features of the scene around which *The Master's Bedroom* is obviously organized and through which it was able to speak with the kind of power it did to Breton, Eluard and Aragon in 1921. Ernst may have claimed this bedroom as his own, but he could have done so only through an obvious identification with Freud's patient, the Wolf Man, and thus by evoking the famous dream of the wolves and behind them the Wolf Man's primal scene. All of it is there, indeed: the absolute immobility of the animals; the window opposite the bed; the raising of a curtain on the scene in the form of the window opening by itself which is the dream's figure for the onset of vision in the opening of the child's eyes; and underneath it all the element of repetition, the anxiety brought on by the uncanniness of the experience, by the fact of an already-there that is returning, returning in the form of an object which can only represent loss, an object whose identity resides precisely in the fact that it is lost. As a screen for the primal scene the dream allows that first uncanniness – the castration misperceived across the plane of the parents' coitus – to reappear, and it does so in the upsurge of a new uncanniness, in which the lost object is summoned forth through the first of that long series of substitutions – wolf, butterfly, cut finger – that repeat the mark of the lost object not as found again, but as recurring through the very condition of absence.

Is it historically possible, we might ask, to load this little object, made by Ernst in 1920, with such a freight of psychoanalytic ideas, and specifically with a connection to this precise case history? Perhaps at this point a digression into a certain kind of art-historical detail might be appropriate.

That Ernst identified with the Wolf Man in various of his works is easy enough to document. The 1923 painting *Souvenir de Dieu*, which the artist himself described as depicting his father in the form of a kind of omnipotent god-head, projects him there, indeed, in the guise of a wolf.¹³ And beginning in 1927 Ernst was to publish in *La Revolution Surréaliste* the first version of a story he was frequently to repeat throughout his life, in which through the agency of a screen memory of his father performing obscene motions in front of a wooden panel, Ernst was to place himself at the observation post of his very own primal scene, ending the account with a coy reference to his father's conduct on the occasion of his conception.¹⁴

However, Ernst's relation to the entire corpus of Freud's texts is extremely striking. Everywhere one turns it becomes clear that the artist, who had been a psychology student at the university of Bonn and through this an avid reader of Freud, mined the major works of psychoanalysis for material for his art. Whether we look at the overttness of the 1921 picture *Oedipus Rex* or the more covert reference made by the 1920 *Dada in Usum Delphini* to Freud's announcement in his *Introductory Lectures* that he would not refer to the genitalia in *usum delphini* (that is, in the manner of speaking to children) but call them instead by their names,¹⁵ or if we regard the staging of the trapping-of-the-lizard scene from *Delusion and Dream* that Ernst painted as a monument to his love for Gala,¹⁶ we find evidence of the range and precision of Ernst's knowledge of the psychoanalytic literature, and more instances of this can be cited: from the Schreber case, from Dora, from the phobia of Little Hans.

The most specific and far-reaching example of this identification with Freud's case histories, however, was Ernst's projection of himself into the Leonardo story. At a somewhat superficial level we find this in the 1926 picture *The Virgin Chastising the Infant Jesus before Three Witnesses* (A.B., P.E. and the Artist), in which the shadow of a bird formed in the profile of the innumerable doves Ernst was to paint in the late 1920s is cast onto the garments of the Virgin in a miming of the Oskar Pfister diagram of the hidden vulture in *The Virgin and Saint Anne*, published in the 1919 edition of Freud's Leonardo essay.¹⁷ At a kind of eagerly assumed totemic level it operates more generally in Ernst's assumption of Loplop, 'Bird-Superior', as his own alter-ego, identifying this creature, the subject of innumerable pictures, as 'my private phantom, attached to my person'.¹⁸ At another, iconographic level, it controls Ernst's relation to the realm of natural history, whether in the early collages or in the cycle of *frottage* drawings which assimilate themselves to the character of Leonardo's sketchbook projects in both facture and scope. But at the level that interests us here, Ernst's connection to the Leonardo case turns on the very function of screen memory as the central element of Freud's analysis: screen memory, that is, not as a generator of content but as a condition of structuration, for it is not the bird itself but the bird as fundamental absence that plays so important a role in the structure Freud will put in place.

Leonardo's reference to the recollection he had of a bird's having visited him in his cradle and having beaten its tail between his lips is interpreted by Freud as a screen on to which is projected in disguised form the remembered remnants of the infantile arousal caused by an overaffectionate mother. That it should be a bird that is produced as the perceptual content of this memory Freud explains in a way that is parallel to the Wolf Man's wolf, or indeed the various objects presented in the screen memories of so many of his patients. These elements are provided to the subject readymade, Freud states; they are what the child picks up from the scraps of conversation around him, from images he happens to see in books, from the behaviour of animals both seen and recounted. They are the data uncovered in the research the child's own sexual curiosity is constantly driving him to perform and, once discovered, retrojected on to the formless past in the guise of 'memory'. They are the completely factitious referents that come, after the fact, to attach themselves to the floating signifiers of what Freud had come to think of as not the primal scene, but the primal fantasy. In Freud's reconstruction of Leonardo's case, the bird derives from an old wives' tale, the mother's repeated story of an omen of her child's future greatness, and it is then reinforced as the specific memory object, Freud hypothesizes, by the information that vultures have no mates and are instead inseminated by the wind.¹⁹ The screen memory is, then, an apparatus by means of which vision is retrojected, projected after-the-fact on to the fully saturated ground of the readymade.

The Leonardesque screen has long been understood as playing a central role in Ernst's subsequent practice. However, it is not a memory screen – or more precisely, a screen memory – that has been seen as at issue in this development, but rather a projective screen – Leonardo's famous spotted wall – conceived as the setting for a free play of imagination, the screen itself interpreted as a latency that permits the welling up of associations within the creative process. In his treatise, *Beyond Painting*, Ernst quotes at length

Breton's explanation of 'Leonardo's lesson, setting his students to copy in their pictures that which they saw taking shape in the spots on an old wall (each according to his own lights)'.²⁰ And this Ernst juxtaposes with his own account of his discovery of *frottage*, which begins, 'On the 10th of August, 1925, an insupportable visual obsession caused me to discover the technical means which have brought a clear realization of this lesson of Leonardo', a story that tells how a sudden fixation on the grooves in the floorboards of his bedroom at a seaside inn led him to invent his own projective procedure.²¹ The reference to Leonardo's projective screen is obviously intended here to give *frottage* a pedigree of unparalleled lustre.

In this account, however, Ernst then goes on to make a claim that is inexplicable as long as we conceive of the projective screen as a latency which, like the blank page of conventional painting, can be analogized to the ground of vision as traditionally conceived. That claim is that *frottage* and collage (or collage as Ernst practised it, saying 'ce n'est pas la colle qui fait le collage') are indistinguishable as procedures, making it no surprise that the circumstances that suggested each of them to him should have been nearly identical. 'The similarity of the two is such', he writes, 'that I can, without changing many words, use the terms employed earlier for the one, to relate how I made the discovery of the other'. And then his account for collage begins: 'One rainy day in 1919, finding myself in a village on the Rhine, I was struck by the obsession which held under my gaze the pages of an illustrated catalogue showing objects designed for anthropologic, microscopic, psychologic, mineralogic, and paleontologic demonstration'.²²

Yet if this similarity is possible, it is only so because Ernst conflated the two screens – Leonardo's spotted wall and Freud's account of the vulture memory – understanding the vision configured in the one as structured by the mnemonic retroactivity of the other. And in this conflation it is the unconscious that is understood to be at work, with the two processes made to occupy the same perceptual stage due to what Freud describes as common to both dreams and hallucinations (namely a regression towards the visual). Thus the parent space for both collage and *frottage*, the single plane from which both were launched, is explained in *Beyond Painting* as the screen of Ernst's own rather carefully fabricated screen memory, the mahogany panel in his bedroom which he casts in the drama of a twilight-state daydream he claimed for himself in early childhood. This is the panel he imagines his father to be copulating with and on which is produced an inventory of images: 'menacing eye, long nose, great head of a bird with thick black hair, etc.'.

In what Freud calls vision's 'other scene' – the one towards which the unconscious regresses in the conditions of dreaming, fantasizing, hallucinating, or screen-memory – the operation of retroactivity is at work. This retroactivity, or *Nachträglichkeit*, or *après-coup*, is importantly a function of the readymade which, displaced backwards in time, seems to rise up on the horizon of the subject's vision as an originary perception. Freud describes this, for example, in relation to secondary revision, as that process of the dream-work which comes, *après-coup*, to construct a façade for the dream: the one we seem to

remember upon waking, the one that gathers the chaos of the dream representations together, creating the relative coherence of a narrative. This façade, Freud says, is a readymade, a narrative lying in wait to be affixed to the dream material, its readymade condition making its attachment possible in the very split-second of waking. Offering many examples of the way this works, Freud asks of one of them, 'Is it so highly improbable that [this] dream represents a phantasy which had been stored up ready-made in [the dreamer's] memory for many years and which was aroused – or I would rather say "alluded to" – at the moment at which he became aware of the stimulus which woke him?'²³ Secondary revision, however, is not the affixing of just any prefabricated plot-line to the surface of the dream. The relation between the narrative façade that secondary revision erects and the desire that functions at the dream's core is that these two in fact mirror one another. And further, that inner kernel is itself ready-made, a function of daydreams elaborated in infancy or puberty which 'form within the nexus of the dream thoughts'.²⁴ And as we know, in that infinite regress in which the referent is constantly displaced from its supposed causal connection to the fantasy's origin, those daydreams will also be described by Freud as readymade for the subject, lying in wait for him in the scraps he picks up from his parents and grandparents, the legends the family tells about itself and him, its favourite sayings, the myths about itself that it weaves out of the prefabricated material of social chit-chat and cultural aspirations; the romances, in short, which he takes from others and assumes as his own.²⁵

Now, if the daydreamer is able to produce these second-hand scraps of excitement as his own, if they appear to him on the screen of his memory as his personal experience, this is due to that particular structure of visual perception that Lacan has termed the 'belong to me' aspect of representations'.²⁶ It is this phenomenological experience of something's being both outside himself and *his* that turns this bric-à-brac into the deictic markers of the subject's own being, the evidentiary signposts that appear to him the indices of his own history, his own identity, the touchstones of his most intimate connections to the real; which is all the more astonishing in that the readymades he will come to identify as 'his' are the markers erected after the fact to commemorate an event that never happened, an encounter whose traumatic effect on him arises from the very fact that he missed it. The sexuality of the child, Freud says, will always be traumatic, because it will always be a missed encounter; one for which he was always either too early, or too late.²⁷

The traumatic event, the missed encounter (what Lacan comes to call the *tuché*, and sometimes the *dustuchia*), produces not excitement but loss, or rather excitement *as* loss, as a self-mutilation, as something fallen from the body.²⁸ The repetition automatism set in motion by this trauma will work thereafter to restore that unknown and unknowable thing, attempting to find it, that is, on the other side of the gap the trauma opened up in the field of the missed encounter. The structure of the trauma, then, is not just that it initiates a compulsion to repeat, but that it institutes the gap of the trauma itself – the missed encounter – as the always-already occupied meaning of that opening on to a spatial beyond that we think of as the determining character of vision. For it is from the other side of the perceptual divide that the signifier will come, the object capable of standing for what the subject has lost. It is this

object that the child sets out to find, supplying himself with an endless series of substitutes that present themselves to him, in the world beyond the gap.

To the reservoir or inventory of this series of stand-ins Lacan gives the name automaton to indicate the quality of uncanniness that surrounds the finding of each of these objects, the sense not only of anxiety the encounter produces but also its aura of happenstance, an encounter one was not prepared for, a meeting that always, one insists, takes place by chance.²⁹ But the term automaton also underscores the inexorability and order that rules this series, that creates the logic of the substitutions which will take place among it.³⁰ The automaton inaugurated on the site of that gap of the missed encounter will both mark that spot and attempt to fill it, to produce from its grab-bag of readymades the stop-gaps presumed by the subject to be made to the measure of his own desire.

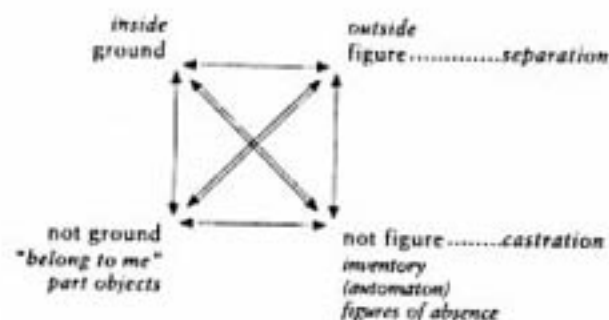
In the question period following Lacan's session on 'Tuché and Automaton' he is asked why, in describing the formation of intelligence up to the age of three or four, he seems to have abandoned the notion of developmental stages – first oral, then anal, then Oedipal – and to have organized everything around the fear of castration. Lacan's answer is:

The fear of castration is like a thread that perforates all the stages of development. It orientates the relations that are anterior to its actual appearance – weaning, toilet training, etc. It crystallizes each of these moments in a dialectic that has as its center a bad encounter. If the stages are consistent, it is in accordance with their possible registration in terms of bad encounters.³¹

In another, earlier seminar on the notion of 'object relations' as viewed from within a Freudian structure, he had spoken of the castrative status of weaning. 'What happens', he asks,

when the mother no longer responds to the sollicitation [*sic*] of desire, when she responds according to her own will? She becomes real, she becomes powerful. All at once access to objects is modified: until then objects which were pure and simply objects of satisfaction, are now transformed into gifts coming from this source of power. We witness, in short, a reversal of position. From being symbolic the mother becomes real, and objects from being real, become symbolic.³²

If we were to try to graph this relation (Illustration 88), we might start by characterizing the primal appearance of the object within the infant subject's perceptual field as the advent of something that separates itself out from a hitherto undifferentiated ground to become distinct as figure. That object, which is the mother's breast – and by extension the mother – becomes a figure, of course, by dint of its withdrawal from the field of the infant, by virtue, then of setting him up no longer as the amorphous and all-inclusive subject of satisfaction but now as the subject of frustration and longing, the subject that is, of desire. The very moment which produces the visibility of the object brackets it, then, as an object submitted to the terms of absence. As such this 'figure' is conditioned by its own contradiction, which is that of not-figure. But the figure, as image, is also mirrored back to the infant perceiver, who

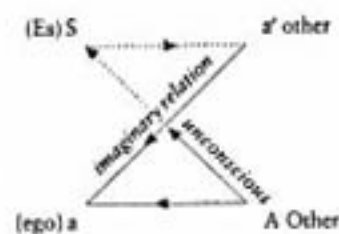


88 Diagram of castration-fear (Klein group)

understands it as the representation of not just any object, but of that object which is uniquely his, which was invented for his satisfaction and pleasure, which in being his marks him as a unique being, and in this character of 'belonging to him' reproduces itself deixically as part of his own identity, the 'not-ground' of his self-differentiation as ego. Rewritten in this way, the appearance of the object as the psychoanalytically construed function of separation begins to suggest a schema with which we are familiar.

The Klein Group, on to which modernism's structure of vision can be mapped, is also the support for Lacan's L-Schema (Illustration 89). That schema, as we know, sets the subject of the unconscious in contrast to its objects, which Lacan terms *objets petit a* (or objects of desire). From that initial contrast two derivations then occur, as the *objets petit a* are first doubled along the mirroring relationship of the deixic axis to structure the field of the subject's ego and then are configured in terms of that absence that projects them into the unconscious field, also to be termed the Symbolic and the locus of the Other.

Now, although the L-Schema derives from the Klein Group and thus shares with other extrapolations from it – like the modernist visual structure we explored before – that feature of cognitive immediacy and synchrony that is the privileged domain of structure, this schema is used by Lacan to configure something quite different as well. For one thing, the schema challenges the very transparency set up by the structuralist diagram itself, for it is a map of the conditions of opacity that rule in the midst of a seeming transparency, operating from within the centre of that very transparency both to make it available as the terms of vision but also to mark it simultaneously as 'misrecognition'. For another, the schema is meant to contest the idea of the structure as cognitive mastery, given through the table's diagrammatic stasis or a-temporality. As a generator or producer of effects, the schema is constructed as a circuit rather than a table, a circuit set in motion by the trauma's production of the compulsion to repeat. Thus it is only that sequentiality and time taken up into the heart of the system that gives it its character as homeostatic and its appearance as a-temporal.



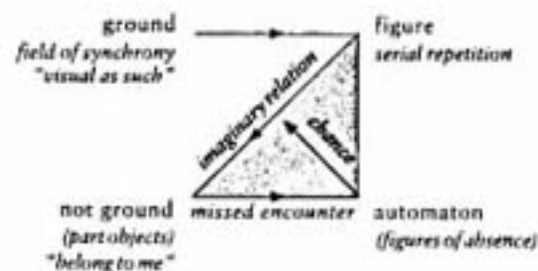
89 Jacques Lacan, L-Schema

Modifying the L-Schema to serve as the basis for our own problematic which is that of an automatist visuality, we would produce the following structure (Illustration 90). The figure, constituted by separation, is deixically redoubled as *not-ground*: as those parts of the subject's own body that are identified with the external object. But since that external object is given through its very condition as retreating or separating, those part-objects belonging to the subject are similarly parts lost to the subject, and for that reason written along the axis of castration. At the pole at the far end of that axis, the pole of the *not-figure*, the inventory of all those substitutes for the lost object pile up in a potentially endless series. The appearance of each of these figures, as it rises from behind the barrier of the missed encounter, out of the field of the unconscious and into that of perception, will strike the subject with surprise, and will seem to him the result of chance.

There are three things I hope to have shown by means of this demonstration. The first is the truly compelling nature of the two objects by Ernst that have functioned as its core: *The Master's Bedroom* and *La puberté proche*.

The second is the relationship between what we could call the graph of modernism, with its insistence on simultaneity and transparency (and its concomitant resistance to time and happenstance), and the schema of the visual automaton. The relationship I have in mind is not that they are opposed to one another, but that (as the Lacanian L-Schema already suggests) they map onto one another; and the nature of this mapping is that the second is the repressed of the first. The transparency of modernism's 'vision as such' is an effect of this convoluted structure, just as, for Lacan, the transparency of consciousness to itself that is the 'subjectivity effect' is indeed an effect of the relation to the unconscious. Seriality, repetition, the automaton: all these are the repressed of modernist visuality.

The third point can be no more than a suggestion here, but it is that the readymade, as a marker of the site of serial production, needs to be approached in relation to the repetitive mechanisms of consciousness and the unconscious, which is to say we need a psychoanalytic of the readymade. It is not enough to use it as a tool of analysis within the political economy, and address it solely in terms of commodity fetishism; neither is it satisfactory to



90 Diagram of the relation of figure to ground (L-Schema)

limit its discussion to its attack on the institutional closure of the aesthetic economy of the precious, artistically intended, object. We have to bring the readymade closer to the site of its real power to scandalize. And that site is 'the master's bedroom'.

Notes

- 1 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1984), pp. 47–54.
- 2 I have explored this aspect of Duchamp's work in 'The Blink of an Eye', in *States of Theory*, ed. David Carroll (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).
- 3 See my 'No More Play', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).
- 4 For an analysis of the Klein Group, see Marc Barbut, 'On the Meaning of the Word "Structure" in Mathematics', *Introduction to Structuralism*, ed. Michael Lane (New York: Basic Books, 1970). See also A.J. Greimas, 'The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints', *On Meaning* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1987).
- 5 André Breton, 'Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism', 1941, in *Surrealism and Painting* (New York: Icon Editions, 1972), p. 64.
- 6 Luc Decaunes, *Paul Eluard* (Paris: Balland, 1982), p. 61.
- 7 Louis Aragon, 'Max Ernst, peintre des illusions', 1923, in *Les collages* (Paris: Hermann, 1965), p. 29.
- 8 André Breton, 'Max Ernst', 1920, in Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz), p. 177.
- 9 Theodor Adorno, 'Looking Back at Surrealism', in *The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Horizon Press, 1967), p. 222.
- 10 Werner Spies, *Max Ernst Collagen - Inventar und Widerspruch* (Cologne: 1984), p. 81.
- 11 This was the 1914 *Kataloges der Kölner Lehrmittelanstalt*. See Dirk Teuber, 'Max Ernsts Lehrmittel', *Max Ernst in Köln* (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1980), pp. 206–40.
- 12 Sigmund Freud, 'A Note Upon the "Mystic Writing-Pad"', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psycho-Analysis), XIX, p. 231.
- 13 This connection is pointed out by Ernst himself in *Beyond Painting*, p. 28. See also Malcolm Gee, 'Max Ernst, God, and the Revolution by Night', *Arts*, LV (March 1981), p. 91.
- 14 Ernst, *Beyond Painting*, pp. 3–4.

- 15 In Lecture 10 he says, 'No science can be treated *in usum delphini*, or in a manner adapted to school-girls'. Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York: Perma Books, 1953), p. 161.
- 16 This connection is discussed by Werner Spies, 'Une poétique du collage', *Eluard et ses amis peintres* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1982), p. 66.
- 17 See Werner Spies, *Max Ernst, Loplop: The Artist in the Third Person* (New York: George Braziller, 1983), pp. 101–9. Besides this connection, Spies discusses Ernst's identification with Leonardo in terms of his adoption of the bird as alter-ego and his embrace of the crumbling wall as a projective screen. He does not, however, consider the other meaning of 'screen image' that emerges from Freud's discussion.
- 18 Ernst, *Beyond Painting*, pp. 9–10.
- 19 Sigmund Freud, 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood', *Standard Edition*. The speculation that the bird fantasy was projected retrospectively on to a story about a bird visiting him in his cradle told to him by his mother was added in a footnote in 1919 (Chapter II).
- 20 Ernst, *Beyond Painting*, p. 11.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 23 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon Library, 1965), pp. 533–4 (Chapter VI, Secondary Revision).
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 530.
- 25 Jean LaPlanche and J.-B. Pontalis, 'Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, XLIX (1968), pp. 10–11.
- 26 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), p. 81.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 32 Jacques Lacan, 'La Relation d'objet et les structures freudiennes', *Bulletin de Psychologie*, X, 7 (1 April, 1957), p. 429.