

**COMPOSITION AND THE UNCANNY:  
A METHODOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF COMPOSITION IN VISUAL ARTS**

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## ABSTRACT

### COMPOSITION AND THE UNCANNY: A METHODOLOGICAL OF ACCOUNT COMPOSITION IN VISUAL ARTS.

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This study aims at giving an account of composition in visual arts by basing itself on the notion of uncanny. In that respect the works of three different surrealist artists, Max Ernst, Giorgio De Chirico, and Joan Miro, will be analysed in terms of their compositional uncanniness, by taking into consideration writers who analysed the uncanniness of these artists' works. As an addition to those writers' ideas, the aim of this thesis will be to find some new aspects of compositional uncanny in order to challenge the traditional account of composition in visual arts, as a source of visual resolution into unity.

**Key Words:** Composition, uncanny, perception, memory, space, representation, loss of unity, surrealism.

## ÖZET

### KOMPOZİSYON VE TEKİNSİZLİK: GÖRSEL SANATLARDA KOMPOZİSYON ÜZERİNE BİR YÖNTEM ARAŞTIRMASI

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Bu çalışma, görsel sanatlardaki kompozisyon kavramının, tekinsiz(uncanny) kavramı bağlamında incelenmesini amaçlıyor. Buna bağlı olarak, üç gerçeküstücü sanatçı, Max Ernst, Giorgio de Chirico ve Joan Miro'nun eserlerindeki kompozisyona bağlı tekinsizliği, farklı yazarların o sanatçılar üzerine yapılan yorumlarından yola çıkarak inceliyor. Ayrıca, bu yorumlar üzerine, kompozisyona bağlı tekinsizliğe yeni bir boyut getirerek, görsel çözümlemenin bir bütünlüğe ulaşması yolundaki geleneksel düşünceyi sorgulamayı da hedefliyor.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Kompozisyon, tekinsiz, algılama, bellek, bütünlüğün yitirilmesi, gerçeküstücülük.

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## CHAPTER 1

### 1. INTRODUCTION

When we think about “Composition”, derived etymologically from the Latin *Componere* (to place with), one of the things that may come to mind is an act of assembling things, or making a whole, a unity out of many things where we are able to recognise a combination. Concerning visual arts Rudolf Arnheim believes that composition occurs when we see a work of art as an arrangement of definable shapes organised in a comprehensive structure so that the harmony thus obtained gives the viewer a certain satisfaction to the eyes. But can we really say that unity and the creation of satisfaction are the only values of composition? Isn't it possible that composition can be the site of disorientation and of loss of unity by the very fact that its unity can be threatened by what it is constructed of, that is distinctions and divisions?

The aim of this thesis is to question the role and the conception of composition in visual arts, not as a source of visual resolution into unity, but as creating a space for an impossible image, or rather an impossibility of a stable, oneiric image, since it can be a source of constantly reactivated contradictions between the terms of an image as well as between the fragments of its composition and its framing mechanisms. This questioning will possibly permit us to relate the Freudian term “Uncanny” with

composition, and to question the compositional “Uncanny” in different works including paintings and collages.

In that respect an analysis of surrealist works can be a good starting point since the concept of uncanny was questioned and put into consideration in different contexts of surrealist practice. Therefore I decided to choose three different artists peripheral to French Surrealism which are Max Ernst, Giorgio De Chirico and Joan Miro. The reason of this selection lies in the fact that the uncanniness of those artists’ works is not limited to the meaning of narrative and symbolic elements of their compositions and that they can represent three different approaches to representation. An analysis of some of the works of those artists will permit us to understand how compositional uncanniness is related to factors other than narrative and symbolic elements, such as to space and its perception. Mainly this study will deal with challenging the traditional account of composition as a source of resolution into unity by departing from an analysis and comparison of different approaches to representation. This analysis will not be limited to the analysis of the relationship between different elements of composition, but will also question the relationship of the observer to what he or she observes.

Before starting with the analysis of these artist’ works, an introduction to the Freudian of the notion of uncanny will be presented in the second chapter. Departing from the paradoxical conclusion of Freud on the two instances of the uncanny, this chapter’s aim will be to try to expand the uncanny as a notion opening up problems of perception and space.

Chapter 3 which aims to analyse Ernst's collage novels in terms of their compositionnal uncanniness, starts by giving an account of their uncanniness in terms of their narrative content and shows that the uncanny lies in the return of the repressed of Bourgeois ideology which takes bourgeois interiors as refuges from industrial world. According to Hal Foster these idealised interiors are haunted in Ernst' collage novels by elements belonging on the one hand to the unconscious of nineteenth century individuals, and on the other hand to the image sphere of industrial world, (images taken from encyclopaedias and scientific magazines) and that of high capitalist bourgeois culture (images taken from romantic novels of nineteenth century bourgeois culture). Before the analysis of the collage novels, a general description of Surrealist collages will be presented in order to introduce how surrealist criticism of high culture is based on a symbolic reworking of images from the nineteenth century.

Following this, as it is impossible to reduce composition to the existence of narrative and symbolic elements, another approach, to the compositionnal uncanniness of Ernst's collage novels will be studied. This approach will question in general the structure of perception of any image. In that respect, Rosalind Krauss' argument concerning Ernst's collages as representing the possibility of an undoing of modernist opticality that is based on the autonomy of the visual and established through a neutralisation of figure/ground distinction, will be assessed. For Krauss, Ernst's collages go outside the hegemonic system of the modernist conception of visuality by evoking the "already-seen" and by pointing to a possibility for another structure of vision, which, far from being autonomous, is shattered by a ceaseless return to the "already-seen" and which is thus opaque, having a dimension of time.

Krauss' notion of the already-seen shows in a way how the intent in narrativity of images can be blocked without however being eliminated.

The last section of this chapter departs from this new structure of vision in order to question the possibility of representation as a movement of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. In that sense, compositional uncanniness can create a space of unsettled discursive and pictorial entities, by a possibility of going beyond a continuity in the perception of images, and this is not simply related with the narrative content but also with the way this narrativity is composed.

Chapter 4 takes another example of compositional uncanny by referring to De Chirico's works. At first, De Chirico's paintings' uncanniness in terms of their symbolic meanings will be analysed. De Chirico's changing style was influenced by a return to figurativeness or neo-classicism that happened during the period between the wars by usage of historical elements. According to Benjamin Buchloh, this return to the abandoned elements of "history" and the assemblage of various fragments of historical recollection is a regressive return of the repressed of modernist ideology as figurative.

Following this, another interpretation of uncanniness, based on the interpretation of symbolic elements, is foregrounded by Hal Foster who analyses the paintings of de Chirico in terms of repetition of elements such as gazing statues and moustached figures, as a re-enactment of traumatic primal scenes.

In order to question how a compositional uncanniness other than that which is simply related with the meanings of symbolic elements can exist, the rest of the chapter 4 will start by considering another aspect of the term uncanny which is characterised by a coexistence of homely and unhomely. In that respect, Elizabeth Wright's argument about the transgressive aspect of the uncanny which will permit a shattering of perception similar to Krauss' argument will be presented. Wright enlarges Krauss' visuality by examining some of René Magritte's paintings as a site of subversion and points to an impossibility of having an image, which can be grasped as a whole. Departing from that a comparison between Magritte's and De Chirico's paintings will be assessed in order to show how in De Chirico the space cannot be grasped and there is a plurality of spaces which puts the viewer into an impossible position so far as narrative unity is concerned.

The fifth chapter is dealing with the compositional uncanniness of some of Miro's paintings by enlarging the notions already discussed in Ernst's and De Chirico's accounts, notions such as shattering of visuality and plurality of spaces. The first part of the chapter opens with an introduction to Miro's works in general, by pointing out that they are characterised by a desire to go beyond painting, not through a passage from painting to collage as many critics argued, but through a transgression of painting by cutting across the distinction between figurative and abstract. Before enlarging this argument, an uncanniness of Miro's paintings will be presented in terms of a Bataillan idea of decomposition and disintegration as a characteristic of modern painting. Briony Fer, departing from this idea, argues that Miro's paintings represent a dissolving of form, which, instead of a clarification obscures the objects in vision through dissolution. This is related to castration and to uncanniness through

the story of “Sandman” where the idea of going blind (which is a substitution for being castrated according to Freud) is the dominant theme. Miro’s paintings’ uncanniness lies for Fer in the re-enactment of castration anxiety on the surface of painting.

As it is done in the previous chapters, the ending of this chapter will be an attempt to find another aspect of Miro’s paintings’ uncanniness, an aspect freed from the oedipal scenario. In that respect compositional uncanniness as a possibility of a movement between Figuration and Abstraction will be assessed through Deleuzian arguments. Firstly, as Deleuze refers to Bacon, some of Bacon’s paintings will be analysed in order to show how he escapes from figuration without going into abstraction. In that respect a Deleuzian account of figurative and abstract painting will be given and the possibilities of going beyond them will be discussed through the idea of “manipulated chance”. Following this, still basing on Deleuze, an account of Bacon’s paintings as creating a passage between haptic and tactile-optical modes of representation will be presented. In that respect, Deleuze’s account of different modes of representation will be given. The last part of this chapter will be based on the similarities that exist between Bacon and Miro. Departing from this similarity the aim of the last section will be to show how the uncanniness of Miro’s paintings lies in a movement between a plurality of zones within the composition which blocks our way of memorising. This will help to question whether Miro’s communication between colour and figure, can create a possibility of a vision which is not haunted by a desire for a picture and the possibility of remembering that which can’t be framed and even that which cannot be composed

## CHAPTER 2

### 2. FREUDIAN UNCANNY AND ITS DELIMITATION

Although Freud was not the first in the investigation of the uncanny, he was the one who effectively questioned the conditions of the emergence of uncanny sensations and the relationship of the uncanny to aesthetics. In his essay on the uncanny, published in 1919, he starts by analysing Jentsch's conception of uncanniness. According to Freud, Jentsch couldn't go beyond a conception of the uncanny as the unfamiliar and that, which creates a certain "Intellectual uncertainty". For Jentsch the most important cause of an uncanny feeling is the uncertainty whether a figure in a story is a human being or automaton and this observation refers to the study of Hoffman's story, "The Sandman". According to Jentsch, the uncanniness of the story lies in the uncertainty of whether one of the main figures of the tale, the doll Olympia is a human being or an automaton. However, for Freud this first explanation for the uncanniness of the tale was incomplete because the 'uncanny' cannot be reduced to the 'unfamiliar' and, most importantly, the feeling of uncanniness is attached to the figure of the Sandman, instead of Olympia.

Freud, departs firstly by analysing the complex definition of the German word *das Unheimliche* translated as uncanny but literally meaning unhomely. In fact, although unhomely is the opposite of what is familiar and homely, the term uncanny for Freud is not simply the one which is unfamiliar and this is due partly to the ambiguity of the term *heimliche* (homely). Basing himself on two nineteenth century dictionaries,

Freud demonstrated that “among its different shades of meaning, the word ‘*heimlich*’ exhibits one, which is identical with its opposite, ‘*unheimlich*’.”(17: 224). On the one hand *heimlich* is related with what is familiar and agreeable and on the other, with what is concealed and kept out of sight, such as the *unheimlich*, since *unheimlich* can also include everything that ought to remain secret and hidden but has come to light. Considering this, Freud argues that *Unheimlich* can be considered as a sub-species of *heimlich* because there is an inevitable inclusion of the unfamiliar into the familiar, or rather the unfolding of the homely into the unhomely. Uncanny isn’t thus something new or foreign but something familiar or old established estranged by the process of repression. But the main problem of Freud in exposing the disturbing affiliations between the two words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, and by constituting the one as a direct outgrowth of the other, was to offer a principle that will permit him to go beyond the simple “Intellectual Uncertainty” posited by Jentsch and to make uncanny understandable by means of the concept of repression.

To show this Freud bases himself on the story of “The Sandman” and finds that the feeling of uncanniness is directly related to the figure of the Sandman. This figure is a highly ambiguous figure, which reappears in certain instances of the story. Firstly it is the dreadful character that comes to children when they won’t go bed, in order to throw sand in their eyes so that they will jump out from their sockets and he will collect them to feed his children. The story of the Sandman is told to the main character of the story (Nathaniel) by his mother in order to send him to bed. However for Nathaniel Sandman was an enigma because he cannot be sure whether Sandman is a turn of phrase or a real personage. Moreover, each time that his mother tells this story, Nathaniel hears some footsteps coming from the corridor and

believed that they were those of the Sandman. One night, in order to fix Sandman's identity and to turn this acoustical encounter into a visual one, he decides to hide himself in the study room of his father in order to discover whom the Sandman really is which is to know what he looks like. He realises that Sandman is the lawyer Coppelius, his father's friend who comes each night to dinner. Some years later, his father dies in an explosion that occurred in his study room when he was again with the lawyer Coppelius and who disappears after the accident. But he reappears under another name, the Italian optician, Guiseppe Coppola. For Freud then, the doll Olympia who appears later on in the story and with whom Nathaniel falls in love, is not the only reason for the uncanniness of the story. The uncanniness is also related to the fear of losing one's eyes because Hoffman brings this anxiety about eyes into an intimate connection with the father's death. Moreover, later on, Sandman appears also as a disturber of love, under the name of Coppola, who separates Nathaniel from his love object, Olympia, by destroying the doll. For Freud, if we replace the Sandman with the dreaded father at whose hands castration is expected, we can understand that the figure of Sandman suits this image well. On the one hand he has the power of taking one's eyes out, and losing eyes is according to Freud a substitute for being castrated because there is a substitutive relationship between the eye and the male organ which exists in dreams, myths and fantasies. On the other hand Sandman appears as a destroyer of love, as the image of the father is the destroyer of the child's love towards his mother.

According to Freud one reason for the uncanniness of this story lies in a return of repressed castration anxiety, which is made strange by repression. But Freud was also aware that the feeling of uncanniness was a feeling which arises in different

situations and not everything that is uncanny fulfils this condition of undergoing repression and returning from it. For Freud these other instances of the uncanny occur when we find ourselves in inexplicable situations such as the mysterious repetition of similar experiences in particular place or date, coincidences and instances of wish fulfilment. In these cases it is as if we are reminded that something in our lives seems to confirm some surmounted modes of thoughts, such as the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts, or in secret injurious powers. In these instances of the uncanny there's not exactly a repression which returns in another form but rather a confirmation of surmounted beliefs. The reality we believed is turned upside down and we lose our confidence about our beliefs. Freud says that here is a "conflict of judgement as to whether things which have been surmounted, and are regarded as incredible may not after all be possible." (19: 250) The difference between these different instances of uncanniness lies in the fact, in the first case, the uncanny comes from the infantile complexes and what is involved is a repression of some content of thought with still a belief in the reality of such a content. In the second case there is more a questioning of a situation, of a content, which was believed to be real but has deceived us. Freud is not sure whether these two categories can converge if we include the notion of surmounting in the term repression. He argues in the case of the repression of infantile anxieties that what is repressed is a ideational content while in the other case of surmounting the animistic beliefs, there is a repression of a belief in the reality of a content. Although towards the end of his essay Freud separates these two categories of the uncanny, he concludes in a paradoxical way that these two classes of the uncanny experience are not always sharply distinguishable. This paradoxical conclusion can lead us to argue that the origins of an uncanny experience cannot be fixed and most importantly the experience of uncanniness can differ from

one person to another and we cannot categorise elements which may create uncanny feelings. Freud also argues that the uncanny is often produced when the distinction between fantasy and reality is blurred, when something we regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality or symbols take over the full functions of the thing they symbolise. I think by this argument he opens up the possibility that uncanniness can point to an impossibility of representation. This transgressive aspect of the uncanny is already mentioned in fact in Samuel Weber's re-reading of Freud's text "The Uncanny".

Weber departs from a reanalysis of the castration anxiety and shows that castration anxiety is an anxiety born from the very fact that it is never fully graspable. He believes that there is an impossibility of castration being a visible theme, since it is based on a negative vision of the sexual difference. The relationship that exists between castration anxiety and uncanny is a relationship based on an impossibility of desire reaching its object and having a determinate representation, and a dislocation of an object of perception. In other words castration anxiety is related with an impossibility of having a representation of itself. In that sense the uncanny becomes inseparable from questions of perspective, of positioning and of the relationship of the spectator to the observed thing and which causes a blurring of the predefined positions of the observer and the observed. Weber argues that the uncanniness is "that which affects and infects representations, motifs, themes and situations which...mean something other than what they are and in a manner which draws their own being and substance into the vortex of signification." (2000, 234). It is through an enactment of a temporality that is discontinuous and suspended between "coup" and shocks of recognition as misrecognition, that the uncanny takes place. This

discontinuity isn't different from a discontinuity that exist within the subject who is split in his identity of being observer and the observed but also who is disturbed again by the failure of his desire to have a closed, self contained one perspective perception. Departing from this, we can perhaps claim that although the origins of an uncanny experience cannot be fixed, the uncanny can be the name of a relation that exist in between the object and the subject that perceives it. The main concern of this thesis will be to analyse this relationship by means of an attempt at showing how an experience of uncanny can be related to the relation that exists between the space of composition and the perception of this space. An analysis of compositional uncanniness of art works will take the uncanny as a possibility that challenges our conception of space as a "a passive, fixed arena in which 'stuff' takes place"(1996, 169). Such a consideration of uncanny can in fact outline the struggle for coherence as much as the points where that coherence breaks.

## CHAPTER 3

### **3. ERNST'S COLLAGE NOVELS AND OVERPAINTINGS: FROM UNCANNINESS AS A RETURN OF THE REPRESSED OF BOURGEOIS IDEOLOGY TO COMPOSITIONAL UNCANNINESS LEADING TO A SHATTERED OPTICALITY.**

#### **3.1. SURREALIST COLLAGES AND UNCANNINESS AS A RETURN OF THE REPRESSED OF BOURGEOIS IDEOLOGY.**

Hal Foster takes surrealism as a related set of practices, which develops its own ambiguous conceptions of aesthetic, politics, and history through difficult involvements in desire and sexuality, the unconscious and the drives. In that sense, it is more a “theoretical object productive of its own critical concepts.” (28, 1993)

This complicated heterogeneity of Surrealism makes it a paradoxical movement. On the one hand, from a Bretonian point of view, it is a movement desiring a certain point where life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable cease to be perceived as contradictions. But on the other hand, even they work to find this point, they don't want to be pierced by it and according to Foster, the real and the imagined, the past and the future can only come together in the experience of the uncanny.

Breton once remarked that surrealist collages are “slits in time” that produce “illusions of true recognition” “where formal lives, actual lives, future lives melt together into one life” (foreword to La Femme 100 têtes) (1993, 168). This Bretonian definition of the surrealist image as a dialectical image, an image in which the past and the present flash into a reconciliation, shows according to Hal Foster, that surrealism was concerned to work through historical trauma by usage of dialectical juxtapositions of past and present.

After Breton, Walter Benjamin conceived surrealism as being the comedic death of nineteenth century, in the sense that it breaks with nineteenth century’s dominant values concerning art, politics, subjectivity and sexuality through a symbolic working of its image sphere “of broken political promises, suppressed social movements and frustrated utopian desires.”(1993, 168) It was indeed familiar to see in surrealism repeated images of nineteenth century and a reworking of them as “ciphers of repressed moments”(1993, 168). Hal Foster in his book Compulsive Beauty focuses on the surrealist usage of those outmoded images as an attempt to work through historical repressions. Positing a connection between the psychic and the historical, Foster’s aim was to show how the surrealist outmoded, which is a term including both, archaic, old and *demodé*, and represented by artisanal relics, old images within bourgeois culture and outdated fashions, “posed the cultural detritus of past moments residual in capitalism, against the socioeconomic complacency of its present moment”(1993, 159).

Surrealism, for Foster, exploits first of all the effects of capitalism, through objects rendered outmoded by industrialisation and *dépaysé* in imperialization, such as

artisanal and tribal objects. But on the other hand, surrealism invokes outmoded forms in order to point out the persistence of old cultural forms in productive modes and social formations. Basing himself on Aragon and Benjamin Péret, Foster shows how the surrealist vision of history was based on a conception of history “that ruins in order to recover an active return of the repressed.” (1993, 166). In a way, Foster wants to show that surrealists do not cling obsessively to the nineteenth century but rather uncover the relics of the past, “the residues of a dream world” (Péret quoted in Foster, 1993, 163) in order to criticise high capitalist culture. Péret believes that this recourse to the past that is both social and psychic is a consequence of an utopian desire for the classless; but it may also signify a social withdrawal, even a psychic regression. But what is important here is Foster’s insistence that the uncanny return of the past states may occur in a social register and Ernst’s three collage novels, La Femme 100 Têtes(1929), Reve d’une petite Fille qui voulut entrer au carmel (1930) and Une Semaine de Bonté (1934), are, according to Foster, good examples of surrealist works recovering repressed historical and psychic materials.

Ernst’s interest in collages was related to a desire of exploration of the possibilities of representation outside the limitations of cubist formalism. His concerns were not with abstract forms but with the strange juxtapositions of ready made images that provoked in him “a sudden intensification of the visionary faculties and brought forth an illusive succession of contradictory images...piling up on each other with the persistence and rapidity which are peculiar to love memories and visions of half sleep”(1993, 7). Although the idea of collage (be it in the form of collage paintings or real collages) was dominant in most of works, his mastery of collage was put to its most effective use in 1930s, in one of his famous discoveries, the collage novel.

### **3.2 ERNST'S COLLAGE NOVELS AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED OF BOURGEOIS IDEOLOGY.**

The characteristic of Ernst's collage novels is that, they are produced from images of melodramatic novels (Une Semaine de Bonté for example was based on Jules Marey's illustrations for Les Damnées de Paris, a 1883 novel of murder), salon paintings, old goods catalogues, (Catalogue de Grand Magasin du Louvre, Magasins de Nouveautés etc) scientific magazines and encyclopedias. They have thus h an outmoded, archaic style as they configure these spaces of laboratories, pampas, pool halls, train cars and bourgeois interiors.

There can be different levels of meanings to those collages. First of all, according to Foster, the fact that those images are taken from old sources of nineteenth century, and thus being once familiar representations (belonging to the childhood of the artist himself) made strange and dislocated by collage, creates their uncanny effect. But what is more in these collages and especially in Une semaine de Bonté is a "melodramatic" return of the repressed in the becoming-monstrous of the figures in the Victorian interiors such as in figures (1-8). Also, in these interiors, there is a suggestion according to Foster of traumatic primal scenes and castration fantasies

Foster says in fact: "Implicitly, this not only restages these particular scenes in the formation of sexuality and the unconscious, but also returns the Freudian discovery of these forces to its general historical setting: the late Victorian interior"(1993,176). This relationship between the outmoded and the repressed indicates according to



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

Ernst, Max. Une Semaine de Bonté, 1934



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

Ernst, Max. Une Semaine de Bonté, 1934

Foster that the collage novels of Ernst show the historical preconditions of the becoming unconscious of subjectivity.

Another aspect of those collages is that the return of the repressed is not only registered in the becoming monstrous of the figures but also in “becoming-hysterical of the interiors” (1993, 177). According to Foster Une Semaine de Bonté includes images of hysterical women. Although Foster doesn’t illustrate his account by specific examples, I think that in Figures 9 and 10 there is perhaps an evocation of paralysed women bodies and in Figures 11 and 12 there are women having uncontrollable and excessive emotional reactions. Also, there is some evocation of “perverse desires”, such as sadomasochism, and sodomy most often in the spaces of representation, such as Figures (13-16) but also in the paintings and mirrors within the representation. (Fig. 5 and 12)

The last point of Foster concerning these collage novels concerns their criticism of the idea of bourgeois interiors. Basing on Sigfried Giedon’s arguments, for whom the collage novels reveal that the bourgeois interiors had failed as a refuge from the industrial world, Foster argues that the fact that many of Ernst images derives from old catalogues of goods and fashions, turns the novels into kitsch, underlining than a certain devaluation of symbols by the industrial production. Giedon argued in fact in his book Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History that: “These pages of Max Ernst show how a mechanised environment has affected our subconscious.”(1975, 362). In a way, bourgeois interiors conceived as ideological interiors as refuges from industrial world repress in fact both the industrial aspect of the work world and the antagonistic aspect of the public realm.

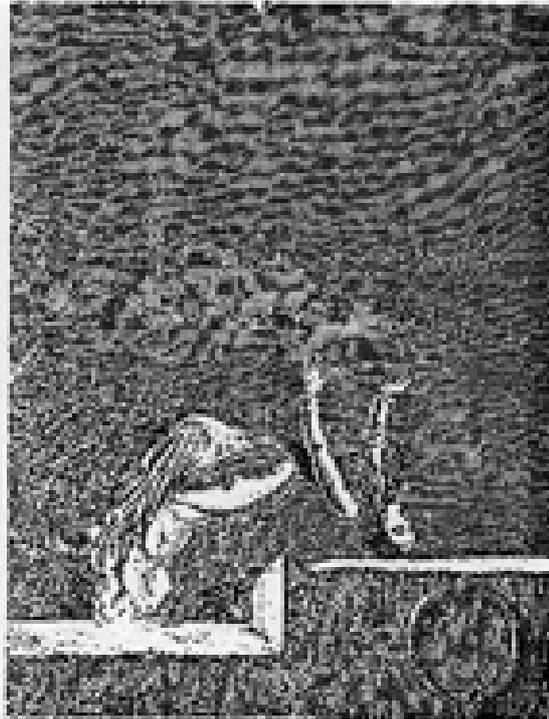


Figure 9.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.



Figure 12.

Ernst, Max. Une Semaine de Bonté, 1934



Figure 13. *Woman in Mourning*



Figure 14.



Figure 15. *Woman in Mourning*



Figure 16.

Ernst, Max. *Une Semaine de Bonté*, 1934



Figure 17 (Continuation of Morning twilight and night games)



Figure 18 (Continuation)



Figure 19 (Continuation)



Figure 20 ( Festival hung like a bracelet around the branches)

Ernst, Max. La Femme 100 Têtes. 1929.

This repression, according to Foster, returns in displaced fantastic forms and monstrous figures.

Until now we saw that the uncanniness of Ernst collage novels lies in the connection between the outmoded and the repressed. Or rather in the exploration of the return of the past states in a social register. The uncanny here is conceived as the damaged return of the repressed of bourgeois ideology, in the form of the representation of the haunted bourgeois interiors by dislocated objects of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. I want now to explore another uncanniness born perhaps from a return of another ideology. An ideology of vision repressed under the illusion of non-illusionistic surface, but which nonetheless cannot escape returning in the form of a visuality or rather a vision, which is not transparent and is instead structured by “a ceaseless return of the “already-seen”.

I want to show now, by mostly basing myself on Rosalind Krauss’s Optical Unconscious, how the uncanniness of Ernst collages and overpaintings come from a return of a repressed visuality, having a dimension of opacity, of repetition and of time. Krauss’s argument will be helpful to an opening up of the uncanny, beyond a relation between the psychic and the social, and show how a different account of Ernst’s collages can lead us to a possibility of a compositional uncanny, which will bring a new dimension to the structure of perception.

### **3.3 TOWARDS ANOTHER PATH: ERNST' UNCANNINESS AS THE UNDOING OF MODERNIST OPTICALITY**

As an attempt of discovering another figure of modernist logic, to foreground the hidden or unconscious part of modernist opticality, Rosalind Krauss in her book entitled The optical unconscious rejects the traditional account of modernist opticality where there is a sense of self-enclosure and a desire to reach a visual plenitude. Her account of modernism can be considered as an attempt at undoing modernist logic from within.

To illustrate how the “standard bearers” of modernism understand and reflect modernist logic, she starts by giving the example of John Ruskin who sees the process of abstraction as a travel through countries. In fact travelling through different countries causes a mode of “contemplative abstraction from the world” where “one’s ear for all sound of voices becomes impartial, one is not diverted by the meaning of syllables from the recognising the absolute guttural, liquid, or honeyed quality of them: while the gesture of the body and the expression of the face have the same value for you that they have in a pantomime, every scene becomes a melodious opera to you.”(1995, 5). From this metaphor we can say that for each sense (eye, ear, touch) there’s a mode of expression, an image, and each image is independent, free-standing and this can show why Ruskin glories so much this “contemplative abstraction from the world” because it establishes an autonomous field of the visual.

Krauss argues that for Ruskin and for others such as Michael Fried and Frank Stella for example, there is a possibility of an abstracted and heightened visuality in a fast encounter of the object seen and the subject that sees it, where neither one seemed to be attached to its merely carnal support, and vision becomes a kind of abstract condition with no before and no after, where reigns pure presentness. According to Greenberg, as Krauss quotes him, in the field of the painting, this meant uncovering and displaying the conditions of vision itself in an abstract way: “The Heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or trompe-l’oeil but it does and must permit optical illusion.” (Greenberg quoted in Krauss, 1995, 7). For him thus, the marks made on a surface of the canvas should firstly destroy the three-dimensional or as he calls, “sculptural” illusion, and then destroy the virtual flatness of the surface. The mark made on the canvas will become then the source of strictly optical third dimension. From this, it is possible to see modernist logic as a logic creating a universe of visual perception, where the figure/ground distinction, the condition of a possibility of vision for the Gestalt psychologists, includes in itself also the conversion of this possibility, which is stated by Krauss as not figure/not ground.

It is hard to illustrate this new relationship to the extent that none of the cited examples will provide a perfect illustration of that logic, but Krauss gives the example of “The frame-within-frame” structure of Stella’s paintings (Fig. 21.) where the figure is simultaneously present and absent (or negated) in the field, since “it is inside the space only as an image of its outside, its limits, its frame.” (1995, 16) and this structure seems to trace the topology of self-containment and complete self-enclosure because the thing in the field (of vision) is already contained by the field,

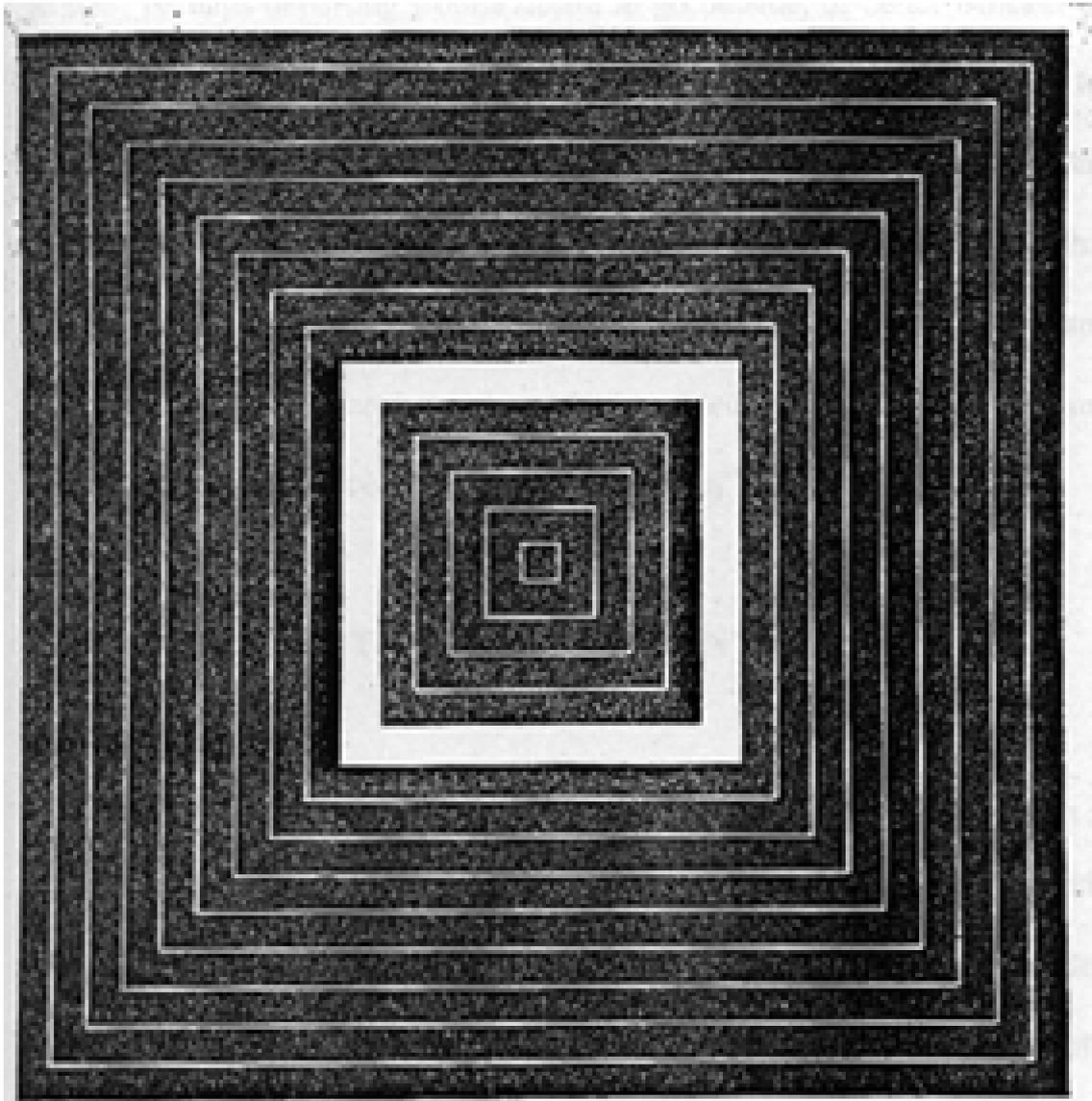


Figure 21. Stella, Frank. Louisiana Lottery Company, 1962

as if forecast by its limits. But, is this seemingly neutralising process which is believed to lead to a kind of self reflexive form, seeing and being conscious of seeing at the same time, not hiding or repressing its content as ideology? An ideology of vision itself?

Krauss, perhaps departing from a desire to go outside, or better beneath this closed and hegemonic system of modernist conception of visuality, wants to foreground what the modernist ideology repressed by basing her argument on the concepts like uncanny, *bassesse* (baseness), informe, concepts which arguably found shape in the works of some artists of 1920s and '30s, such as Giacometti, Ernst, Man Ray and Bellmer. But let us see how she refers to Freudian concept of uncanny and its relationship with an account of the "already- seen" in Ernst collages.

### **3.4 UNCANNY AND THE "ALREADY-SEEN"**

Rosalind Krauss quoting Walter Benjamin, refers to Ernst collage novels, especially La femme 100 tetes, (Figures 17-20) but also one of his famous overpaintings The Master's Bedroom (Fig. 22) as the coexistence of outmoded and archaic depiction of objects which "had broken with its normal environment, and its component parts had 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" (Benjamin quoted in Krauss, 1995, 42).

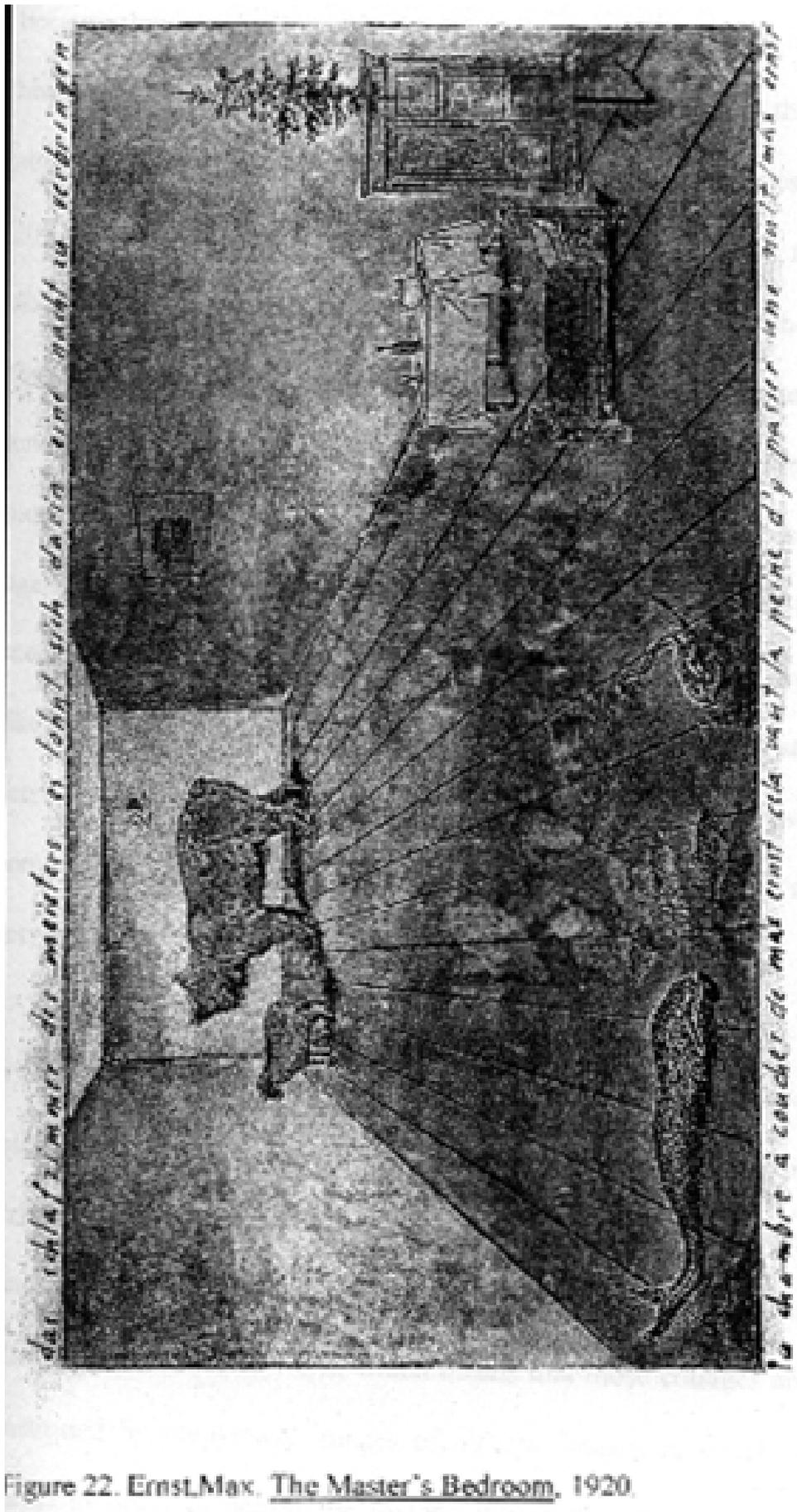


Figure 22. Ernst Max. The Master's Bedroom, 1920.

Starting with La Femme 100 tetes and quoting Adorno, she argues that those collages are working against the abstracted, flattened uniformity of a technologized world, because they are dealing not with the history of the privatised individual but with the history of the modernity itself, a history working against the modernist grain of abstracted and rationalised vision. Adorno noticed in fact that especially in La femme 100 Tetes (Figures 17-20) there is a recurrence of mostly female bodies nearly always nude, floating within the otherwise quotidian space, and always whiter than the scene. Those figures seem to be visible only to the viewer and not noticed by the actors of the scenes. In that sense, they seem more to be at the front of the scenes, close to the eyes of the viewer. But on the other hand, since these part objects appear again in other scenes, they give the impression of being the “thread on which the scenes themselves are strung” (1995, 36). This is at that point that they become more like backgrounds on which other things (scenes and subjects) are supported. In that sense we see perhaps an anxiety in those novels, if we observe their images as a completed sequence. An anxiety has born from a conflict (and not a neutralisation) between the background and the foreground.

In fact, if we analyse closely, we can see that Ernst collages compared to classical collage techniques, such as some of Picasso’s cubist collages, present a difference. That difference is that, in cubist collages there is an additive process: pasting of some incongruous materials on a paper, or blank surface while Ernst’s materials are following a subtractive work, which means that those collages are built on grounds constituted by readymade images of objects, images in which some parts can be deleted in order to permit the juxtaposition with other grounds, of other cut and pasted materials. Considering this, Ernst collages are creating a visual field that isn’t

a latency but a field that is already filled, already readymade, and thus creating a difference with the starting point, the made canvas or white sheet of the artist, which although structured by being framed, it is nonetheless empty, waiting to be filled as with a field of projection. Krauss argues that those collages are anticipating a possible visuality which can be seen as an alternative to both traditional perspective (which is ruled according to a hierarchy of vision) and its so called modernist abstraction (aiming at a neutralisation of visual process and a transparency of vision.).

This is perhaps illustrated in The Master's bedroom. This work, done in 1920, can be perhaps considered as a predecessor of Ernst collage Novels. Like them, the start is with something already occupied, (already seen) such as the pages or catalogues of elementary and highschool-teaching aids (Fig. 23). However the difference of this work compared to other collages lies in his technique of production. Ernst, here, had blanked out various elements of the original sheet (some animals of the high-school teaching aid) by covering them with ink or gouache, and constructed a new space onto it with new elements, such as the furniture pieces. The result is not like bizarre hybrid objects of Ernst other collages, but rather a juxtaposition of elements, which seem oblivious to the demands of this latter space. In fact, the animals seem not to obey to the perspective since distant animals are not smaller than near ones. Krauss mentions that in traditional perspective, vanishing point and viewing point, horizon line and canvas surface mirrors one another in a complex reversibility because they represent two potentialities, on the one hand the horizon that vision probes and on the other the welling up of the gaze. What is happening in this work is thus something

neither figure against ground nor its modernist “sublimation”, which is the



Figure 23. A German Highschool Teaching Aid

neutralisation of that process to reach an ideological zero- degree of vision where there would be an abolition of an hierarchical vision. Rather the experience of the gaze is saturated from the very start, leading it to a kind of layered experience. There is then, a coexistence of two fields of visions (the field of the bedroom with all of its objects and that of the teaching aid with full of species of animals, seeming not to be aware of the other one's optical space), which are seeming unified within the work, and by only seeming unified, they tend to create a certain uncanniness caused by the potential return or 'reminiscence' of their original space. Due to the juxtaposition in row of the elements depicted here, to the fact that the depicted animals seem not to be obedient to the law of perspective (which would require the distant animals to be smaller than the near ones) and most importantly, due to the reappearance of the flattened grid of the supporting sheet, through the gouache skin, we see that what is projected here is a visual field that is not a latency, "an ever renewed upsurge of the pure potentiality of the external" (1995, 54) but rather a field that is already "readymade". In a way, this work generates a scene that disturbs the conception of space and foregrounds the structure of vision working by a periodic return to the already-seen.

### **3.5 ERNST COMPOSITIONAL UNCANNINESS: TOWARDS A NEW DEFINITION OF THE STRUCTURE OF VISION.**

In order to explain more clearly this visual model, Krauss refers to Freud's model representing the functioning of psychic apparatus and memory which is the writing pad (Wunderblock). In his essay " Note on the mystic writing pad", Freud passes

from a neurological model of memory to a more mechanical model, by making a certain analogy between a writing apparatus and a perceptual apparatus.

Freud says in fact, as Krauss argues, that in the writing pad “there’s a flickering up and passing away of consciousness in the process of perception”(Freud quoted in Krauss, 1995, 57) creating a connection and disconnection with and within the perceptual field. He gives the example of that device, to illustrate a possible layering of experience that is happening during perception. The top sheet of the Wunderblock is like the part of the mental apparatus that receives the stimuli from outside in the form of impressions. These impressions are not however permanent within this layer of the system, because the sheet holds the visible marks only if it is in contact with the underlying slab of wax. Once the two surfaces are detached from each other, the marks become no longer available to be seen, without however, having totally disappeared and they are retained by the waxen support. If we think this system as a metaphor for a perception system, we can say that there is a possibility of flow of perceptions, which doesn’t necessarily lead to a fluidity of perceptions. In a way our perceptual system is composed of a permanent network of traces within our unconscious memory but their coming onto the surface isn’t controllable and there is a possibility of a shock caused by the unexpectedly returning elements which leads us to a certain uncanniness that occurs when there is a reversibility between the new stimuli and impressions we get and the old impressions existing as old traces in our unconscious.

Krauss argues then, by referring to Ernst’s The Master’s Bedroom, that the usage of readymade works like the writing pad’s waxen slap, containing the stored up

contents of the unconscious memory, while the top layer (the gouache overpainting on it) is like the new marks (new stimuli) made on the writing pad, on the top of that disappeared but not forever erased and thus having the potentiality of reappearing figures, of the readymade teaching sheet. She adds that Ernst's figures out the gap and the possible detachment/ reattachment of the receptor surface (our eyes) from the ground (the objects we see) and thus creating an uncanny combination of the two, by creating an impression of an "already there" that has the potentiality of returning. In fact we can consider that, in this overpainting, the superimposed spaces are existing in a way as phantom spaces. The space where the animals are originally taken from is still there, although not entirely visible. The reminiscence of the original space of animals is perhaps apparent in the interference of the tree on the right with the furniture. This strange overlapping is like the overlapping of two different spaces. The same effect can also be visible in Ernst collage novels although the technique of production is a little different. Let's take some examples from La Femme 100 Têtes. In Figure 17, the woman is at first sight having right proportions compared to other figures and she seems to belong to the observed space but strangely her position is as if she was sitting on something (it can be a chair or sofa) and the positions of her hands and her foot gives us the impression that there is another space to which she belongs, another material she is touching or putting his foot on, than the space that is visible to us. Moreover, as Adorno pointed out earlier, the other figures of the space, two men and the kneeling child, seem unaware of the presence of the woman, which makes the figure of the woman come to the foreground. We want to believe that the woman is part of the space she seems to occupy, but in fact we realise that she isn't occupying that space but another one that we can't see directly and in totality. So although at first sight we believed that we recognise the space where the woman

seems to stand in and can control it, we realise that we misrecognised her position because she seems not belong to the space she is in. Krauss refers to that figure which appears in other forms, sometimes nude, sometimes draped, as an apparition “that both occupies a part of the space and blocks its backward recession” (1993, 81).

However, Krauss seems to insist on the production of a sense of perceptual periodicity in order perhaps to secure her negation of modernist vision’s intentionality, and to foreground the possibility of a vision which cannot be controlled. She seems to find the embodiment of her argument by means of the collage novels and overpaintings of Ernst, but in her account of the uncanniness of Ernst collages, she also seems to have a restricted account of uncanny. Her referring to Freud’s model for the perception seems to provide a challenge to perception, by providing us with a possibility of vision haunted by a shattering act of the return of the repressed, and I think that it opens up a theory of representation and perhaps perception as a constant flux, constant process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction as Elizabeth Wright also argues. (1990, 26) Perhaps what Krauss was arguing, was also an attempt of showing the same aspect of perceptual process against the conceived staticity, self-enclosure and hegemony of a modernist ideology of vision. But she is perhaps not developing her argument in detail. When she argues that the usage of readymade and found images in Ernst collages can invoke some “already-seen”, leading way to a feeling of uncanniness, she wants to escape from a field influenced by the notion of zero-degree of vision. But is she really escaping from an ideological conception of purity of vision? We can ask this question: “While arguing for the “already-seen”, are we not also a creating a field where any image

can be a possible image of the already-seen and thus we reach to a point where image becomes an impossibility, in the sense that it becomes ungraspable?

Elizabeth Wright refers at the end of her text entitled “The Uncanny and Surrealism”, which will be discussed in the next chapter, to Lyotard’s conception of the uncanny, and argues that he describes the field from which the uncanny emerges “as the ‘unpresentable’ meaning that something is happening which defies representation.” I think what is important here is the fact that compositionnal uncanny is a condition for a creation of a transgressive space, exploring categories that question or collapse boundaries, as is also happening in Ernst collages, which in a way unsettles discursive and pictorial entities. Perhaps that was an attempt also, of De Chirico who, despite of being criticised for his return to figurative style in 1920’s, was nevertheless creating a style which will perhaps become more than a justification of the failure of modernism.

The next chapter will analyse some of De Chirico’s paintings, in terms of compositional uncanny born from a representation of a space, which perhaps transgresses the “Normality of vision” and which creates a plurality of spaces.

## CHAPTER 4

### 4. DE CHIRICO'S PAINTINGS: FROM THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED AS FIGURATIVE TO A COMPOSITIONAL UNCANNINESS AS A MOVEMENT BETWEEN INTERPRETATIONS AND PLURALITY OF SPACES.

#### 4.1 RETURN OF THE REPRESSED AS FIGURATIVE?

Became famous in the surrealist sphere but rejected after 1919, the Italian painter Giorgio De Chirico has an enigmatic style. His is mostly known by his “metaphysical painting” which, according to Pere Gimferrer, was as radical a renovation as cubism, anticipating the later paintings of the surrealists. The characteristic of “metaphysical painting” is according to Gimferrer the absence of the animate human figure (though it may appear asleep or motionless in the distance) which is replaced by the tailor’s dummy, and by the association of unexpected objects in a dreamlike scene that is painted with topographic and perspective details, which can however be as illusory and unreal as the scenes depicted. (Figures 24, 25, 26) It can even be claimed that Ernst’s combination of unrelated objects in his collages can be considered as being influenced by De Chirico. Especially, in his painting Celebes ( Fig. 27) we can see how he combined his collage preoccupations with devices derived from de Chirico such as the headless, plaster-like female figure,

and the construction on the top of the elephant. But what makes De Chirico's work

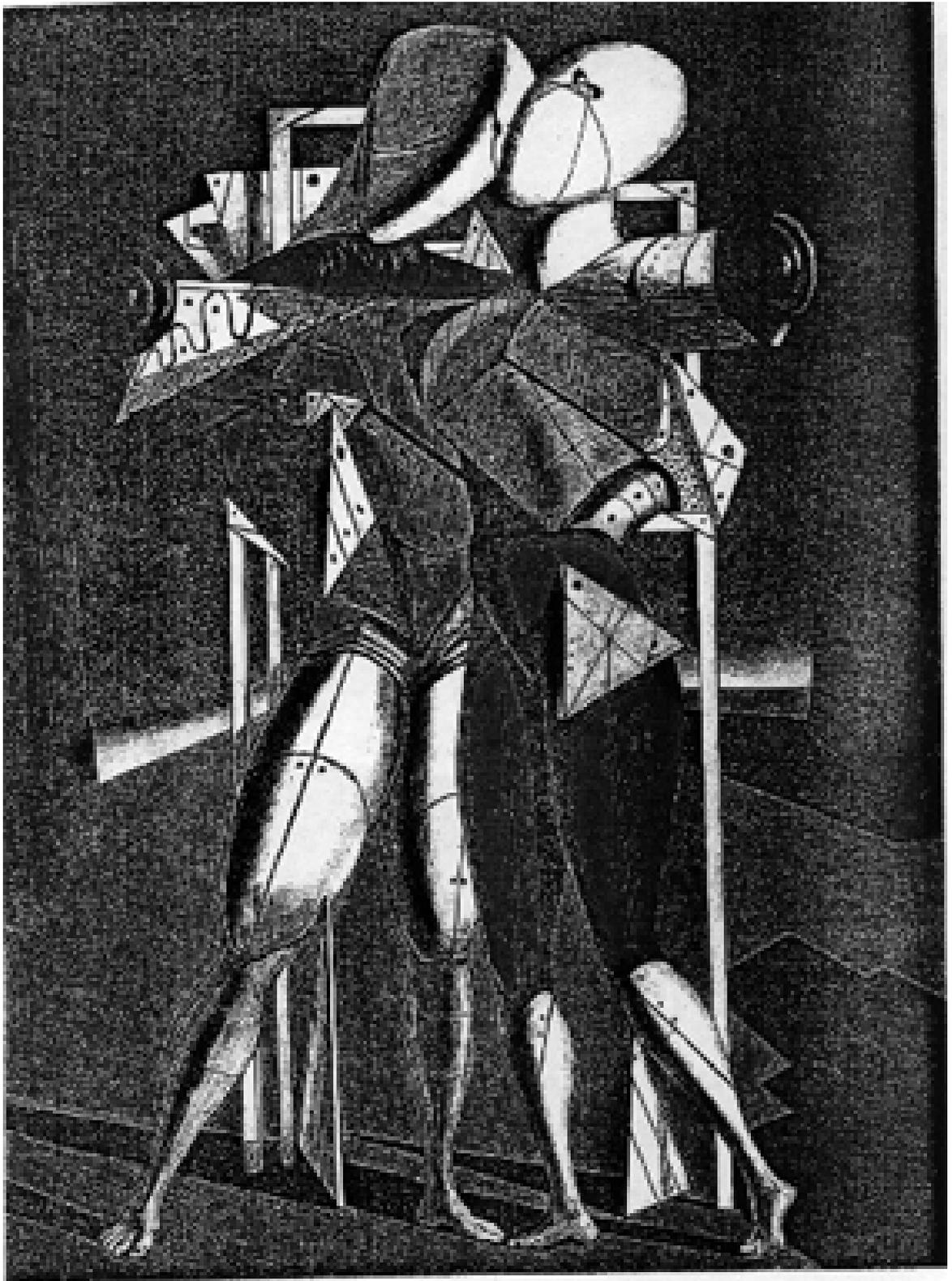


Figure 24. De Chirico, Giorgio. Hector and Andromache, 1946.  
Oil on Canvas. (82x60 cm). In Private Collection, Rome.



Figure 25. De Chirico, Giorgio. Love Song. 1914.  
Oil on Canvas (125x99 cm) Art Institute, Chicago.  
Joseph Winter Botham Collection.

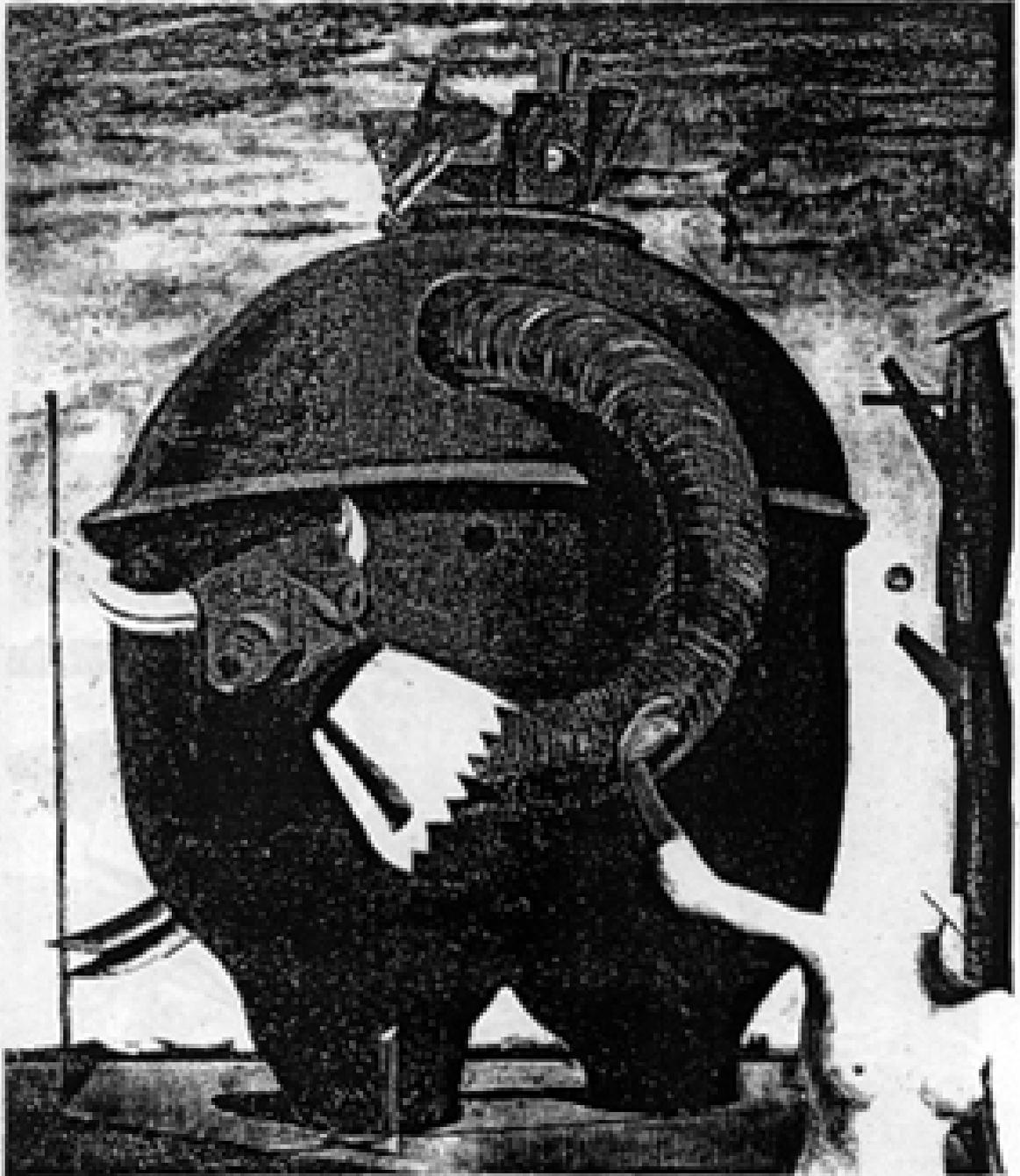


Figure 27. Ernts, Max. Celebs, 1921.

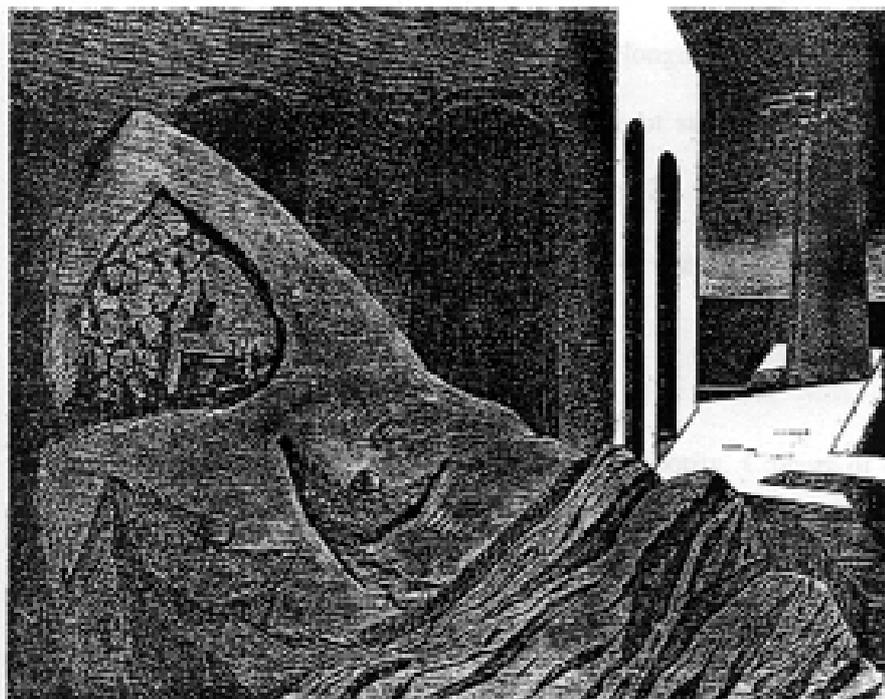


Figure 28. De Chirico, Giorgio. Silent Statue, 1913.  
Oil on Canvas. (99,5x125,5 cm). Kunstammlung, Dusseldorf.



Figure 29. De Chirico, Giorgio. The Poet's Uncertainty, 1913.  
Oil on Canvas. (104x92 cm). Tate Gallery, London.

different is also his combination of elements belonging to history such as nude sculptures, or busts in antique style, in the middle of strange and even threatening perspectives of Italian settings with arcades (Fig. 28, 29). This picking up of classical elements and return to figurativeness was highly criticised by Benjamin Buchloh.

In Benjamin Buchloh's text entitled "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the return of Representation in European Painting" De Chirico's work is referred to as the "Return of the repressed in cultural costume", with a paradoxical reality, which goes beyond an attempt at the resolution of the modernist dilemma of aesthetic "self-negation", "particularisation" and "restriction to detail". In fact, in 1920 De Chirico wrote an essay called "Return to Craft" as an attempt at showing and affirming his desire for returning to classical figurative painting, which he saw as a saviour from the failure of modernism which was for him nothing else than an unprogressive effort of seeming original, leading only to the proliferation of "multifarious fancywork"( De Chirico,1992, 235). And he is not the only one in this return to classical style or so called Neo-classicism started around 1915, which includes also well known cubists and futurists such as Picasso, Carra, Severini.

Benjamin Buchloh criticises this return and its consequences, by pointing out to a continuity that exists between a return to figurative style that happened during the period between the wars and the postmodern historical eclecticism, started around 1960. For him both of those movements represent regression rather than an innovation. He believes that cubists' and futurists' return to historical style is a sign

of their vision of modernism as a cultural weakness, and their desire to create a myth of Neoclassicism, is a desire for authority and for the idealisation of painter's craft and the notion of the master, which is emphasised also by a return to an expressive style against, for example, the constructivist wish to abolish the production mode of the individual master in favour of collective and utilitarian practice, free from an idea of painting as a sexual metaphor . Buchloh says that Neo-classicism is a form of authoritarian alienation from modernism. He notices that in all of these so called neo-classical works there are figures belonging to the iconography of Italian theatre such as Pierrots, Bajazzos, Pulcinelles, mannequins, wooden puppets, all working as "ciphers of an enforced regression" (1998, 118). He adds that those figures, which can also be considered as clowns, work as the representation of the artist himself, who, going between the alienating extremes of self-criticism and self-pity, come to see himself as "powerless and entertaining figure performing his acts of subversion and mockery from an undialectical fixation on utopian thought." (1998, 118)

He also argues that there is the transformation of the subversive function of aesthetic production to a regressive return to the abandoned elements of "history" and this discovery of history as a treasure, the assemblage of the various fragments of historical recollection, is a belief of those artists in the fact that these images of the past will provide for the needs of the present. As opposed to the modernist collage in which there is a heterogeneous coexistence of different materials leading to contradictions, the combinations of different historical images pursues according to Buchloh an opposite aim, that of a unity and totality by a reference to an Italian identity through the usage of elements belonging to Italian iconography.

Hal Foster, in his account of the uncanniness of De Chirician paintings (from his book entitled Compulsive Beauty), mentions how the repetition of those elements can be the sign of the re-enactment of the traumatic primal scenes. He says that the presence of gazing statues or moustached figures such as in Child's Brain (Fig. 32) implies a gaze of the father. Also he points out to the existence of paranoid perspectives (Fig. 33, 34) where viewing points and vanishing points, are decentred, rational perspective is deranged and where the seer is pushed into a space where there is a paranoid return of the gaze, a paranoid gaze identified with the gaze of the threatening father image. In general then, for Foster, the uncanniness of De Chirico is related to two sets of thematic registers: on the one hand, there is the thematic register of a welcomed seduction of the parental figures, apparent in the repetition of the theme "the return of the prodigal", in terms of moustached figures and statues, representing the artist's father; and sightless and armless mannequins (both being submissive or resistant to parental figures), representing the artist himself. On the other hand, there is an enigmatic register of a traumatic seduction, whose signs are in the gaze of the objects, corruptions of spaces, repeated symbols and shapes. But again the uncanny seems to be bound with what is a repressed and infantile anxiety.

There may however be another aspect of the uncanny in De Chirico, something other than a return of the repressed related with the symbolic elements within his paintings. De Chirico is criticised by Buchloh for his picking up of elements from history because of a desire to secure his national identity. And Buchloh considered this attempt as a regressive return to the past. If we consider uncanniness in a new perspective, and think it as not only a regressive return of the repressed but rather as "what defies the normality of seeing"(1990, 277) we can perhaps find another kind

of uncanniness born from an ambiguity of interpretations. Perhaps uncanny is that which conceals its own construction and unmask its deceit and thus removes itself from the category of the return of the repressed as a coexistence of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. And perhaps the uncanniness of De Chirico lies in a coexistence of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* in the composition itself in such a way that will create a space, a zone which would neither be limited to the narrative and symbolic content nor to the arrangement of those elements on the surface of the painting. I will now refer to another text by Elisabeth Wright entitled “The Uncanny and Surrealism”, which can provide an opening up of Buchloh’s and even Foster’s negative view of the uncanniness as a regression. This will permit us to relate the uncanniness of De Chirico’s paintings not only to the recurrence of symbolic elements but also to a creation of a space of recession within their composition.

#### **4.2 UNCANNY AS A TRANSGRESSION OF “NORMALITY OF VISION”?**

According to Wright, the concept of uncanny can be seen as a source of challenge to representation since it challenges our perception of the world which is in a process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction, instead of being stable and waiting to be depicted and described. Although for Freud, the uncanny is generally related to what is frightening and anxiety, not every frightening thing is uncanny and this is visible in the ambivalence of the term *heimlich*, which includes in itself its opposite so that it means not only homely and familiar but also hidden and secret. The *unheimlich* object then, threatens us but this threat is related not to a simple dread of horror, but rather to a shock born out of a shattering of a context to which we have been accustomed. In a way, when we feel uncanniness, it is not due to a frightening

object but rather to our awareness that any object we believe to grasp may fail us at any time and may hide in itself the potential of being shattered, disturbed from within, and this act can be a subversive act rather than a regressive one. Wright, basing herself on Adorno, shows that the effects of surrealist images are not to foreground the emergence onto the surface of the unconscious through techniques such as automatic writing and collage, but rather it is more than the literary and graphic illustration of Freudian and Jungian theory.

In his essay entitled ‘ Rückblickend auf den Surrealismus’ to which Wright refers, Adorno questions whether it is acceptable to define surrealism simply as an emergence of the unconscious, in a dream like manner, in the techniques of collage and automatic writing, in other words, as a simple literary and graphic illustration Jungian and Freudian theory. Surrealist collage and montage enables images which are not only blurred and unreal as in a dream, but rather they create juxtaposed patterns of discontinuity, which gives Surrealism, as Wright argues, its shock value, its sense of ‘Where I have seen this before?’ with the coexistence of *heimlich* (homely and familiar) and *unheimlich* (unhomely, hidden and secret). In that sense, for Adorno, the power of the surrealist image lies in its ability of not dissolving and being spilt into parts. The uncanny effect of surrealism is not because what is repressed returns in another form, but rather because we are confronted with a possible split into parts never meeting in reconciliation. To illustrate this idea of the coexistence of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* in a shattering and transgressive manner, Wright analyses some paintings of Magritte such as, Philosophy in the Boudoir (Fig. 30) and The Blank Signature (Fig. 31) where she argues that there is combination of

“the abnormality of the *unheimlich* with the normality of the *heimlich*”(1990, 268).

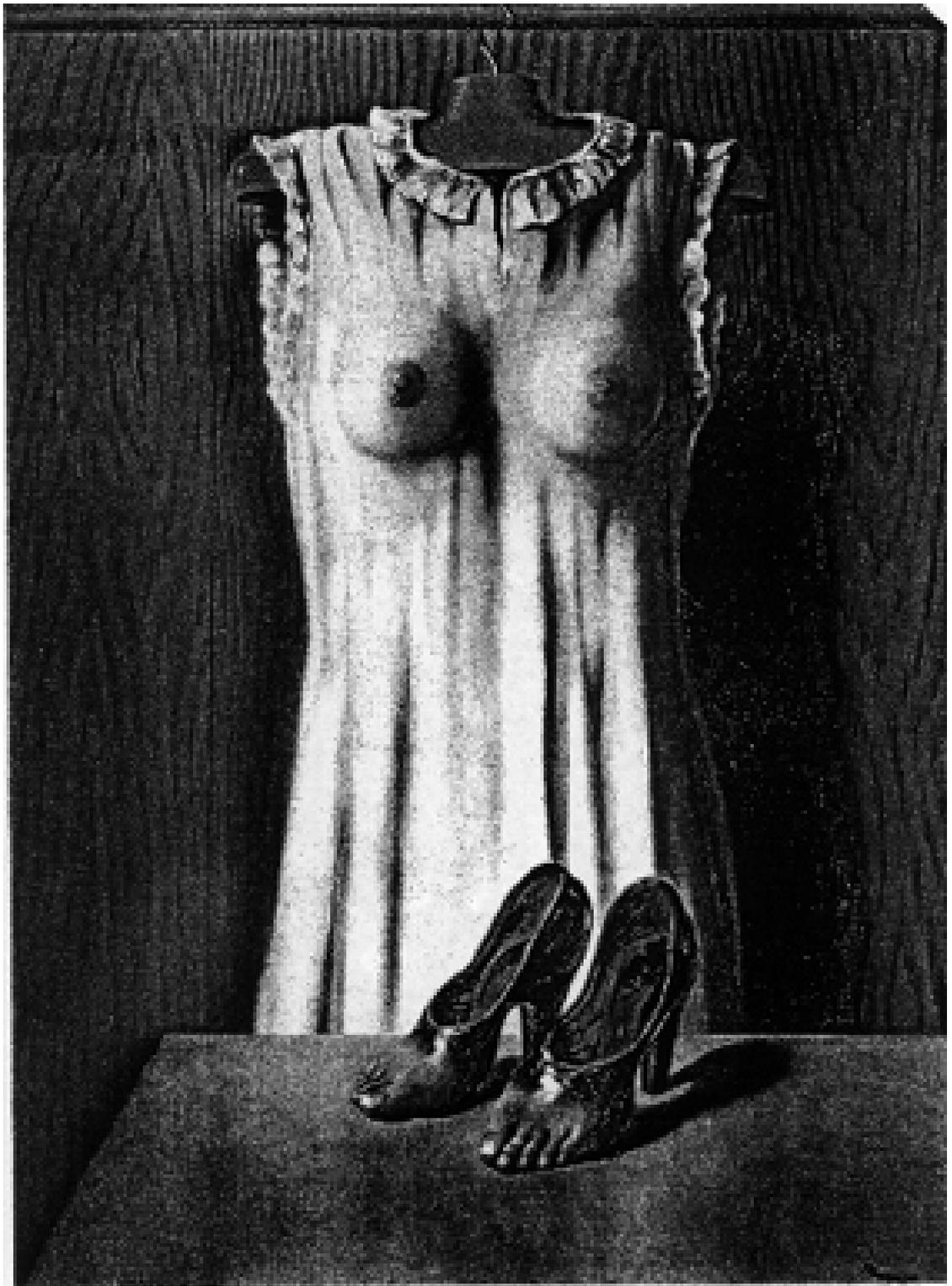


Figure 30. Magritte, René. Philosophy in the Boudoir, 1948.



Figure 31. Magritte, René The Black Signature, 1956

In Philosophy in the Boudoir, for example the *heimlich* dress become *unheimlich* by revealing what it should conceal, the breasts and the feet. According to Wright, what is seen in this painting is not the dress on the hanger, the *heimlich* object, but what a dress normally conceals. Something that should have remained hidden emerges, but this emergence doesn't cause the loss of the autonomy of the different parts, neither the dress, nor the parts of the body lose their identity, and they are not transformed before being mixed. This strange coexistence of the canny with the uncanny, in a "state of uneasy alliance" (1990, 281) creates a movement in Wright's terms, that "undermines repression, letting the *unheimlich*, what should remain hidden, emerge." (1990, 270). This argument is not so much different from Krauss' argument about the impossibility of having one autonomous perception since this coexistence of homely and unhomely in the same image creates also a shattering of perception.

Another example referred to by Wright can clarify the transgressive aspect of uncanniness. In the Blank Signature, (Fig. 31) uncanniness appears at the coexistence of two modes of reality, which are incongruous so that if you accept one, you have to reject the other. This is mostly due to a perspectival disturbance, the disturbance of the three dimensional plane: in one part of the picture the horse seems to be in front of the background but in another part it is in the background. The same thing happens for the woman, she seems to be in front of a tree-trunk while at the same time behind another narrow trunk whose position is also ambiguously neither in the foreground nor at the background. In a way each position, each viewing cancel another one and we cannot reach to a conclusion, to a stability Wright argues that "very little bit makes sense in it own, but together they do not"(1990, 277). In other words she means that if we consider the different elements of that picture (such as

the left rear leg of the horse) independent from other parts, (the head of the horse for example) each part is graspable in its own, as a fragment. But when we start to construct the whole, it becomes ungraspable to us, because one relationship between bits or parts of the picture is incongruous with another relationship between other parts of the picture. For example, we cannot conceive the different parts of the horse as a whole because the relationship of these parts to other parts (the parts or bits of the trees for example) prevents us from conceiving the bits in totality due to a distortion of the three dimensional plane. For Wright, this picture is subversive, because it defies the normality of seeing, reminding us, as Krauss already did, that normal seeing is an achievement. The uncanny then, is what defies the normality of seeing. “The cunning of the normal is that it conceals its own construction. The uncanny unmasks this deceit and thus removes itself from the category of the return of the repressed”(277, 1990).

Perhaps the aim of Wright was to challenge the conception of the uncanny effect of surrealism, which is taken in a negative way: involving only regression and related to what is frightening, to “what arouses dread and horror”(1990, 263), as a projection of our inner fears onto the external. Rather she wanted to think of a conception which opens up a possibility where the uncanny can lead to a possibility of a moment of subversion, an intervention, where there is a shift of the old order, and a chance to re-symbolise, to create fresh symbols. And a re-reading of some of De Chirico’s paintings in terms of compositional uncanniness similar to the examples discussed in Wright’s text, can help us to understand his paintings’ uncanniness in a transgressive way.

#### 4.3 DE CHIRICO'S COMPOSITIONAL UNCANNINESS AS A TRANSGRESSION OF "NORMALITY OF VISION"

Indeed some of De Chirico's works seem to combine different elements (be it sculptures, wooden puppets, columns, gloves or balls) in such a way that at first sight there is the illusion as if they are part of the same whole, by way of a deceptive perspective. But these paintings also have similarities with Magritte's paintings, as discussed through Wright's argument with a co-presence of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. Let's take for example his painting entitled The Child's Brain (Fig. 32) which is similar to Magritte's Philosophy in the Boudoir. Here, there is a presence of an ambiguous moustached figure. Because of the colour of its flesh, this figure supports a connotation of sculpturalness mostly because the same combination of colours is repeated on the column looking like shape at the foreground. However it has also some moustache and hair, which blocks our interpretation of it being a sculpture. This ambiguity isn't as sharp as in Magritte's paintings, but there is still a co-existence of homely and unhomely with an interchangeability between the terms: human being as homely, sculpture as unhomely; or sculpture as homely for the painter (representing Italian nationality along with the column of the foreground) and moustached figure as an unhomely figure of authority, with his book in front of him. The important thing here is the fact that we cannot separate homely from unhomely. What is homely becomes unhomely and vice versa and it is this flexibility which provides us with a plurality of interpretations or rather an instable movement between interpretations. In a sense, what is happening in De Chirico is a movement which blocks a singular account of his paintings opening them to different accounts

which block each others. De Chirico's paintings question the possibility of an

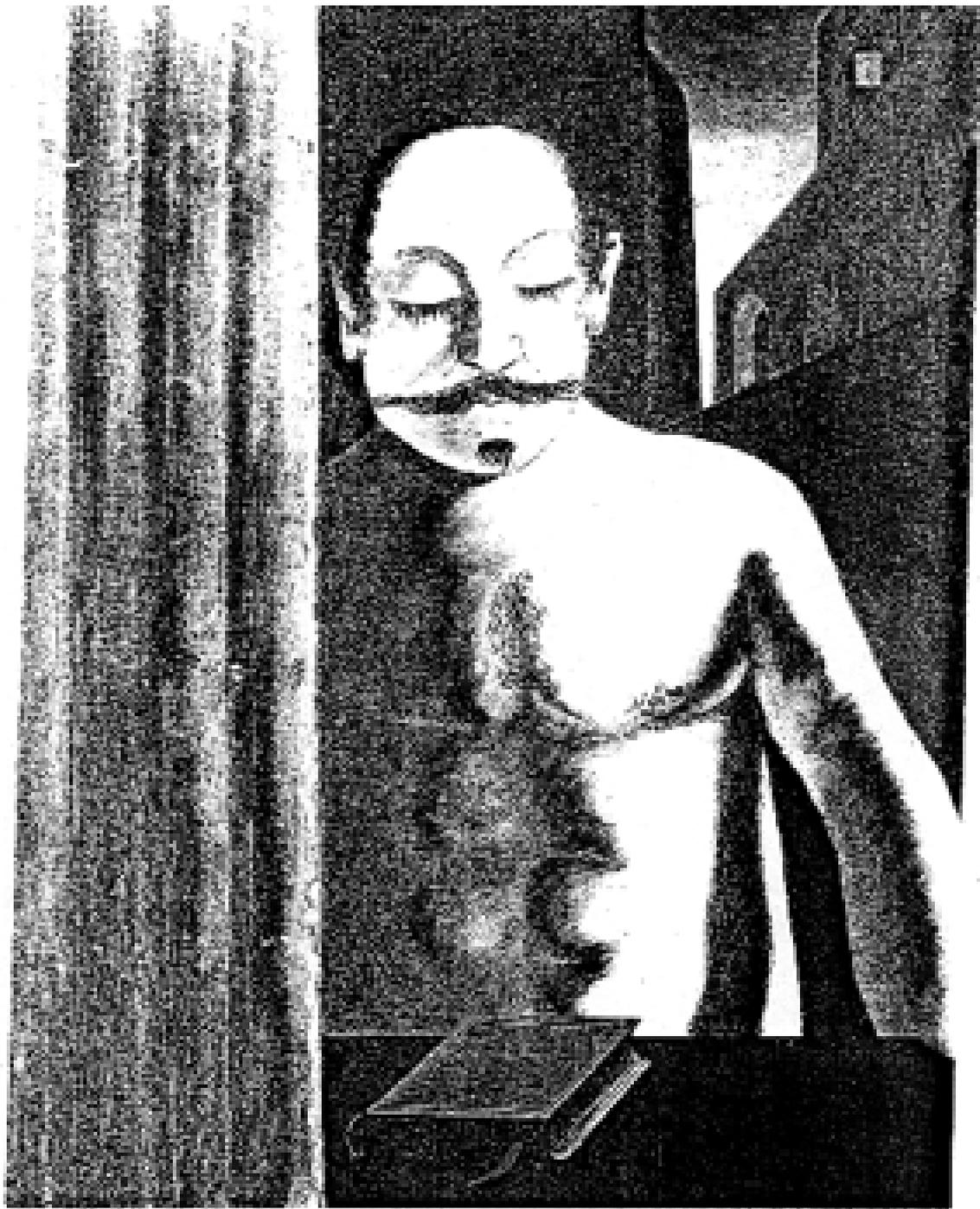


Figure 32. De Chirico, Giorgio. Child's Brain. 1914.  
Oil on Canvas. (81,3x65,5 cm). Centre George Pompidou, Paris.

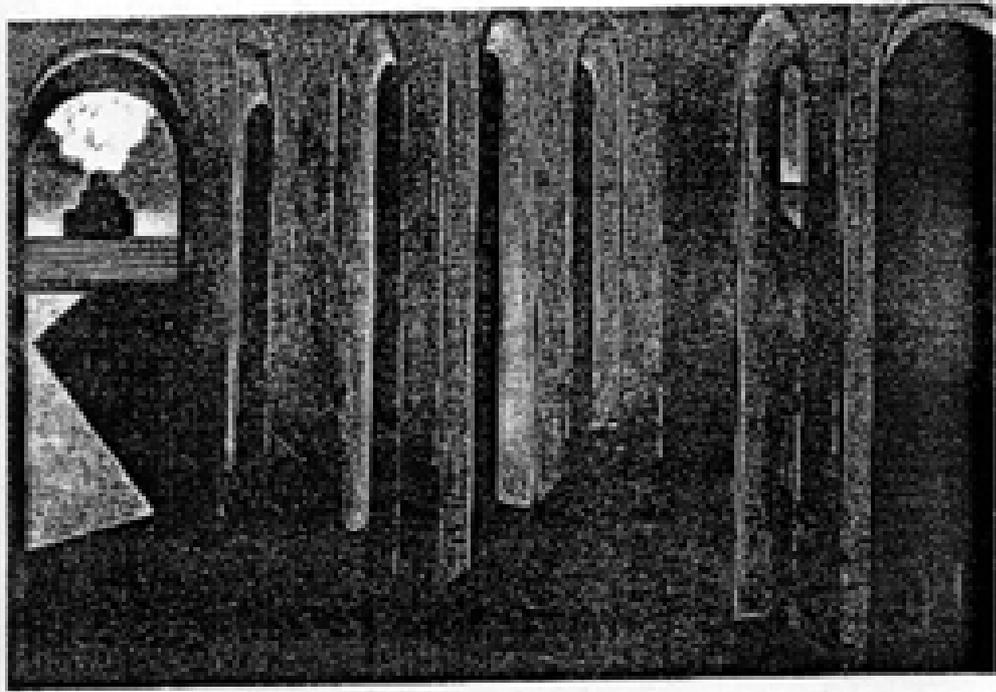


Figure 33 De Chirico, Giorgio. *The Anxious Journey*, 1913.  
Oil on Canvas. (74x107 cm). Philadelphia Art Museum  
Louise & Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia.

account of a picture as a graspable surface where each element can be identified according to the other parts of the picture. Before expanding this hypothesis it would better I think to analyse some other paintings of De Chirico in terms of an uncanniness related with an ungraspability, born out of a plurality of spaces shattering our perception of his paintings.

In some other works such as The Anxious Journey (Fig33) and A King's Bad Mood (Fig. 26) we can see an uncanniness similar to that of The Blank Signature, born out of a disturbance of perspectival space, but not as clear as Magritte's one. In Figure 33 for example there is a coexistence of different directions. The architectural space we are looking into has ambiguous perspective and even, it has more than one perspective. The left arcade where we see the train suggests a direction which is enforced by the shadow cast on the floor, sharply contrasting with the light coming from outside, and suggesting a direction. However, the line of the shadow is not parallel with the baseline of the columns and arcades which are intersecting towards the centre of the picture, nor with the base line of the last series of arcades finishing ambiguously on the right of the painting. In a way, we may analyse three different spaces: the space of the arcade with the train, the space of the arcades combining into a corner angle nearly towards the centre of the composition and the space of the arcades and columns of the right part of the picture. These three spaces seem to overlap or cut into each other's spaces: we cannot be sure for example whether the arcade of the left through which we see the train is in the foreground of the arcades making a corner in the middle, or the arcades of the right suggest a perspectival direction which ends up at the second lighted area of the picture where we see a

portion of the sky and the wall, towards the right side of the composition. In a way

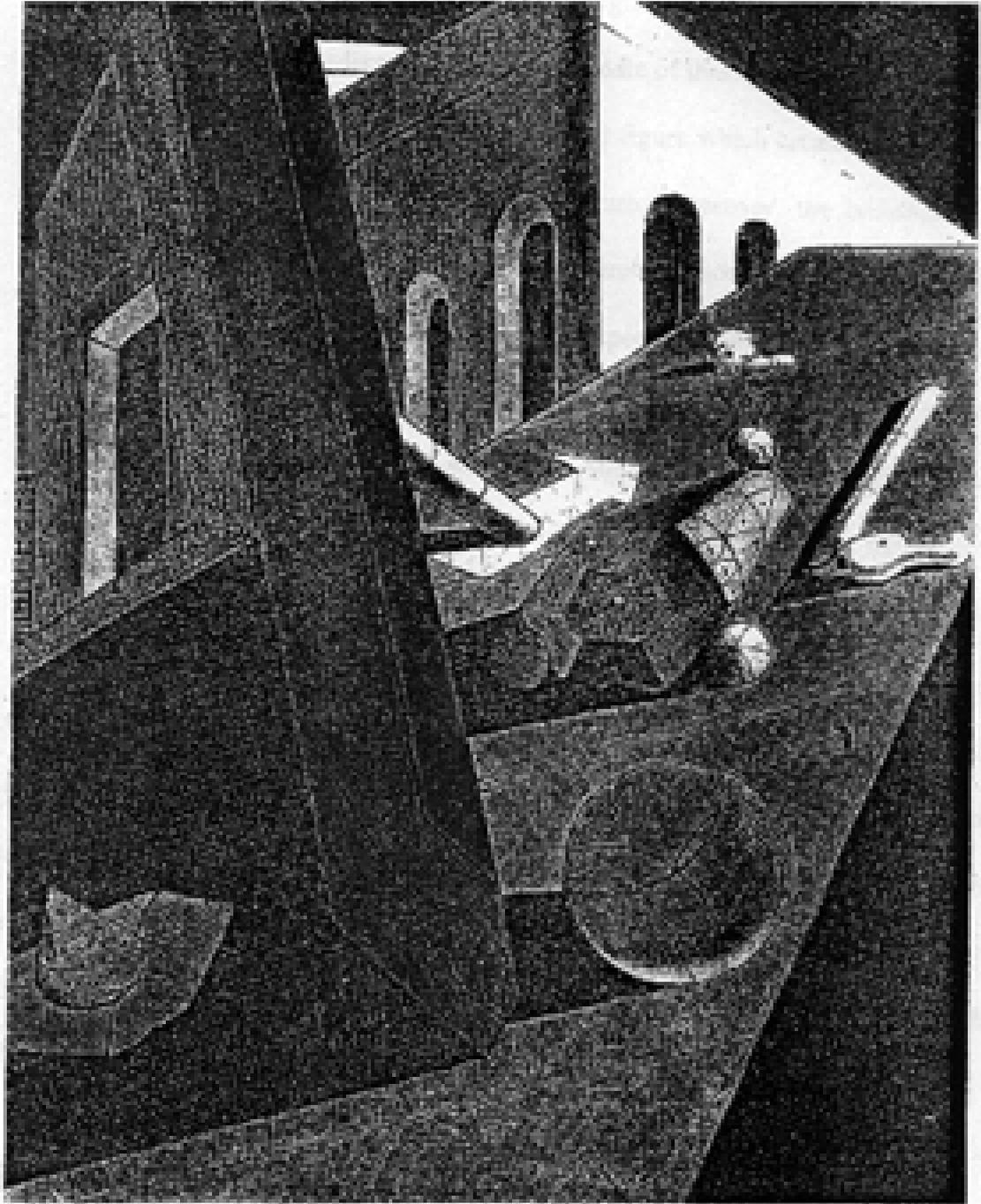


Figure 26. De Chirico, Giorgio. A King's Bad Mood. 1914-1915.  
Oil on Canvas. (61x50.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

there is a certain multiplication of perspectives in the same space, which makes the spectator's gaze unable to fixate in one direction.

The same kind of effect exists in Fig.26. In this figure, there's at first sight an oblique space where lies some toy-like objects. In the middle of that space another space is as if imposed on it where there is a column seeming figure which creates another space by its cast shadow towards the left of the picture. Moreover, the building at the background of the oblique space seems disconnected from the spaces we talked earlier. It is in fact due to the incongruous perspective they have, but also to the difference of scale existing between them. If we consider the objects of the first space as being real toys, their scale will be too big compared to the buildings of the background. Also although they stay on an oblique plane they are not falling down and seem to resist to gravity. Lastly, the building at the left background of the picture with a door in front of it is not part of the same space as the other building because their roof lines direct us into to different perspectives. We can conclude that, although at first sight there seem to have some consistency between the different spaces of that picture, there are in fact four different spaces. The space of the oblique space in the foreground, the space created by the column and its shadow on the left foreground of the picture, the space of the building with arcades, and the space of the building at the left background.

#### **4.4 DE CHIRICO'S COMPOSITIONAL UNCANNINESS AS A MOVEMENT BETWEEN MULTIPLE SPACES: TOWARDS AN EXISTENCE OF A PLURALITY OF ZONES IN COMPOSITION**

Departing from the analysis of all the examples we discussed above, we can say that in these paintings of De Chirico there is on the one hand a multiplication of perspectives creating thus different spaces incongruous with each other, and an ambiguity that exist between the connotations of the figures within the space.

Related to this multiplication of perspectives and perhaps a movement between recognition and misrecognition there is also a blurring of the observer and the observed in such a way that this compositionnal uncanniness is also related with a discontinuity that exist within the subject who is in a way splitted and disturbed by the failure of his or her desire to have a closed, self contained one perspective perception and thus a fixed interpretation.

This can be understandable if we observe now another very famous painting of De Chirico entitled Mystery and melancholy of a street. (Fig. 34) At first sight, there is a scene where a girl is running towards a mysterious shadowed figure, which may not with certainty be identified either as a man or as a woman. The space in which this girl is "acting" has two different architectural elements which however seems to indicate different perspectives. The long building with arcades on the left side is indicating a space whose perspective is different than the other building on the right side. And more, the space of the girl and of the shadow of the invisible figure, seems

to be in another perspective. This scene of De Chirico is reminiscent of a theatre



Figure 34. De Chirico, Giorgio. Mystery and Melancholy of a Street. 1914. Oil on Canvas. (87x71,5 cm). Private Collection.

scene having different décors of different scenes at the same time, so that there is impossibility on the part of the viewer to see the scene as a totality although the elements may belong to the same play. This ambiguity or uncanniness subverts perhaps the possible priorities existing between images and their appearances, and we come to ask ourselves an important question: can any interpretation of images reach a finality without being interrupted by a coexistence of many other interpretations?

As a conclusion we can say that De Chirico's paintings creates a zone which questions two different accounts of addressing ourselves to a painting. An account of painting as a graspable surface where each element can be identified according to other parts, where we can definitely locate elements within a composition and where there is one definite narrative as a content. The other account takes painting as a surface of involvement, which cannot be controlled by the viewer in the sense that we cannot reach to a conclusion, to a closed narration. De Chirico's paintings, by creating an illusion of unfragmented whole (because of the consistency of the technique) seem to give the viewer to satisfy his desire of observing a completed whole. But the viewer is disturbed by the awareness of a plurality of zones or spaces of recession. This uneasiness of De Chirico's paintings is due to a displacement of the expected (graspable image) by a plurality of perspective which reveals a hidden reality, a hidden space behind the surface meanings of his paintings. The distortion and juxtaposition of buildings and open-space voids in those paintings upsets the eye and creates a tension within the viewer.

I think that De Chirico's paintings remind us of the possibility of a plurality of zones in images. By moving the viewer into a complex position, into an impossible position, De Chirico's creates a space which can neither be reduced to the surface of the painting nor to the space of the optical illusion where there is only one point of view.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **5. MIRO'S PAINTINGS: COMPOSITIONAL UNCANNINESS AS A REPRESENTATION OF SPACE OTHER THAN MEMORY**

#### **5.1 BEYOND PAINTING?**

If we look back over Miro's long and remarkable career and try to understand it as a whole, we can see that like De Chirico, he has an unstable style. But contrary to De Chirico's return to the figurative, Miro's paintings lived a crucial and decisive shift from a realist art to a painting of signs in the 1920's. This shift is so remarkable that Jacques Dupin asks how could the same man have painted such different and opposing works. How such a crucial transition from object to sign, from figurative space to imaginary space occurred? According to Dupin, the idea behind such a change was to extract from each form the sign latent within it, "to unshackle the sign from the matrix of realistic representation"(Dupin, 1987, 34). This alternation governed Miro's work from 1920's until his death. He created many different series of paintings, as well as contrasting styles and methods, which enhance and authenticate each other such as drawings and collages. In 1930 for example, according to Briony Fer and Anne Umland, Miro's was in crisis, a crisis that occurred after his series of Dutch interiors and which was characterised by an abandonment of painting for collage. In comparison with Miro's reworking of the Dutch seventeenth century paintings, those collages, according to Briony Fer, were

represented a departure from the main concerns of modern painting. In those collages, there is neither usage of coloured papers nor decorative additions that had characterised the cubist collages of Picasso or Braque. Unlike cubists “pasted papers”, Miro had little interest in the material used. Rather, those collages were areas of brown paper interspersed with minimal drawing in pencil or ink (Fig. 35). According to many critics, Miro was using collage as painting’s undoing. Maurice Raynal in 1927 quoted Miro as saying, “I want to murder painting”. (Umland, 1992, 98) This statement was also reflecting surrealism’s concerns. In surrealism, collage was a privileged genre over painting. Aragon believed that, unlike painting, collage, allowed the visual field to be broken up into related and yet independent parts which as a result presented a heterogeneous, rather than a unified field. This characteristic of collage was seen as a harbinger of artistic revolution and social change, and Aragon described this revolutionary nature, by referring to collage’s ability to escape the conventions of painting, by being anti individualistic, and anti-commercial.

However, Aragon who founds in Miro concerns similar to his own, also suggested that Miro’s collages imitate his paintings and insisted that they should be considered not only in terms of what they reject, which is the painting, but also in terms of what they are built upon. Aragon, in a catalogue preface for the gallery Goemans Collage Exhibition, including Miro’s collages, and which is entitled “La peinture au défi”, refers to the existence of a relation both symbiotic and antagonistic between Miro’s collages and his paintings. Aragon writes as follows:

A funnyman, Miro. Many things in his paintings recall what is not painted; he makes paintings on coloured canvas, painting there only a white patch, as though he had not

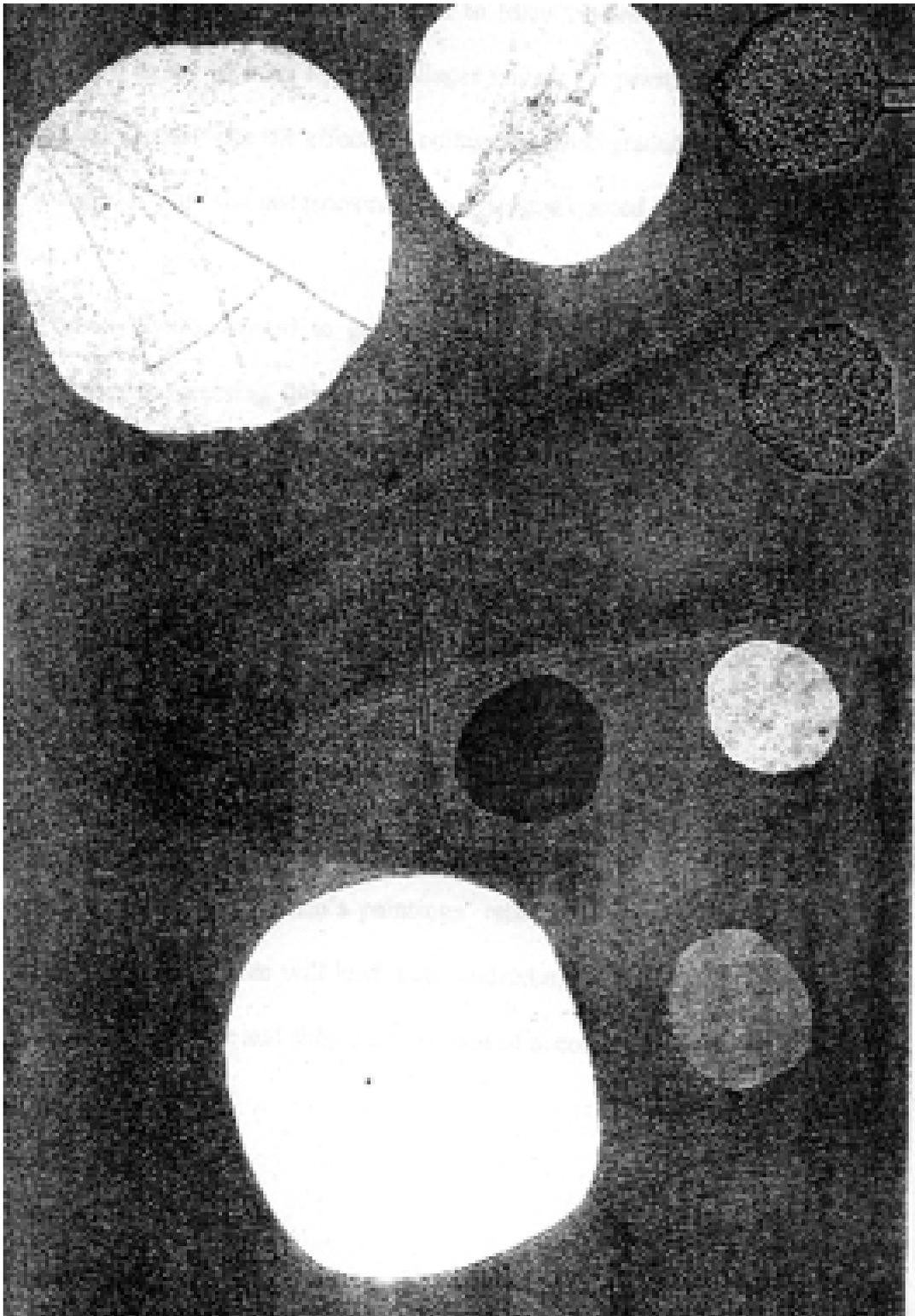


Figure 35. Miró, Joan. Paper Collage, 1929. Collage. (73x108 cm). Private Collection, Madrid.

painted in that spot, as though the canvas were the painting. He deliberately draws the lines of the stretcher on the painting as though the stretcher were crooked on the canvas. Last year, he happened, quite naturally, to make nothing but collages, which are closer to Picasso's collages and to Miro's painting than to anything else. It is difficult to say whether Miro's collages imitate his paintings or whether his paintings imitated in advance the effects of collage, as Miro gradually came to practice it. I am inclined toward the last interpretation. (Aragon quoted in Umland, 1992, 49)

Perhaps, Miro wanted to go beyond painting not by a new technique, but was already transgressing the limits of painting by his paintings. Tristan Tzara in 1931 observed that Miro wanted to kill painting by its own means. The main concern of this chapter will be to show the transgressive aspect of Miro's paintings by an analysis of their compositional uncanniness. In that respect some of Miro's paintings will be discussed according to Bataille's and Deleuze's ideas, and an attempt at showing that his paintings are neither abstract nor figurative, and in that sense they are transgressive. This will open up the notion of uncanny to a new dimension, localising perhaps the ambivalence of Miro's compositional uncanniness in the domain of sensation. Miro's paintings' relationship with the "levels of sensation" mentioned by Deleuze will lead us to understand how a compositional uncanny can cut across objective and subjective divides of accounts of paintings.

## **5.2 MIRO'S UNCANNINESS AS A RE-ENACTMENT OF CASTRATION ANXIETY ON THE SURFACE OF PAINTING?**

In Documents of 1930, Bataille wrote a criticism of Miro's 1929-30 paintings, and described how in Miro's paintings forms are dissolved, vision is obscured and reality is disintegrated into "sun-shot dust" (1997, 77). This metaphor of dust was very important for Bataille because it is related to his view of the origins of modern painting where the pleasure of not seeing clearly is dominant.

Bataille started to get interested in Miro's work at the point of his crisis. Miro was marginalised from surrealism by Breton, and for Bataille this was an opportunity of showing his own difference from Breton, articulated over the ground of practice. But the most important reason for the interest of Bataille in Miro was, according to Fer, the common ground between Miro's art and Bataille's thinking. Let's see how Bataille's view of modern painting leads Fer to relate Miro's paintings' uncanniness with the idea of decomposition.

Bataille worked on the margins of Surrealist movement in the early 1920 and by 1929, he became the leader of ex-surrealists including André Masson, Michel Leiris and Antonin Artaud. In contrast to Breton's idealism, for Bataille all that is "base", undesirable, and excremental in society, had to be acknowledged and explored. His anti-idealism pushed Bataille to favour the distortion of the body, which was conceived as a privileged site of order in bourgeois society. Bataille was attacking to

the idea of homogenous body, which was the aim of Western philosophical, scientific, religious and cultural discourses, based on the classification and reduction of all things to productive utility, and assimilation of all differences. And anything that cannot be assimilated is excluded by these discourses.

Bataille's disorganised body brought a new implication for consideration of the representation of that body. Doing violence to representation was for Bataille at the basis of any representational act. In the act of drawing, which Bataille valued as a kind of 'pre-history' of art, and thus suggesting a place where art's unconscious can be found, the simple tracing of a line is thus the transformation of the clean sheet of paper, into something else, into a horse or a head. This passage from one state to another, and the succession of changes, is according to Bataille an alteration which includes two senses: "a partial decomposition analogous with that of corpses and at the same time, the transition, [passage] to a perfectly heterogenous state corresponding to...the sacred, found for example in the ghost." (Bataille qtd. in Fer, 1997, 79). It can seem that from this point of view, abstract modern painting which was dealing with a transformation and deconstruction of form, was not revealing the flat surface of painting but destroying the bare canvas or a text, obscuring in a way the objects in vision. Bataille relates this impulse of violence to the sadistic impulse, which was present according to Freud in the sexual instinct. In fact for Freud, the sexual instinct related to narcissism is not however totally separated from the death instinct, represented through sadism, and whose task is, to lead organic life back to the inanimate state through decomposition. But the important point here is that, those two sets of instincts are never simply separable, and combination and dispersal, composition and decomposition exist as a fusion.

Modern painting for Bataille, was rehearsing violence on its own means of representation and this violence is repeated in Miro's paintings through the decomposition of objects of vision. The metaphor of flashing light which dissolves form, by making it difficult to see, is a good metaphor for modern painting since modern painting is also obscuring the objects in vision through dissolution, a becoming-dust. Briony Fer refers to Miro's 1930 paintings which illustrates the process of decomposition through the presence of sinuous tracing of lines and scribbled, textured surfaces which appear as a series of cancellations and which show that a line may trace a figure but also cancel it or scratch it out. I want to analyse one of those paintings paradoxically named Composition (Fig. 36)

In this oil painting which has the aspect of drawing within it by the presence of thin lines, there are first of all different forms of crossing out and even scribbling over. These can give an impression of cancellations, especially towards the lower left part of the painting where some dark lines have been drawn onto a scribbled blue shape. This blue shape can be seen as another form of cancellation, a cancellation similar to the one we generally make when we start drawing something and renounce to accomplish it, and we prefer to cancel it by scribbling. Also, the figure in the middle seems to have a contour whose paint is spread over the canvas, forming an ambiguous splash or stain. Other stains are formed around it by the tiny brush strokes, which can give the impression of being the decomposed particles of the big stain. This big stain seems also to be spared because of the becoming lighter of the dark colour and the merging of it with the background colour, through its becoming yellowish or brownish. Also important, is the decomposing aspect of the lines around

the central figure. Especially to the left of the picture, we see some randomly spread

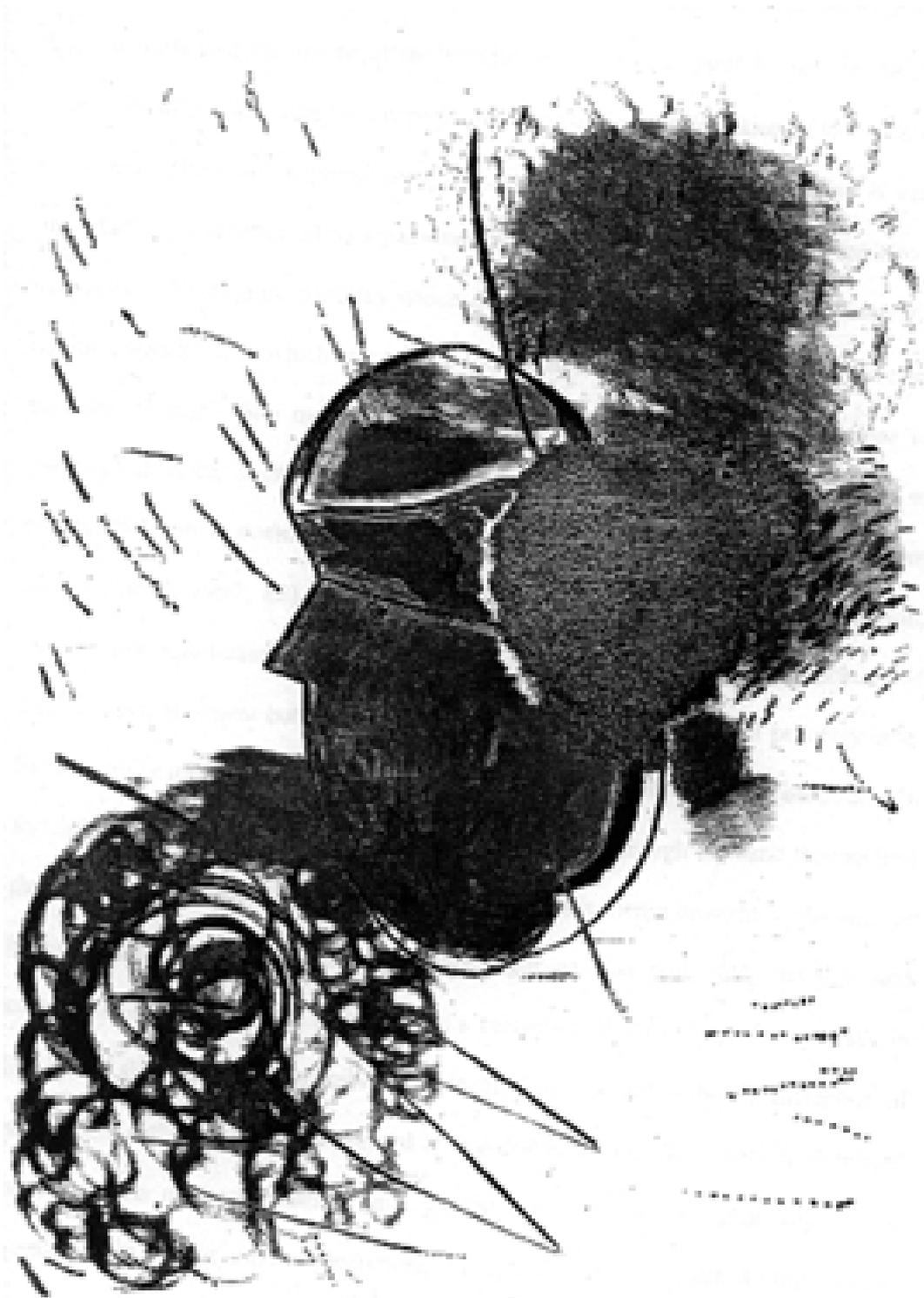


Figure 36. Miro, Joan. Composition, 1930  
Oil on Canvas (230x165 cm). Musée de Grenoble.

lines, which decompose into dots. It is as if Miro wanted us to be aware that any line is composed of dots, or rather any form is composed of details, and we can even say that the trails that the figure of the middle leaves around itself is like its ghostly aspect. What is happening here is perhaps a kind of dematerialization of the body of the figure, a kind of stripping away and emptying out of the body. This is very important for Fer since Miro's paintings is a form of erasure that lends itself to a dissolution into minute particles which are like "exquisite scattering of seemingly random marks", and which are related thus with Bataillian metaphor of "sun-shot particles of dust". She mentions that in many paintings of Miro "the surface of painting at once scintillates and decomposes (understood as the undoing of composition) in a storm of minute particles, like phosphorescent powder strewn across it"(Fer, 1997, 82). This idea of representation leading to a cancellation, erasure and dissolution into minute particles suggests then not the clarification of form or enlightenment but the obscuring of vision through a cloud of powdery dust. Fer uncannily relates this with the story of "Sandman" and the theme of castration. In fact in the story of "Sandman", the idea of going blind through the sand thrown into the eyes is the dominant theme. According to Fer this theme brought to the surface by Freud, and concerning sight and insight, sight and thwarted sight, and sight and castration have similarities with Bataille's metaphor of dust. A part from that, in Sandman, the idea of dismemberment is also present through the metaphor of mannequin and automaton represented by the doll Olympia. Both metaphors related with the idea of fragmentation have similar aspects with the Bataillian idea of rupturing the insight and enlightenment, through obscurity, through decomposition, through dislocation, alteration and destruction. Fer suggest that sexual difference is brought into play in Miro's paintings and, in the reduction of powder, in obliteration,

the oedipal scenario is played out on the surface of painting. The uncanniness of Miro lies for Fer in the re-enactement of the castration anxiety on the surface of painting, since for Freud, dismemberment, and going blind is linked to the fear of castration. But this account seems to limit itself to a notion of uncanny delimited with the oedipal scenario. In Miro's paintings there is perhaps another aspect of the uncanniness, related with levels of sensation.

### **5.3 UNCANNINESS AND SENSATION: BEYOND FIGURATION AND ABSTRACTION, BACON AS AN EXAMPLE.**

I want to focus now to some other paintings of Miro, which I think go beyond painting in the sense that they differ from figurative, but also abstract paintings. Those paintings evade and disrupt the oppositional categories of abstraction and figuration because there is a blurring of boundaries of form. Miro used several mediums and he was perhaps in search (and temptation) of a transgression. The notion of painting was significant and important for him: not only it was the medium he used the most, but also he searched to go beyond it by creating his own road. In this search for a personal style, away from the desire of criticism and excommunications between other styles, the uncanniness of Miro's spaces are perhaps related with a movement between subjective and objective accounts of images due to the plurality of zones that exists in his compositions. This aspect of Miro's paintings has some similarities with Bacon's paintings. In that respect a Deleuzian account of Bacon's paintings will firstly be presented in order to clarify the levels of sensation and plurality of zones that exist in Bacon.

In fact, when we talked about the importance of decomposition for Bataille, we shouldn't forget that he was attacking the idea of homogenous body. The same kind of attack is present in Bacon because the boundaries of the Baconian body are disrupted, violated. It is incomplete and fluid, transgressing its limit, leaching into the pictorial space and this fluidity is very much related with the medium that he uses. In fact Bacon argues that oil painting is a medium which "breeds another form that the form you are making can take."(Sylvester, 1987, 150) And this fluidity permits him to use different techniques, which can be transgressive. In most of his paintings he uses the technique of local wiping, with a rag, handloom or brush, in which the thickness is spread out over a non-figurative zone. To illustrate this technique and its affects we can analyse one of his painting from a triptych entitled Study for Self Portrait (Fig. 37). In this oil painting we can see that the face of the figure is dissolved by the technique of local wiping, so that what remains from the figure is some small particles of paint. This technique creates local vagueness and fading as if the figure is disappearing, leaving behind only a vague trace of its former presence. Compared to Miro's painting we analysed so far (Fig. 36), there is an important similarity in the sense that in both of the paintings the figures tends to return to the material structure that creates them. Deleuze argues that it is as if melt into a "molecular structure" (Deleuze, 1992, 19). This creates according to Deleuze a kind of blurring that liberates the figure from figuration. Let's see more in detail how Bacon can escape from figuration. Not through abstraction but through a surpassing of the duality of the tactile and the optical.

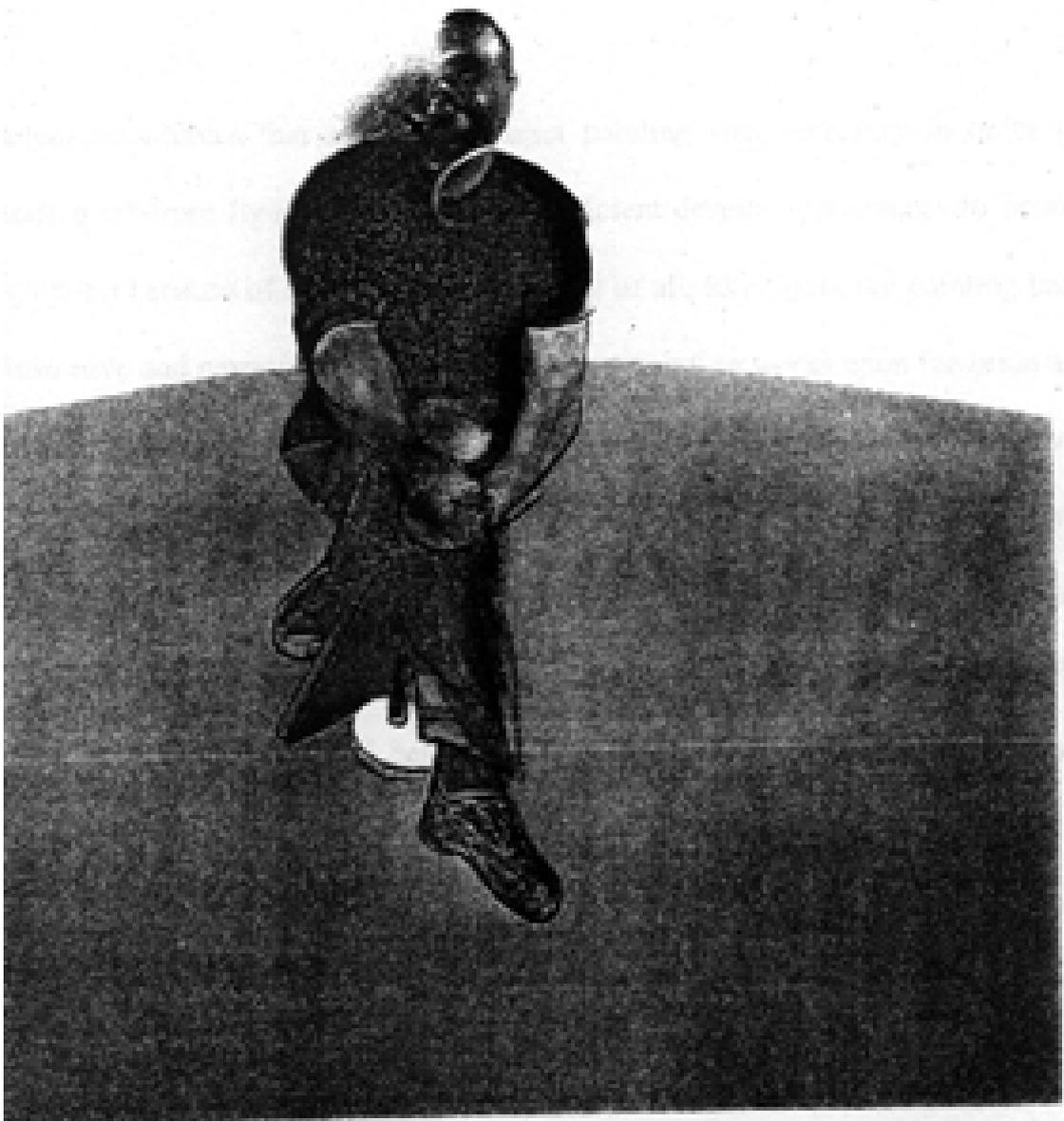


Figure 37. Bacon, Francis. Study of Self Portrait (Triptych) 1985-86.  
Oil on Canvas (78x58 cm). Marlborough International Fine Art.

For Deleuze, figuration or rather figurative representation, illustrates on the one hand, the relationship between an image and an object that the image is supposed to illustrate, and on the other hand, it illustrates the relationship of images between themselves in a composite whole which assigns a specific object to each of them. For him, Bacon is in the search of another type of relationship between figures, other than narrative and from which no figuration can follow. As Bacon argues: “The story that is already being told between one figure and another begins to cancel out the possibilities of what can be done with paint on its own.” (Bacon, qtd in Deleuze, 1992, 7).

Deleuze continues that although abstract painting was necessary in order to tear modern art from figuration, it was not sufficient despite appearances to break with figuration because of two main reasons. First of all, like figurative painting based on illustrative and narrative relationships, abstract painting works upon the brain and not upon the nervous system. Abstract painting, even though it raises itself above the figurative, it creates forms that are still part of a new and optical space suppressing tactile referents in favour of an “eye of the mind”(Deleuze,1992, 59) and its line still delimits an outline. Secondly, abstract painting to the contrary of classical religious paintings, “is involved and besieged by photographs and clichés that are already lodged on the canvas before the painter even begins to work” (Deleuze, 1992, 10). It would be thus a mistake to think that the painter works on a white and virgin surface since the surface is already invested virtually with all kinds of clichés. Deleuze argues that the painter does not paint in order to reproduce on it an external object functioning as a model. He paints on images that are already there in order to produce a canvas whose functioning will reverse the relations between model and

copy. In fact what fills the canvas before the beginning are ready-made perceptions, in the form of figurative givens such as all kind of images be it in the form of illustrations but also photographic and cinematic images. In here what Bacon is mostly concerned about is breaking the history of painting which was seen as a continuous process of changing and altering the previous modes of representation. We can say that this idea of “ready made perceptions” mentioned by Deleuze has a different value compared to Krauss’ notion of the “already-seen”. Deleuze is looking from the side of the painter who is concerned in going beyond the clichés, while, when Krauss argues for the already-seen, she is on the side of the spectator and thus more concerned with perception and its relationship to a subjective recollection and structuring of already-seen images.

For Deleuze abstract paintings’ reactions against the cliché of the figurative, cannot escape from becoming a cliché itself. Abstract painting, by creating its own code of representation which is believed to react against the cliché of the figurative, couldn’t escape from becoming figurative itself in the sense that it remains still a representation with a different convention a different code. For Deleuze, Bacon but also other painters such as Cezanne were fighting against those clichés not through transformation of a cliché but perhaps through liberating art as being a given, as a “perceived thing” (Deleuze, 1992, 51).

How than one can escape or go beyond clichés? According to Deleuze, for Bacon the clue lies in the question of chance. But a manipulated chance. The blank canvas before the painter is already full of clichés and probabilities before the painter’s work begins. The painter’s task for Bacon must be getting out of the cliché out of the pre-

pictorial figuration which is on the canvas and in the painter's head in the form of “what the painter wants to do” before he begins to paint. For Bacon than, the act of painting consist of making random marks, wiping, sweeping or rubbing the canvas in order to clear out zones, throwing the paint from various angles and at various speeds. Figure 38 can be a good example for this because what illustrates the “jet of water” is a jet of paint onto the surface of the canvas. I think that what makes this chance encounter of the paint with the surface of the painting a manipulated act is the fact that it is still related with the other elements of the picture. It seems that its position is a conscious position since it is arranged in such a way that it looks as if it is coming out of the hole situated at the left side. However, although we think that we identified some elements in the picture, this identification is ephemeral because the “Jet of water” becomes immediately an amount of paint thrown on the canvas reminding us that the other elements within the painting (the three dimensional space depicted there) were also nothing more than paint. In this, we have a movement between interpretations. Should we interpret the paint thrown on the surface as an illustration of jet of water according to the other elements of the painting or should we interpret other elements as a-signifying elements like the thrown paint?

According to Deleuze, through these acts of chance, the pre-pictorial givens will be removed, whether wiped, swept or rubbed and Deleuze says that “it is as if Sahara were suddenly inserted into the head, it is as if a piece of rhinoceros skin, viewed under a microscope, were stretched over it... it is as if the units of measure were changed, and micrometric, or even cosmic units were substituted for the figurative unit”(Deleuze,1992, 55). These involuntary, accidental, free, random marks are no

longer significant or signifiers for Deleuze. They are a-signifying traits, and in that

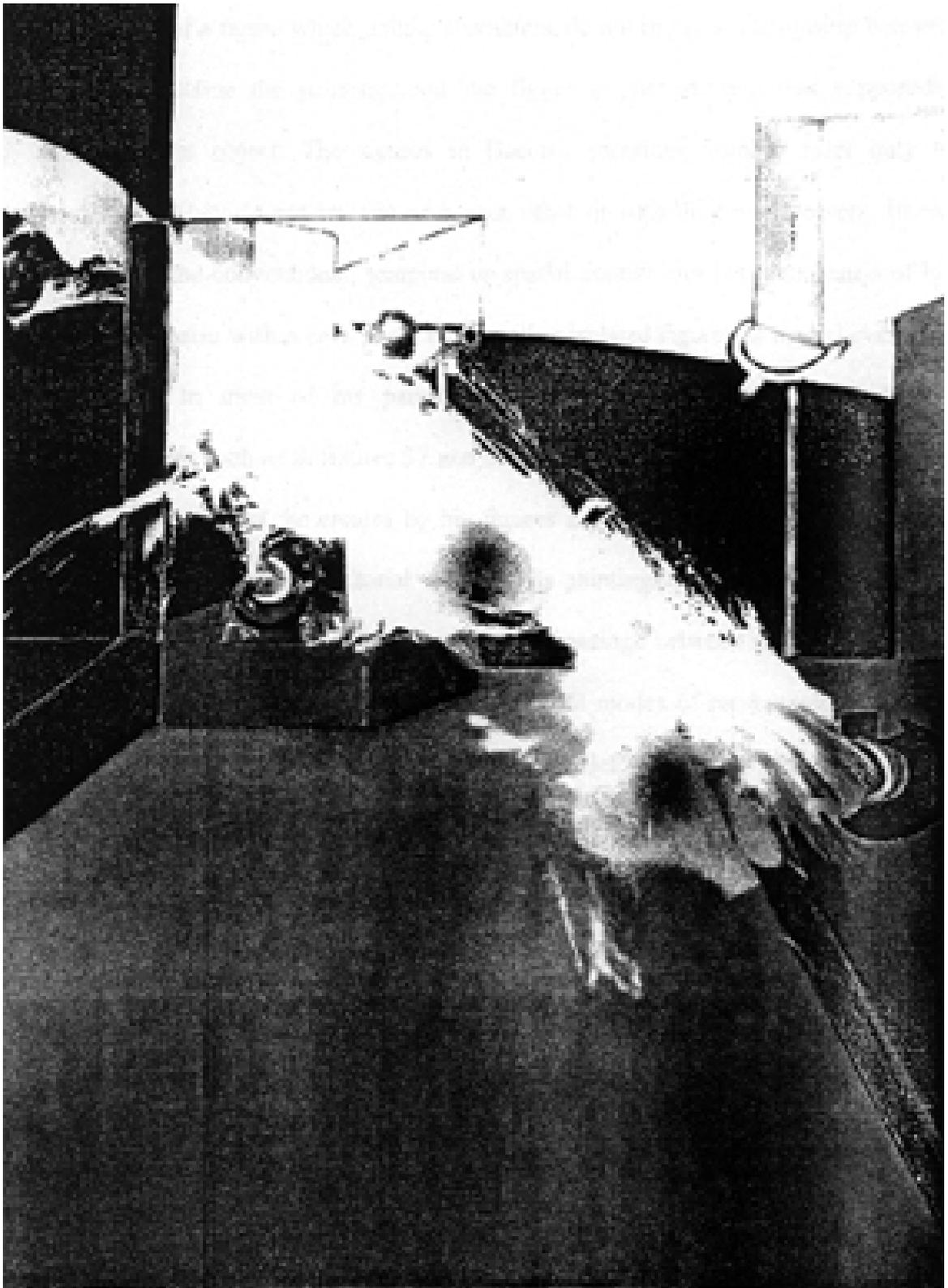


Figure 38. Bacon, Francis. *Jet of Water*. 1953.  
Oil on Canvas (78x58 cm). Marlborough International Fine Art.

way, Bacon's paintings can represent another path, more direct and more sensible, in order perhaps to go beyond both figuration but also its so called abstraction through the creation of a figure which, unlike characters, do not imply a relationship between an object outside the painting, and the figure in the painting that supposedly illustrates that object. The figures in Bacon's paintings perhaps refer only to themselves. They do not interact with each other or with their environment. Bacon rejects than the conventional, temporal or spatial continuities between panels of his triptychs but also within each panel by depicting isolated figures or figural events on the panels. In most of his paintings, the figures are isolated in circles or parallelepipeds such as in figures 37 and 39. But what is the most important thing in Bacon's work is that, he creates by his figures a plurality of zones, which are not simply identical with the pictorial surface. His paintings are not only surfaces nor only optical spaces. Bacon is creating a zone of passage between optical and haptic. A communication, a movement between different modes of representation. In that sense, he is creating different levels of sensation. Before expending on the levels of sensations let's first clarify what we mean by haptic and optical modes of representation.

In Alois Riegl's terms, the haptic mode of vision is analogous to the sense of touch in the way that it must synthesise mentally a number of discontinuous sensory inputs. The optic view is on the contrary a distant synoptic view of objects in space. Hapticity is characteristic of Egyptian art. In Egyptian Bas-reliefs, there is the uniting of the two senses, of touch and sight, which imposes on the eye a tactile or haptic function. The flat surface of the Egyptians allows the eye to function like the

sense of touch. Since the form and the ground lie on the same plane of the surface,

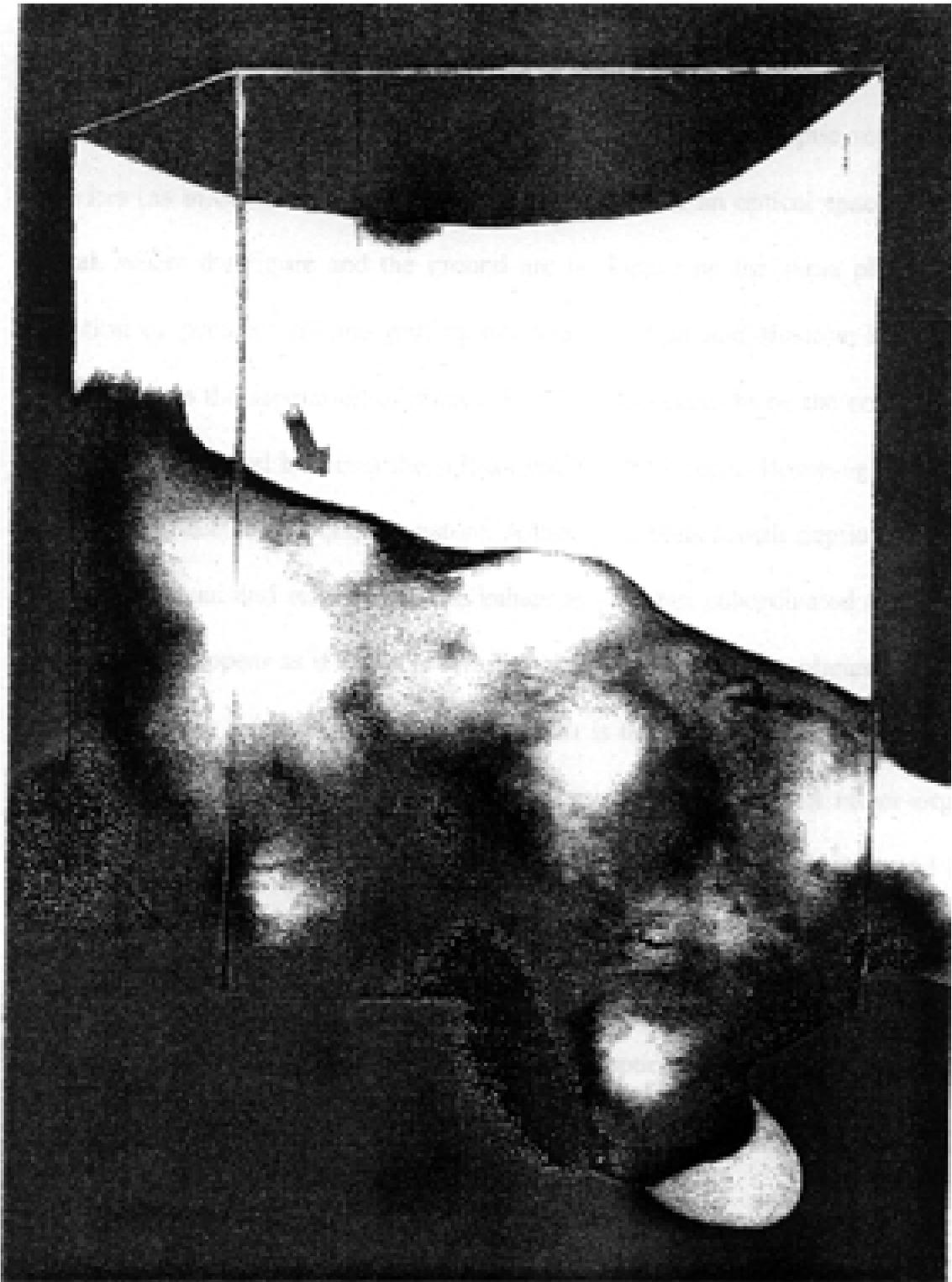


Figure 39. Bacon, Francis, Sand Dune, 1983.  
Oil on Canvas (78x58 cm). Ernst Beyeler Basel.

the floor and the horizon are indistinguishable spatially. This haptic function is assumed by a frontal and close view, which permits the ground and the form lie on the same plane of surface, equally close to each other, and to us. The only thing that separates and unites the form and the ground is the contour. And this contour isolates the form as an essence, as a closed unity that is shielded from all accident, change, deformation and corruption. At the other side of this kind of haptic representation there lies (as in Christian and Greek art) the conquest of an optical space that is not frontal, where the figure and the ground are no longer on the same plane. By the invention of perspective, and putting into play of light and shadow, hollows and reliefs, there is the separation of planes. The contour ceases to be the common limit on a single plane and becomes the self-limitation of the form. However for Deleuze this optical space has a complex nature. Although it breaks with haptic vision, it is not merely visual and refers to tactile values as well but subordinated to vision. In here the forms appear as if on their own, in the space between the planes which they sustain. They are freed from the background. It is the gaze, which picks and unites them. But the contour of the form is not geometric any more but rather organic, acting as a mould. This contour remains unchanged by plays of shadow and light, because “it is a tangible contour, which must guarantee the individuation of the optical form through visual variations and diverse points of view.”(Deleuze,1992, 69). In short what replaces haptic space is a tactile-optical space.

Later on, Deleuze argues that this tactile-optical space can be surpassed through two different ways: either by the exposition of a purely optical space or through the imposition of a manual space. According to him, Byzantine art would be a good example for the first path because Byzantine art reverses Greek art by creating

backgrounds with impalpable forms, so that we cannot know where the background ends and the form begins. In here even the contour ceases to be a limit because it is now the result of shadow and light. This rhythm of light and shadow which does not respect the integrity of plastic form, will make an optical form emerge from the background. And this form is born from the independence of light and colour. In here the form is no longer separable from a transformation, a process of disintegration created by the never-ending relations of light and shadow, of clarity and obscurity. This optical relationship between light and shadow make that the object's form becomes the colour itself. Deleuze mentions that in this kind of representation the organisation that existed in classical painting leads its place to composition since for him a composition is an organisation, which is in the process of disintegration. What happens then is that, it is no longer the essence (presupposed as achieved fact) that appears but it is the apparition that creates essence. Deleuze argues that "things rise up and ascend into the light.

The other path, the creation of a purely manual space, can be found in Gothic art, where instead of being directed to the optical, we are face to face with a hand given speed and violence that creates lines going to infinity by "continually changing direction, perpetually twisting, splitting and breaking from itself"(Deleuze, 1992, 70). Basing himself on Wilhelm Worringer, Deleuze argues that the Gothic line is an expressionistic abstraction and it is opposed to the geometric line of the Egyptian essence and the optical space of luminous apparition. This is due to the fact that in Gothic art, the line becomes more than a line by being constantly broken, and the plane become less than a surface. The line does not delimit any contour and does not outline any form. According to Deleuze, the space of Gothic art is a manual space, a

space of active manual trait, which works through “manual aggregates” rather than through “luminous disintegration”. This non-organic line (as opposed to the organic representation of classical art) imposes in fact a zone where forms become indiscernible.

Bacon’s paintings can be understood to have similarities with those of the Egyptians. In fact, in most of his paintings, the contour, the form and the ground exist as two equally closed sectors lying on the same plane. But what differentiates Bacon’s work from a haptic but also from tactile- optical representation is the presence of an irruption, a scrambled or cleaned zone that overturns the optical coordinates as well as the tactile connections.

In most of Bacon’s paintings there are relations of proximity between different fields. First of all the field has clear-cut sections. In Fig.37 the dark ground delimited by a curvilinear line and forming a clear zone in the bottom half of the image. The light ground on the upper half of the page is separated but also connected to each other by the contour. However there is a difference when we pass to the figure in the middle. Because here, there is the play of light and shadow, the contour ceases to be the common limit of the form and the ground, on a single plane. It becomes the organic contour of the form, the mould we already mentioned in the tactile-optical scheme of classical painting. What happens to the figure, the fact that it is swept up, wiped away, distanciates Bacon from haptic and optical representations. Deleuze argues that this accidental catastrophe, this disintegration is in the interval between the planes. It is happening neither on the foreground nor in the background because it creates a link between the optical and the manual. It is the colour that starts to shape

the figure and the contour becomes an a-signifying element by renouncing to delimit a form. Perhaps this effect is more visible in Fig.39 where we see that the figure, which spreads out from the parallelepiped, is delimited not by the contour but it is the colour, which shapes it. Or in Fig 38, where the accidental throwing of the white paint overturns the relationship existing between contour and colour.

We can say that in Bacon, there is a plurality of zones or rather a communication between different zones. In the painting we analysed so far (Fig. 37) Bacon has an original system which moves the figure to the fields of colour. Because of the dissolving head, the motionless uniform colour around the figure, is neither beneath, behind or beyond the figure but rather all around it. When we move from the figure to the fields of colour there is no relation of depth or distance because it is as if the figure is dissolving into the colour. Here the scrambled or wiped-off zone will stand on its own, independent of every definite form, appearing as pure force without object, and Deleuze, uses the Bataillian metaphor of dust as follows: “The figure is dissipated by realising the prophecy: you will no longer be anything but sand grass, dust or a drop of water...” (Deleuze, 1992, 21).

Drawing on a similarity between Cezanne and Bacon, Deleuze argues that what matter for both of them is to paint the sensation. According to Bacon, the form related to sensation, which is the figure, is the opposite of the form related to an object that is supposed to represent through figuration. The figure here is in a movement between a plurality of zones we mentioned earlier. This movement, this dissolution, transformation of the figure into the paint or colour, is what transmits a sensation having different orders and levels, which blocks the narration. This

sensation is different from the sensational since what is sensational is narrative, re-introducing a story to be told. However for Deleuze these different levels of sensations are not separated from each other and every sensation is already an “accumulated” and coagulated sensation. Although levels of sensations in Bacon’s paintings are like snapshots or momentary instants of movement, which recomposes movement synthetically (like the cubists), this movement is a movement in place, like spasm in a body, a body deformation. Deleuze argues that for Bacon “sensation is what passes from one ‘order’ to another, from one ‘level’ to another, from one ‘area’ to another.”(Deleuze, 1992, 24). And this passage from one level to another happens through deformations. What is lacking in both figurative and abstract paintings is the fact that they don’t attain the sensation because they can only implement transformation of forms but not deformations of bodies which will permit them to pass from one level to another. This movement can also exist in the bodies of the figures of Bacon’s paintings For Deleuze, Bacon dismantles the organism in favour of the body. The body becomes wave of flows and traces. The wiped and brushed part of the canvas creates bodies with polyvalent and indeterminate organs. To be clear we can analyse Figure 40. In here there is an ambiguous figure which seems to be in movement. The body of the figure is composed of different brush strokes, creating a variation of texture and colour of and across that body. This variety means that organs and body parts are not determined. Is the head in a profile or frontal position? Where are the eyes? In the place of the ears? Where is the left arm, is it becoming the knee of the figure? Is the body escaping from its organism? It is as if any organs, any parts of body are determined at a level, than changed, losing their identity. In that sense they become provisional, persisting only as long as the

passage of the wave (brush stroke), the action of the force make it ready to be



Figure 40. Bacon, Francis. Portrait of George Dyer Riding a Bicycle. 1966. Oil on Canvas (78x58 cm). Ernst Beyeler Basel.

displaced and positioned elsewhere. Deleuze argues that, Baconian body is a body without organs, not because it lacks organs, but rather it lacks the organisation of organs. In his paintings there is a “pathic” (non-representative) moment of the sensation. In figure 40 for example but most obviously in 39 it is as if there is a kind of unity of the senses, of the figure in the painting. The tormented body of the figure in Fig.40 seems to have uncontrollable reactions. Not only we cannot differentiate his bodily parts from each other but also there is a neutralisation of the differences between the senses, through the acceptance of their responses as an uncontrollable force or power within the body. Also, the distorted representation of the body of the figure creates a more direct contact with the viewer in the sense that it creates also different levels of sensation in the viewer, which are not reducible to visual sensation. Deleuze says for most of Bacon’s paintings that: “we ...hear the noise of the beast hooves...we feel the quiver of the bird, which is plunging into the place of the head; and every time meat is represented, we touch it, feel it, eat it, weigh it...”. In other words the visual sensation is united with the other senses and a multisensible figure appears. According to Deleuze, this is similar to a Cezannian “nonrational”, noncerebral “logic of the senses.”(Deleuze, 1992, 27). I think that this account is different from modernist visual ideology referred to already by Krauss. The main difference lies on a kind of a loss of autonomy of each sense and unity of all senses in Bacon’s work. Considering this we can perhaps say that the uncanniness of Bacon’s figures lies in the fact that they create a loss of autonomy of the visual and a creation of a movement between a plurality of zones. But it would be better I think to enlarge this account while analysing some of Miro’s paintings. Perhaps in Miro the uncanniness is born and created by loss of autonomy of the vision, in the sense that it is a loss which will bring with it, transformation and intermingling of all senses. This

can bring a different and new relationship of the uncanny to memory. But first, it would be better to point out the similarities that exist between Miro and Bacon. Miro has a different style, but in some of his paintings we can see the escaping of the body from itself and this movement between different senses.

#### **5.4 SIMILARITIES BETWEEN BACON AND MIRO: MIRO'S UNCANNINESS AS A COEXISTENCE OF DIFFERENT SENSATIONS AND PLURALITY OF ZONES**

If we start by analysing Fig. 41 for example, we can ask this question: Is the form of figure of the dog on the right of the picture, the form that the painter wanted to give to that dog? Or is it a form born out of the paint, of its fluidity which makes it bolder in some areas and lighter in others, which creates its own form by just drying on the canvas? This dialogue between the forms is more visible in the second painting, Fig 42, where some animal seeming figure at the right is perhaps not the body of the already known animal, because we cannot escape seeing its skin as a combination of different coloured paints. In a way, the body's boundaries are disrupted, since it can never be complete, it is even fluid, transgressing its limits, leaching into other materials through the paint which surrounds the pictorial space. There is perhaps a play between locations, orientations and other meanings, ambiguity between figure ground, body skin, man and animal. Especially we can find similarities between the animal connoting figure of Fig. 42 and the figure riding a bicycle of Fig. 40. In Miro's figures, as in Bacon's ones, there is continuity through the bodily parts in the sense that we cannot separate the bodily parts easily from each other but also from

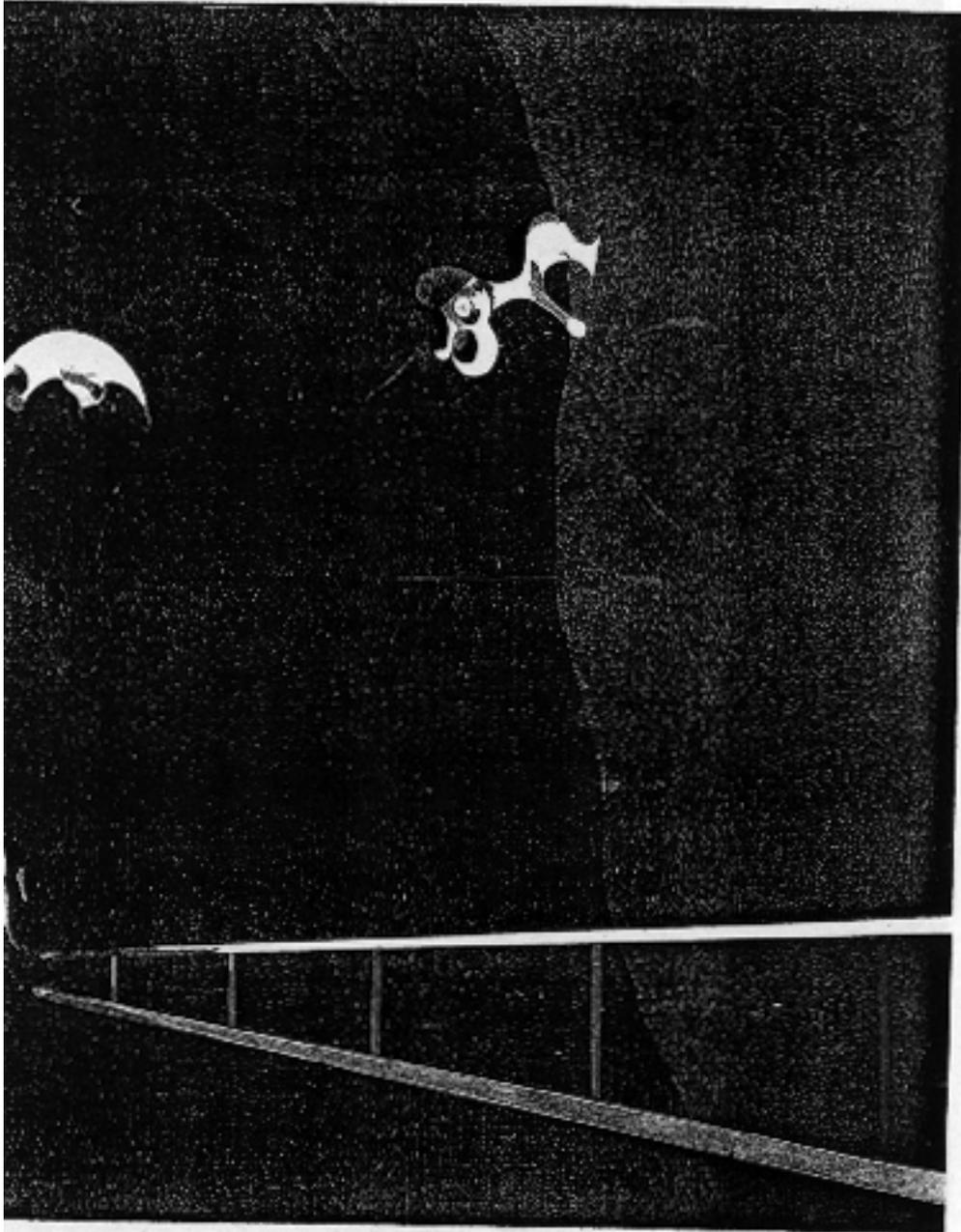


Figure 41. Miro, Joan Dog Barking at the Moon, 1926. Oil on Canvas (73x92 cm). The Philadelphia Museum of Art. A.E.Gallatin Collection

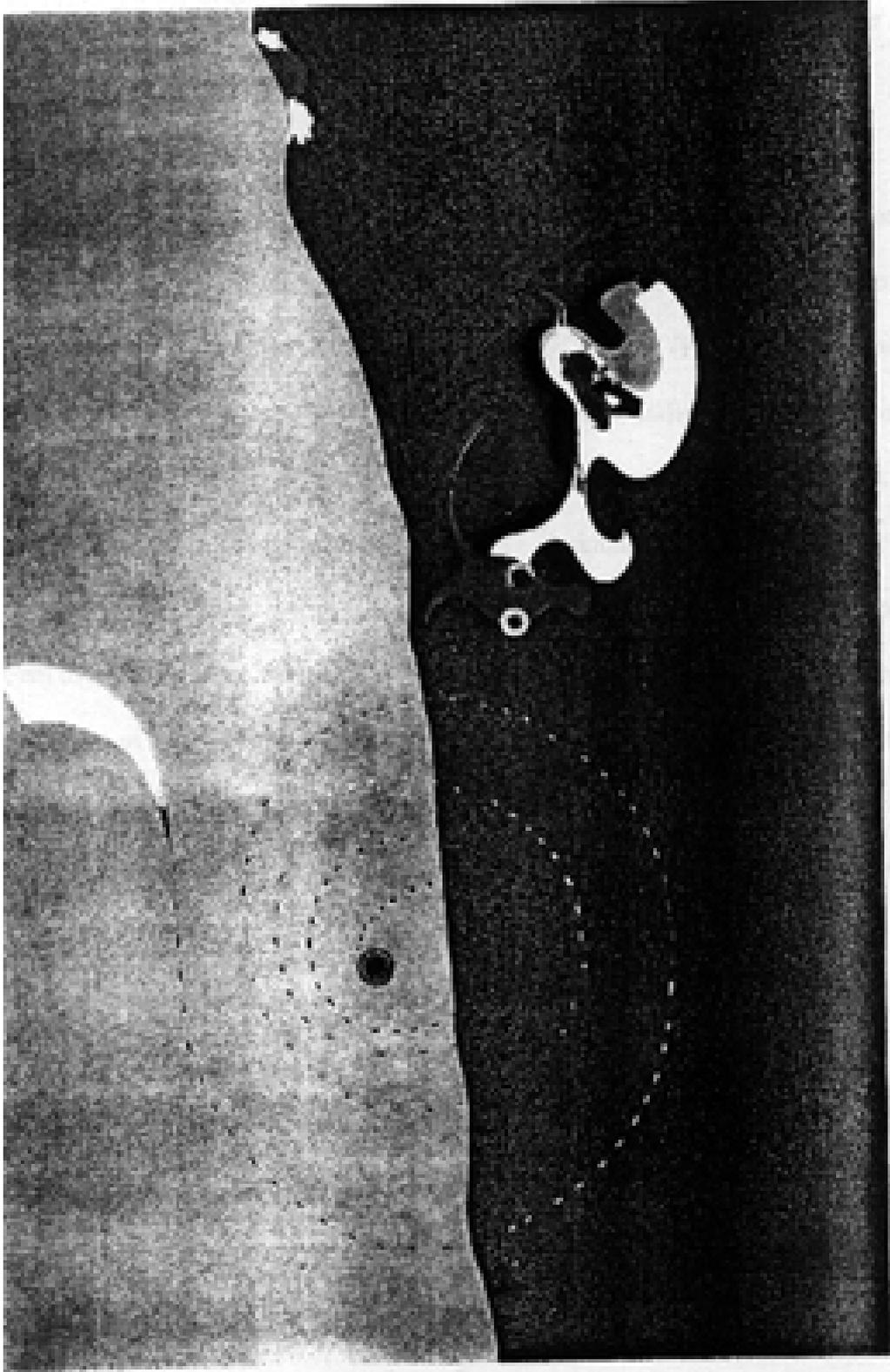


Figure 42. Miro, Landscape , 1927. Oil on Canvas (129,5x194,5 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

the ground that the figure is painted on. Is Miro's figure in Fig.32 a representation of an animal? Which one? Or is it a form, which represent only the paint itself as the form at the right part of the picture? If we consider it as an animal, where the front paws of the animal end and the rear paws starts? Doesn't it seem as if it has a body with different parts in fusion into each other as in Bacon's bicycle rider?

Also, in Figures 43 and 44, we can see deformed bodies similar to Baconian ones. In Fig. 43 there is a metamorphosis, according to the title. The style of Miro in this painting is not the same as Bacon's Study of Self Portrait (Fig. 37) in the sense that there are no wiped zones. But there are still deformed bodies. Bodies that lose their identity, bodies whose organisation of parts are indeterminate. We cannot define them. Are they bodies of human beings? Animals? Plants? There are some connotations of bodily parts. The two figures on the right bottom of the painting seem to stand erect on their legs. Perhaps the figure of the left has even a penis, and the figure of the right has a face with an open mouth. But these interpretations are insecure because as soon as we define a bodily part we lose their identity. If we consider for example the circular form having a connotation of the eye, and repeated in different parts of the figures, as really being the eye, how can we explain its presence on the bottom part of the yellowish figure of the bottom right of the painting?

Apart from a certain movement of sensations within the body of Miro's figures, another important element in Miro's paintings is the presence of a plurality of zones we already mentioned in Bacon. In Figures 41 and 42 for example, it is as if we go between a zone characterised by figurative elements, that we recognise within the

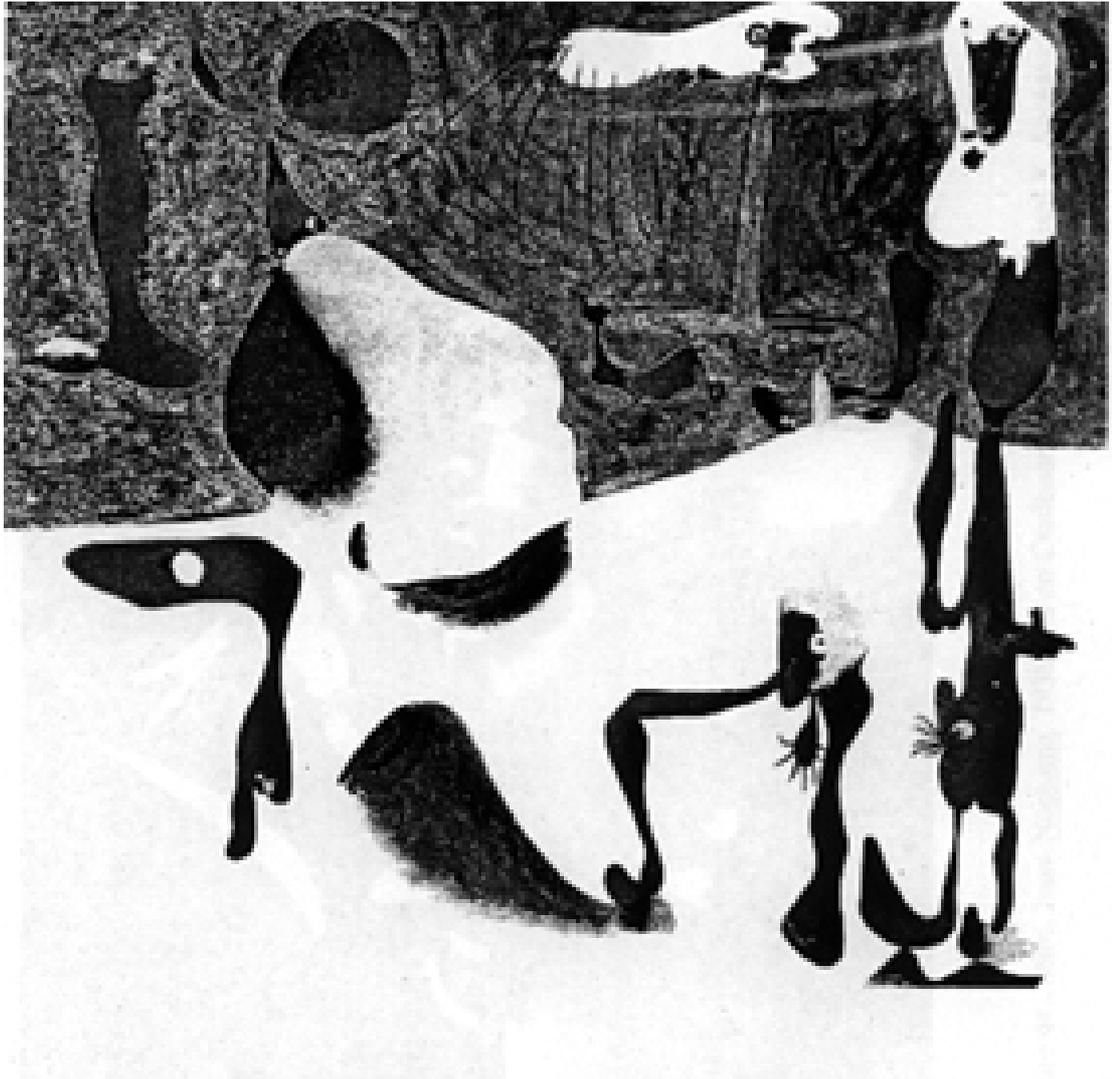


Figure 43. Miro, Joan. *Personnages in the presence of a Metamorphosis*, 1936. Egg tempera on Masonite. (59x57cm) New Orleans Museum of Art.



Figure 44. Miró, Joan. Nocturne, 1938. Oil on Cardboard (34x74cm). William R. Acquavella, New York.

composition such as the animal and the ladder standing in the dark foreground of Fig. 41; and another zone characterised by colours freed from contours where there is no figuration. These two zones are not totally separated from each other and there is as if a becoming figure of the colour and becoming colour of the figure. Perhaps there is even a volumic aspect of the colour. The colour in Miro's paintings has a volume, a three dimensionality that is not limited by any contour nor through a difference of tonality. This can also be visible I think in Figure 45. In this painting depicting a Still Life, there is at first sight a coexistence of different coloured areas. But these areas give birth to figures, such as shoe or bottle in such a way that there's no contour that delimits the figures. In some areas the proximity of different colours is not so sharp and there is no one colour which defines one object but all the colours creates the object. I think this characteristic creates levels of sensation similar to Baconian figures. Let's compare Fig 40 and 45. In Bacon's painting, (Fig 40) it is the colour which also forms the contours of the figure and it gives us the impression that the movement of the figure is not prepared, visualised in advance. It is according to fluidity of the colour, of the paint that this movement is born, but this fluidity giving birth to a sort of chance is not the same as abstract expressionism since we still recognise a figure, although this recognition is temporal, appearing and disappearing. The same kind of recognition misrecognition (recognition is taken here as a recognition of a figure which is part of a definable composition) exist in Miro's painting because we are struggling between a recognition of figurative elements such as shoe or bottle, and a disturbing of this recognition by the fact that these are only painted surfaces which are combined next to each other (Fig. 45). This is a becoming which creates a certain narrativity of perception. What is happening both in Bacon's

and in Miro's works is not the representation of a perceived sequence of events but a



Figure 45. Miro, Joan. *Still Life with Old Shoes*, 1937. Oil on canvas (81.3x116.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art New York.

representation of perceiving as a sequence of events, in the sense that the narrative is not the content of the perception but defines the structure of perception. So both in Figures 42, 43 and 45 we can perceive a plurality of zones. We move across different zones, figurative zone, abstract zone and a zone, which is in between them. Although Miro's paintings like Bacon's ones reflect a possibility of sensation, this sensation can push us to relate Miro's work and its relationship to memory in a different way, in the sense that what is memorised in Miro is the experience of colour instead of an experience of restructuring the already-seen figurativeness. We may be tempted to re-construct figurative elements, to re-cognise some shapes and figures that we already know, such as animals, human beings etc. But this temptation is exceeded because we are released from this temptation and come to forget this structuring by the movement between different zones, by the fact that there are in fact nothing to be re-constructed and there is only the colour, the paint, its fluidity and its trace on the canvas, although this paint, unlike abstract expressionism, seems to embody a recognisable figure.

Departing from this we can claim that the uncanniness of Miro's spaces come from a possibility of remembering differently. Unlike Ernst collages, the memory in Miro is not based on a structure. We are not constructing something at the beginning which then we forgot, until what we have constructed appears in another way. Rather, in Miro there is remembering that there was perhaps no ordinary-constructed image to be memorised.

For Deleuze, Bacon's accidental free marks means that, even if the painting is figurative, the marks and the traces are non-representative, non-illustrative and non-narrative. They are features of sensation. The action of hands breaks the optical organisation to such extent that we no longer see the figurative objects. The artist registers only the painterly sensation. The faces become heads and heads becomes flesh. Deleuze argues that this is an attempt of escaping from the history of art, which exist in all of us. I think that in Miro's paintings a similar attempt is present in the sense that Miro's paintings show a possibility of escaping from the history of perceived and memorised things.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **6.CONCLUSION**

We can perhaps say that the concept of uncanny is presented in Derrida's text entitled "Freud and the Scene of Writing" when he argues for the "symptomatic return of the repressed: the metaphor of writing which haunts European discourse" (1978, 197) However he also points out that this repression is not comprehensible on the basis of Freudian concept of repression since like the other concepts such as presence, perception and reality which Freud refers constantly, it needs a labor of deconstruction.

In this text, Derrida's aim was to show how Freudian concepts of writing and trace cannot easily be contained within logocentric closure. In that respect, he is showing the impossibility of having an original presence or rather an essence before trace and writing since for him it is a non origin which is originary. This way of thinking can thus problematise the relationship of memory to representation and perception. If there's no originary things to be perceived and memorised, and if what is perceived and memorised, is always already represented, then we come to a point where the difference between signifier and signified is never radical. I think that this blurring of the distinctions between signifier and signified or even, the impossibility of having

fixed and ordinary signifiers, was something, which occurred frequently throughout this study. Although the concept of composition was based on an idea of unity created by a fixity of signifiers and signifieds, an analysis of some examples of visual arts in terms of the concept of uncanny, permitted us to show that there is a possibility of challenging the preconceived understanding of composition, and composition can become a source of disorientation and can interrupt the desire to reach a visual unity

All of the artist's works we analysed so far, and which represent different modes of representation and create different relationships between the observer and the observed, we are confronted with an impossibility of grasping images in totality, as a whole. However this impossibility does not kill the desire for images. In Ernst's case for example the desire for narrativity of images exist, in De Chirico the desire of having stable perspectives which creates unity as far as the narrativity is concerned, is still there; and in Miro the desire of recognising and remembering exist. What this thesis perhaps shows is the fact that this desire is not always satisfied. In all of the three examples, we are confronted in fact with a possibility of losing our direction by being reminded that a plurality of spaces and zones could be hidden under the familiar space of representation. I think that this thesis is also questioning the relationship of uncanniness and space by pointing out how the spaces of representation we are used to perceive can also deceive us. Departing from the same problematic, an investigation of composition and uncanny can be pursued by going outside the frames of images by analysing for example the compositional uncanniness that exist within the spaces of installations. But this would be another problematic, which may be treated in other studies.

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