

# Positivism, Impressionism and Magic: modifying the modern canon in America and France from the 1940s

Gavin Parkinson

A debate continues as to the value and definition of the term 'positivism' to our understanding of Impressionist painting and what came after. The blunt view has been presented by Albert Boime, who stated that 'during a period of conservative political backlash' in the 1870s after the Franco-Prussian War, Commune and *semaine sanglante*, the Impressionists 'still link[ed] their activities to the positivism and materialism of modern life expressed in Third Republic science, entrepreneurialism and colonialism.'<sup>1</sup> James H. Rubin is more precise in a popular account of Impressionism, avowing that positivism was 'undoubtedly the dominant philosophy of the third quarter of the nineteenth century,' implying that its main philosopher Auguste Comte and contemporary representatives in literature, philosophy and history – Émile Zola, Hippolyte Taine, Jules Michelet and Ernest Renan – articulated a means of understanding the world that was shared by the Impressionists, confirmed by the repudiation of realism and positivism in a cruder form by Charles Baudelaire.<sup>2</sup>

However, Richard Schiff had earlier criticised the ways art historians had handled positivism and how they had portrayed its relevance to Impressionism. Insisting that '[t]he term "positivism" has so many meanings that further qualification is demanded before it is to be used at all,' he went on to state that 'the more specific brand of positivism derived from Auguste Comte speaks clearly against an art of simple observation or realism.'<sup>3</sup> The treatment of positivism as a central epistemological concern in a gendered reading of Impressionism by Norma Broude entailed a re-examination of the origins of its linkage with the movement in

<sup>1</sup> Albert Boime, *Art and the French Commune: Imagining Paris After War and Revolution*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995, 45.

<sup>2</sup> James H. Rubin, *Impressionism*, London: Phaidon, 1999, 36.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Schiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, 13. I am wary of attempting another full definition of positivism here, Comtean or other, because my intention is to set out how the term was understood and wielded polemically later on by André Breton and Clement Greenberg, and it is in those discussions, below, that I give some substance to its meanings. For definitions of positivism for philosophy and art history associated with observation, materialism, realism, science, empiricism and so on, along with the identification of its misuse in the vicinity of Impressionism by art historians such as Marianne Marcussen, Linda Nochlin, H. R. Rookmaaker and Charles F. Stuckey, see Schiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, 23-6, 241 n. 22 and n. 25; and Norma Broude, *Impressionism, A Feminist Reading: The Gendering of Art, Science, and Nature in the Nineteenth Century*, New York: Rizzoli, 1991, 185 n. 39.

the nineteenth century. While accepting that Comte's ideas 'affected to some extent all fields of knowledge and cultural endeavour in nineteenth-century France,' Broude perceived an exaggeration among late nineteenth-century writers of the links between Romantic artists' interest in science 'to support the notion of a predominantly positivist and materialist orientation among artists in France during this period,' and concluded that the Impressionists and their supporters like Zola did not at all view the artist as a positivist in the vulgar sense of an 'impassive recorder of empirical phenomena.'<sup>4</sup> Since then, T. J. Clark has weighed in with the opinion that: 'Monet's art is driven not so much by a version of positivism as by a cult of art as immolation,'<sup>5</sup> while Mary Tompkins Lewis has reiterated the 'limited lens' offered by positivism as the 'most crucial context for Impressionism's presumed basis in material, visual fact.'<sup>6</sup>

Whatever its fate will be in this recent and developing historiography, there is an earlier one that can be reconstituted to show the crucial value given to positivism during the reassessment of the canon of modern painting in the middle period of the twentieth century. This article imparts a narrative that will demonstrate the importance afforded positivism in the 1940s and 1950s in the contestation over the significance of Impressionism and its relevance to the most important contemporary art, by modernist art history, on the one hand, and by Surrealism on the other. This difference of opinion between modernists and Surrealists rested partly on the priority allowed certain of the generation of artists who came after Impressionism or viewed it in a critical light, and were evaluated and elevated ahead of the earlier movement by modernists. Those 'patriarchs' – Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat and Vincent van Gogh – by no means received the blanket rejection from Surrealism that the Impressionists did, yet they were admired on entirely different grounds to those given precedence in the critical practices of modernist art history.

### **Surrealism and the eclipse of Impressionism between the Wars**

Of the cohort of painters critical of the Paris Salon who came to prominence after the Impressionists, Gauguin was the one who came to reject their attitudes most violently in the wake of Symbolism. This was carried out with an ideological fervour in a passage that has since been quoted frequently:

They studied color, and color alone, as a decorative effect, but they did so without freedom, remaining bound by the shackles of verisimilitude. For them there is no such thing as a landscape that has been dreamed, created from nothing. They looked, and they saw, harmoniously, but without any

<sup>4</sup> Broude, *Impressionism*, 121, 116, 123.

<sup>5</sup> T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Tompkins Lewis, 'Introduction: The Critical History of Impressionism: An Overview,' Mary Tompkins Lewis, (ed), *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism: An Anthology*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007, 1-19, 1.

goal: they did not build their edifice on any sturdy foundation of reasoning as to why feelings are perceived through color.

They focused their efforts around the eye, not in the mysterious center of thought, and from there they slipped into scientific reasons.... Intellect and sweet mystery were neither the pretext nor the conclusions; what they painted was the nightingale's song.... Dazzled by their first triumph, their vanity made them believe it was the be-all and the end-all. It is they who will be the official painters of tomorrow, far more dangerous than yesterday's.<sup>7</sup>

Although Gauguin recognised some of the initial achievements of the Impressionists, especially those of Claude Monet, his conclusions were unsparing: '[w]hen they talk about their art, what exactly are they talking about? An entirely superficial art, nothing but affectation and materialism; the intellect has no place in it.'<sup>8</sup>

According to the former Surrealist José Pierre, writing in the 1980s, the 'Surrealists would have agreed without hesitation' with Gauguin's statement.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Surrealist approval had already long been bestowed by the movement's main spokesperson André Breton who quoted from the closing part of Gauguin's refutation of Impressionist opticality – about superficiality, affectation and materialism – in one of the lectures he gave on his pedagogical visit to Port-au-Prince in Haiti in 1945-6, taking it as a general denunciation of the 'occidental' art of Gauguin's day.<sup>10</sup> Earlier in that lecture, which was devoted entirely to the art of the second half of the nineteenth century but remained unpublished in his lifetime, Breton had made his own most extensive comments to date on Impressionism. These were brief, filled with reserve and directed towards the Monet-Renoir wing of the movement:

Impressionism, as a movement in reaction against those that had preceded it, repudiated, in fact, the Romantic imagination and all that which painters named with ill-will *literature*. Indifferent to philosophy and poetry, the Impressionist painters claim to paint only what they see and as they see it, focussing above all on water, the sky and mists, or in other words on everything that time makes and unmakes indefinitely. The unsolicited find [trouvaille], fruit of simple chance as almost always, which gave flight to Impressionism, seems to have been the initially vague and completely

<sup>7</sup> Paul Gauguin, *The Writings of a Savage* [1974], ed. Daniel Guérin, trans. Eleanor Levieux, New York: The Viking Press, 1978, 140-41.

<sup>8</sup> Gauguin, *Writings of a Savage*, 141. These lines would eventually appear in *Diverses Choses*, written in 1896-8, and they were first put into circulation in 1906 when quoted in the very early monograph on the artist by Jean de Rotonchamp, *Paul Gauguin, 1848-1903*, Paris: Édouard Druet et C<sup>ie</sup>, 1906, 210.

<sup>9</sup> 'les surréalistes auraient souscrit sans hésiter,' José Pierre, *L'Univers surréaliste*, Paris: Somogy, 1983, 57.

<sup>10</sup> André Breton, 'Conférences d'Haïti, III' [1946], André Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, Paris: Gallimard, 1999, 233-51, 237.

involuntary observation of the reflection of a landscape on the water of a river.<sup>11</sup>

This was a well-worn take on Impressionism that had its source in Symbolist circles in the early 1890s.<sup>12</sup> However, it was redeemed at least a little in Breton's rendering by a refusal to lump every non-Symbolist from Gustave Courbet and Édouard Manet through to Seurat, all of whom he admired, with Impressionist 'materialism.' Beyond this, however, he gave his attentive Haitian audience only an abbreviated introduction to the Impressionists as artists preoccupied with temporality and light and too tied to the surfaces of objects to create anything more decisive than a 'visual revolution.'<sup>13</sup>

Further confirmation that Breton was brooding on Impressionism in the mid 1940s for some reason can be found in a letter sent from New York a few weeks before the Haiti lecture to the Surrealist painter Victor Brauner. Breton wrote there of leafing through *Cahiers d'Art* with Marcel Duchamp before concluding to Brauner:

all works of art which make the slightest concession to the physical, to the physical aspect of things, to models nude or dressed, landscapes, still-lives, etc. ... and whatever distortion to which they may give rise, must be *pitilessly* shunned. All of that smacks of the vainest sort of Impressionism. Today, this must be the sole measure of judgement.<sup>14</sup>

The programme identifying the creative act with a fathoming of the self as set out in the *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) had been carried swiftly into painting by Breton in 1925 where he wrote of 'a *purely internal model*,' not the Impressionist one taken from nature, as the first and last point of reference for the movement's painters.<sup>15</sup> No doubt, then, he and the Surrealists had always thought of Impressionism in the way he set out to Brauner and to the audience in Haiti in the months after the end of the

<sup>11</sup> 'L'impressionnisme, comme mouvement de réaction contre ceux qui l'ont précédé, répudié en effet l'imagination romantique et tout ce que les peintres nomment en mauvaise part la *littérature*. Indifférents à la philosophie comme à la poésie, les peintres impressionnistes prétendent ne peindre que ce qu'ils voient et comme ils le voient, en s'attachant surtout à l'eau, au ciel et aux brumes, autrement dit à tout ce que le temps fait et défait indéfiniment. La trouvaille, fruit du simple hasard comme presque toujours, qui a donné essor à l'impressionnisme semble bien avoir été l'observation d'abord distraite et tout involontaire du reflet d'un paysage dans l'eau d'une rivière,' Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 235-6.

Breton was referring at the end of this passage to the studies of water carried out by Monet and Renoir at the floating restaurant and bathing place La Grenouillère late in 1869: John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism* [1946], New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973, 226-32.

<sup>12</sup> See the remarks on the Symbolist context in Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 129.

<sup>13</sup> 'révolution visuelle,' Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 236.

<sup>14</sup> Letter of 27 October 1945, quoted by Didier Semin, 'Victor Brauner and the Surrealist Movement,' *The Menil Collection* (ed.), *Victor Brauner: Surrealist Hieroglyphs*, Hatje Cantz: Ostfildern-Ruit, 2001, 23-41, 34 (translation slightly modified).

<sup>15</sup> André Breton, 'Surrealism and Painting' [1925-8], *Surrealism and Painting* [1965], trans. Simon Watson Taylor, New York: Harper & Row, 1972, 1-48, 4.

Second World War, but these were rare remarks and we should ask why that was and what provoked them at that moment.

Gauguin's anti-Impressionist remarks would make the rounds of the Surrealist group and found favour there in later years.<sup>16</sup> However, there is barely any record of a commentary within Surrealism on Impressionism between the two wars. This silence corresponds with the dip in the critical fortunes internationally of Impressionism in the 1920s and 1930s, to the point where it is absent from the famous diagram created for the catalogue of the New York Museum of Modern Art show of 1936, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, where all of twentieth century art tumbles mainly out of the achievements of Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat and van Gogh from '1890.'<sup>17</sup> In fact, that historiographical decline in significance was to some extent down to the sheer dissimilarity of Surrealist art to Impressionist painting in its techniques, aims and effects, and the temporary irrelevance of Monet and his colleagues consequently brought about while Surrealism was in the ascendant in those two decades.<sup>18</sup> But Breton's words to Brauner carry a dull ring of futility to our ears. It is well known that Impressionist painting, and particularly Monet's work, underwent a revival of interest in the postwar period, culminating in the 1950s, which is a key moment in the much lesser-known narrative I will go on to relay here.

### **Surrealism and Modernism in New York, 1941-44**

The powerful aversion provoked in Breton's letter to Brauner is related closely to unfolding debates among modernist critics and historians that would eventually affirm the historical importance of Impressionism a few years later, and even demonstrates an alert yet guarded awareness of them. In Paris before the war, then in New York during it, Breton certainly came into contact with art historians and critics with whom he could have conversed on the modernist justification of the modern canon that used largely formalist means. He had plenty of dealings (most of them fractious) with Alfred H. Barr, Jr. during the organisation of the 1936-7 travelling exhibition organized by MoMA, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (which came immediately after *Cubism and Abstract Art*).<sup>19</sup> As Sybil Gordon Kantor stated: 'Barr's formal analysis was pervasive in all his writings and translated itself into the organisational structures of the Museum,' from the moment of the show *Cézanne*,

<sup>16</sup> See the discussion and approval of Gauguin's rejection of Impressionism, which go beyond the remarks of Breton and Pierre, by the Surrealist Gérard Legrand, *Gauguin*, Paris: Club d'Art Bordas, 1966, 43-4.

<sup>17</sup> Ironically, given the fate of Symbolism at the hands of modernist criticism, the deep roots of the advancement of modernist hero Gauguin ahead of Impressionism, as Breton must have been aware as a reader of the *Mercure de France*, lie in Symbolist circles, in the article by Albert Aurier, 'Le Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin,' *Mercure de France*, tome 2, March 1891, 155-65.

<sup>18</sup> See Lewis (ed), *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*, 9-13.

<sup>19</sup> For the difficult negotiations that surrounded the staging of *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, see Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, and the Surrealist Exhibition Installations*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 2001, 10-19.

*Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh*, which opened MoMA's curatorial programme in 1929.<sup>20</sup> So Breton must have known about formalism before the war, even though Barr deployed its familiar terms in the pamphlet distributed as a guide to *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* only by contrast with the (unspecified) 'fantastic,' 'irrational,' 'spontaneous,' 'marvellous,' 'enigmatic' and 'dreamlike' content of Surrealist art.<sup>21</sup> Still in Paris, Breton could have met Robert Goldwater who was in the capital in 1937-8 as a student researching what would become his best-known book *Primitivism and Modern Painting* (1938), containing a section on Dada and (mainly) Surrealism. In that period, Goldwater met his future wife Louise Bourgeois who had lived in the same building that housed Breton's Galerie Gradiva for a little over a year from the beginning of 1937, so there were certainly opportunities to meet.<sup>22</sup>

Breton got to know the French-speaking Meyer Schapiro in New York very well personally, who was so close to Goldwater that the prefatory note in *Primitivism and Modern Painting* could state that Schapiro had 'followed the work from its beginning.'<sup>23</sup> Others available for discussion at the time on trends in the criticism and historiography of modern painting included artists, critics and writers in the vicinity of Surrealism such as Lionel Abel, David Hare, Gerome Kamrowski, Robert Motherwell and Harold Rosenberg, as well as gallery owners Julien Levy and Pierre Matisse and the collector, writer on contemporary art and future dealer Sidney Janis. John Rewald had been in Paris in the 1930s before emigrating to New York in 1941 on the same vessel as Surrealist painter André Masson, with Barr as his sponsor, where he would play a significant part in the revival of interest in, and clarification of the importance of Impressionism through his classic *History of Impressionism of*

<sup>20</sup> Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 2002, 218. For the way in which Barr 'made the history of modern art a narrative of the developing codes of formalism' at MoMA and for the relation of his writing to Roger Fry's at the time of *Cubism and Abstract Art*, see Johanna Drucker, *Theorizing Modernism: Visual Art and the Critical Tradition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 82.

<sup>21</sup> 'These qualities have always been present in the metaphors and similes of poetry but they have been less frequent in painting, which in the past was largely concerned with reproducing external reality, with decoration, or, as in some of the more advanced movements of recent years, with the composition of color and line into formal design,' Alfred H. Barr, Jr., 'A Brief Guide to the Exhibition of Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism' [1936], *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, eds. Irving Sandler and Amy Newman, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986, 93-7, 93.

<sup>22</sup> Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 2005, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Robert J. Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*, New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1938, vii. In a letter of 8 October 1938 meant to impress her friend, the artist Colette Richarme, which turned out to be speculative about its cast of characters, Bourgeois wrote: 'Fortunately in New York I shall be joining artistic circles. Othon Friesz is there at the moment, so is Fernand Léger. Chirico and Salvador Dalí are Robert's friends and will be in our house regularly. Picasso and André Breton will also be there,' Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*, eds. Marie-Laure Berndac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, London: Violette Editions, 1998, 31-2, 32; Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 15.

1946.<sup>24</sup> From these and other sources, Breton knew at first hand despite his limited English about the strengthening formalist justification of the modern canon.

The break up of the Paris Surrealist group and dispersal of Surrealists from the beginning of the war seemed to confirm the decline of the movement, as had already been surmised by some in the later 1930s. Yet historians have demonstrated the tenacity of Surrealism in America during the war at first, focussing especially on 1942, which saw the arrival of Marcel Duchamp in June (Breton had disembarked in July the previous year). In October, the exhibition organized mainly by Breton with Duchamp, *First Papers of Surrealism*, began at the Whitelaw Read Mansion on Madison Avenue. Later that month Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery opened at 30 West 57<sup>th</sup> Street, showcasing sympathetically all of the major Surrealist artists. Contact between Surrealists and New York artists was good to begin with: the art of William Baziotes, Adolph Gottlieb, Motherwell (who made his debut at *First Papers of Surrealism*), Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko showed traces of Surrealist styles and preoccupations with myth, collective endeavour, automatist spontaneity and the unconscious. The Surrealists began their new review *VVV* also in 1942, making the current orientation of the movement known to artists, writers, curators and dealers. However, most of these would judge Surrealism as decadent or as a historical artefact from the following year, according to Martica Sawin, and emerge from its shadow led by attacks on Surrealists by critics and journalists more than artists.<sup>25</sup>

It was also in 1943 that Clement Greenberg devoted his first, terse statements to a few of the artists who would constitute the New York School. In October, he had written of the sculpture of David Smith as a class above Alexander Calder's following a passing mention of the sculptor in January;<sup>26</sup> then in November he reviewed Pollock's work for the first time, as 'the strongest abstract paintings I have yet seen by an American.'<sup>27</sup> Positive though more tempered judgments followed in May 1944 on a collage by Motherwell ('perhaps the most interesting work present') and a painting by Baziotes ('it makes one more curious about his particular future than about that of any other painter present') when they were shown at Guggenheim's spring salon for abstract and Surrealist artists at Art of This Century.<sup>28</sup>

To formalists and those modernists such as Greenberg who devised and sustained an influential story of modern art, Surrealism was an irrelevance,

<sup>24</sup> Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 1995, 136

<sup>25</sup> Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*, 291-3.

<sup>26</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of Alexander Calder and Giorgio de Chirico' [1943], *The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1, Perceptions and Judgements, 1939-1944*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, 159-60, 159.

<sup>27</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of Marc Chagall, Lyonel Feininger, and Jackson Pollock' [1943], *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1*, 164-6, 166.

<sup>28</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Review of a Group Exhibition at the Art of This Century Gallery, and of Exhibitions of Maria Martins and Luis Quintanilla' [1944], *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1*, 209-10, 210. He also spoke sympathetically in April 1944 of the work of Mark Tobey, an artist older than the Surrealists, who would be strongly associated with the New York School: Clement Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of Mark Tobey and Juan Gris' [1944], *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1*, 205-06.

aberration or distraction, and the more aloofness that contemporary US artists displayed towards it the better. Greenberg had already reckoned in the important text 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' of 1940 that 'orthodox Surrealists,' by which he meant the militant members of the Paris group, had 'reacted against abstract purity and turned back to a confusion of literature with painting as extreme as any of the past.'<sup>29</sup> More recently, in 1942 when Surrealism had seemed on a high in the US, he had written typically resolutely and dismissively in an exhibition review: 'Masson is a Surrealist, but he has absorbed enough Cubism, in spite of himself, never to lose sight of the direction in which the pictorial art of our times must go in order to be great.'<sup>30</sup> These were Greenberg's only published historiographical statements to date about Surrealism. Their casual and self-assured manner suggests that the movement was at an end anyway, but he had still said little about its consequence to the history of art.

He now went ahead and gauged this with hypnotic directness in 'Surrealist Painting' (1944), in which almost all of the visual culture of the movement was rudely disengaged from the historical and contemporary avant-garde.<sup>31</sup> Taking mainly the rounded, perspectival Magrittean and Dalinian Surrealism as his target, which had 'promoted the rehabilitation of academic art under a new literary guise,' Greenberg pronounced them a deviation from the historical logic of avant-garde painting since Manet and the Impressionists, which turned attention to materials and away from technique or subject matter.<sup>32</sup> Greenberg had referred to Impressionism only rarely, too, since he had aligned the movement with Manet, in 'Towards a Newer Laocoon,' as seeing 'the problems of painting as first and foremost problems of the medium, and [calling] the spectator's attention to this.'<sup>33</sup> More patently antithetical to Surrealism than the art of Manet, Gauguin or van Gogh, Impressionism was duly tendered in 'Surrealist Painting' as the counter to Pre-Raphaelitism, Symbolism and their heir Surrealism, in a logic that was carried by emphasis specifically on Impressionism's painterly qualities as opposed to the 'new and interesting kind of pictorial literature' offered by Surrealism, which 'is more literature or document than painting or art.'<sup>34</sup> Greenberg protested further in 'Surrealist Painting' as follows: '[a]dvanced painting since the Impressionists has established a certain decorum, a notion of the aesthetically relevant, which the Surrealists find pompous,' inserting Impressionism more robustly than previously into the tradition of Manet, Fauvism and Cubism that had 'created the first original

<sup>29</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' [1940], *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1*, 23-38, 36.

<sup>30</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Review of an Exhibition of André Masson' [1942], *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1*, 99.

<sup>31</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Surrealist Painting' [1944], *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1*, 225-31. For brief comments on Greenberg's measured 'banishment' of Surrealism in the 1940s, in which '[f]ormalist innovation trumps Surrealist malingering,' see Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, 67-9.

<sup>32</sup> Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1*, 230.

<sup>33</sup> Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1*, 30.

<sup>34</sup> Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1*, 231.

art style since the French Revolution,' which the Surrealists, who 'prefer Mantegna, Bosch, Vermeer, and Böcklin to the Impressionists,' were now placing under threat.<sup>35</sup>

Breton's declaration in the Haiti lecture early in 1946 that Impressionism was itself a kind of aberration in the recent history of art, in reaction to that which had come before it and in poor contrast especially to what came after it, was made not much over a year after Greenberg had made this criticism of Surrealist painting as inauthentic by virtue of its self-positioning within a different, 'literary' art historical lineage. In this emerging Surrealist account after years of unruffled silence on the matter, Impressionist opticality, materialism and 'positivism' made no sense to the validation of a metaphorical and increasingly esoteric content in art, while in the modernist version of events, most Surrealist art was excused from a canon tending towards abstraction and still forming in the wake of Impressionist truth-to-materials, as 'academic,' 'kitsch' or, yes, 'literary.'

### **Surrealism, Modernism and Positivism in the 1940s**

It was in this period, when disagreements over Surrealism and modernist abstraction by their chief spokesmen in New York were being tied to the importance or not of Impressionism to the history of art, that the term 'positivism' took on a more and more central role to the question. Breton had remonstrated long ago in the *Manifesto of Surrealism* that:

the realistic attitude, inspired by positivism, from Saint Thomas Aquinas to Anatole France, clearly seems to me to be hostile to any intellectual or moral advancement. I loathe it, for it is made up of mediocrity, hate, and dull conceit. It is this attitude which today gives birth to these ridiculous books, these insulting plays. It constantly feeds on and derives strength from the newspapers and stultifies both science and art by assiduously flattering the lowest of tastes; clarity bordering on stupidity....<sup>36</sup>

It is pointless to add that experience itself has become increasingly circumscribed. It paces back and forth in a cage from which it is more and more difficult to make its escape. It too leans for support on what is most immediately expedient, and it is protected by the sentinels of common sense. Under the pretence of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy....<sup>37</sup>

Now reluctantly settled on US soil, in December 1942 Breton lectured at Yale University on the 'Situation of Surrealism between the Two Wars.' Measuring the achievements of and distance covered by Surrealism from his and Philippe

<sup>35</sup> Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, 229, 230, 231.

<sup>36</sup> André Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism' [1924], *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1972, 1-47, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Breton, *Manifestoes*, 9-10 (translation amended).

Soupault's collaborative collection of poems *Magnetic Fields* (1920) to Julien Gracq's novel *Au Château d'Argol* (1938) (deemed a 'tour de force' of 'boredom' by Greenberg earlier that year),<sup>38</sup> Breton spelled out what Surrealism had seen off:

Now that the storm is once again raging out of control, it is easier, alas, to understand how necessary such a readjustment is. Once again positivist realism, which returns in periods of dead calm to yawn above the waters, is proven guilty of impotence and, held up to derision, has no alternative but to take flight. So-called common sense, which can rightly claim it never learned anything, is requested to return at the end of the month with its invoice.<sup>39</sup>

These two references to positivism in the 1920s and 1940s were made, respectively, before and after the high period of Breton and Surrealism's involvement with organized communism, which is usually dated by historians 1927-35; Breton's attachment to Leon Trotsky outlasted this, but was itself diminished by the 1940s.<sup>40</sup> The rejection of positivism in 1942, then, must be at least partly explainable as a revocation of the politically inflected materialism of that earlier period. It can be aligned with the regret Breton would express ten years later, that in his exploration of the relations between dreams and waking life in *The Communicating Vessels* of 1932, 'I sacrificed too much to the "materialism" of the hour.'<sup>41</sup>

Greenberg was in the process of shedding his own earlier Trotskyism in the 1940s, as indicated by Annette Cox, yet his gradual shift away from political radicalism would impact his understanding of society, culture and the formation of knowledge under modernity in a way entirely contrary to Breton's. As Cox put it, Greenberg's moderacy meant that ultimately abstract expressionism in his criticism 'lost its leftist and Freudian political associations and became a reflection of the prosperity, pragmatism, and positivism of American cultural life.'<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Caroline A. Jones argues that Greenberg's positivism was present 'wherever the foundational milieus of bureaucratic rationalization were being established,'<sup>43</sup> and regards it as evidence of his 'hope to rescue materialism from Marxism.'<sup>44</sup> However, his use of the term from this period must be seen as at least as much a rhetorical means to distinguish and perhaps even rescue modernism from Surrealism in the face of the potential revival of the latter in 1942. Greenberg would definitely have

<sup>38</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Helter-Skelter: Review of *New Directions in Prose and Poetry: 1941*, edited by James Laughlin' [1942], *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, 100-102, 102.

<sup>39</sup> André Breton, 'Situation of Surrealism between the Two Wars' [1942], *Free Rein* [1953], trans. Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline d'Amboise, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, 51-67, 55.

<sup>40</sup> For the full story, see Carole Reynaud-Paligot, *Parcours politique des surréalistes 1919-1969*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2000.

<sup>41</sup> André Breton, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism* [1952], trans. Mark Polizzotti, New York: Paragon House, 1993, 241.

<sup>42</sup> Annette Cox, *Art-as-Politics: The Abstract Expressionist Avant-Garde and Society*, Ann Arbor MI: UMI Research Press, 1982, 157.

<sup>43</sup> Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 115.

<sup>44</sup> Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 116.

read Breton's boast about Surrealism's victory since the *Manifesto* over positivism and 'so-called common sense' when the New Haven lecture was published in the joint second and third issue of *VVV* in March 1943. The prospect of the resurrection of Surrealism might have inadvertently planted the seed of his landmark attack on its painting the following year; certainly, it seems to have hastened his deployment from then of the word 'positivism' to characterize and distinguish modernist art from it. Nancy Jachec has shown that Greenberg began a devotion to positivism, or at least started using the term systematically for abstract art, earlier than Cox suggests, in 'Abstract Art' in 1944,<sup>45</sup> the same year he attacked Surrealism, while Jones has tracked its more casual usage in his writings back to 1940-41 at which point, she says, Greenberg was still 'ambivalent' over it.<sup>46</sup>

Crucially, Greenberg linked positivism to Impressionism in 'Abstract Art' in order to assign contemporary abstraction a philosophical logic that strengthened the historical one he had already established in the earlier texts of 1939-40. In doing so, he implied that Surrealism had *excluded itself* from relevance to current painting, by identifying itself in opposition to the first and through its rejection of the second:

Impressionism pushed the faithful reproduction of nature so far that representational painting was turned inside out. Incited by positivism borrowed from science, the Impressionists made the discovery – stated more clearly in their art than in their theories – that the most direct interpretation of visual experience must be two-dimensional. The new medium of photography provided evidence for that.... Notice, therefore, how a flatness begins to creep into Impressionist paintings, how close to the surface they stay ... and how openly the physical nature of the canvas and of the paint on it is confessed.... The successors to Impressionism have made all this more explicit.... The taste most closely attuned to contemporary art has become positivist, even as the best philosophical and political intelligence of the time.<sup>47</sup>

The historical consistency and logical development Greenberg insisted upon in the lineage he drew for modern art meant that both the thinness and thickness of paint used respectively by canonical artists Gauguin and van Gogh had to be corralled into the truth-to-materials argument, emphasizing either canvas surface or pigment in a heads-I-win-tails-you-lose. In this way, Greenberg could stake an unlikely claim on the work of the two artists posthumously for positivism (and as precursors to contemporary abstraction), purporting to disclose the 'paradox' of Gauguin's complaint against Impressionist 'materialism' that would be so revered by the Surrealists.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Nancy Jachec, 'Modernism, Enlightenment Values, and Clement Greenberg,' *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1998, 121-32, 126-8.

<sup>46</sup> Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 104, 106.

<sup>47</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Abstract Art' [1944], *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, 199-204, 201, 203.

<sup>48</sup> Greenberg, 'Abstract Art' [1944], *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, 202.

Jones has observed the same conversion process in Greenberg's writings on Hans Hofmann, Barnett Newman, Rothko and any number of others who futilely maintained the relevance of religion, 'spirituality,' philosophy or politics for their work, just as he did for earlier French modernism.<sup>49</sup> The preoccupation with the "'physical" or technical' in mainly French art since Delacroix and Courbet, he wrote elsewhere in a review of 1946, 'reflected ... the conscious or unconscious positivism that forms the core of the bourgeois-industrialist ethos,' and it did not matter if 'the individual artist was a professing Catholic or a mystic or an anti-Dreyfusard – in spite of himself, his art spoke positivism or materialism.'<sup>50</sup> This is the same historically determined 'positivist or empirical state of mind' (as he would term it two years later),<sup>51</sup> untroubled by a personal (or historical) unconscious or individual philosophical position that shows through the work of Pablo Picasso, apparently, 'one of the most literary and super-structural of all painters in intention, and therefore incomparably sensitive to his age and milieu' who 'was forced to produce Cubism, the latest and most radical of all forms of positive art.'<sup>52</sup>

Greenberg conceded that '[a]fter 1920 the School of Paris's positivism ... began to lose faith in itself.'<sup>53</sup> But this was not a concession latterly demanded by Surrealism of Greenberg's argument because it thoroughly repudiated positivism. As we saw, Greenberg was perfectly prepared to draw artist-seers like Gauguin into his paradigm. Rather, it was, I am arguing, an *initial condition* of the modernist argument itself, as it shifted towards a dogma strengthened by what Jones calls 'Greenberg's repetitive, vernacular invocation of positivism,' that 'literary' Surrealism be excluded from historical relevance, and it was a *consequence* of it that Impressionism be restored.<sup>54</sup> This is the element that is missing from the accounts I have quoted from concerning Greenberg's turn to positivism in the 1940s, during which period the term had its highest frequency in his writings.

As Jones writes, Greenberg's uses of the term 'positivism' were not 'mere authorial pretensions,' but neither were Greenberg and Breton trading in an academic, fully justified use of it based on a close reading of Comte.<sup>55</sup> Jachec notes the relevance (not to mention the authority) lent by logical empiricism and logical positivism to Greenberg's usage, but believes Greenberg was caught up in a 'new radicalism,' that is, 'an essentially positivistic approach toward social engineering,

<sup>49</sup> Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 114.

<sup>50</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Review of an Exhibition of School of Paris Painters' [1946], *The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 2, Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, 87-90, 88.

<sup>51</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'The Decline of Cubism' [1948], *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 2*, 211-15, 214.

<sup>52</sup> Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 2*, 88.

<sup>53</sup> Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 2*, 88. Later, Greenberg would refer to the period 1920-25, the one in which Surrealism was born as an organized movement, as 'the high age of positivism,' Clement Greenberg, 'T. S. Eliot: The Criticism, The Poetry' [1950], *The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 3, Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, 66-71, 67.

<sup>54</sup> Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 105.

<sup>55</sup> Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 105, 98.

and economic and political planning.<sup>56</sup> Greenberg understood 'that great change from three to two-dimensionality which modern art has affected in pictorial space' as 'a change that expresses our industrial society's abandonment of Cartesian rationality for empiricism and positivism.'<sup>57</sup> Surrealism in Breton's hands fully accepted historical determinism and like Greenberg it did not accept that art should contain, reflect or attune to a manifest philosophy and certainly not the rationalist methods of the modern capitalist bureaucracy to which Greenberg was conforming; rather, art was forged from the latent human drives of the Id that underlay and gave form to modernity's episteme. The 'positivism' Breton rejected in Impressionism was neither the gestural brush stroke and material surface nor the illusion of three-dimensional space, all of which are to be found in Surrealism, but the model consciously adapted from the field of vision at the expense of an imagery spat out by the unconscious.

If the positivisms of Breton and Greenberg are loosely drawn, that did not make them any less serviceable to their respective intentions. These were meant to portray succinctly what had by then become entirely divergent means of understanding art and the world: materialist, on the one hand, and magical, on the other. 'Greenberg's new man,' writes Jones, emphasizing the gender, was the 'bureaucratic professional of a democratic, industrial, positivist, technocratic state,' wielding 'eyesight alone' in his appraisal of the visual arts.<sup>58</sup> Surrealism's was the Tiresian seer, the 'blind swimmer' who rejected positivism and forwent eyesight, its primary servant, in the quest for a deeper, occultist understanding of humankind and the world.

### **Magic and Modernism, 1943-47**

The period from 1943-47 was the one in which Surrealism manifested its greatest distance from positivism by its embrace of magic and the occult.<sup>59</sup> Odd, local events of action-at-a-distance that evaded contemporary rationalist causality had been identified and circulated in the 1920s among Surrealists. The best known can be found in Breton's *Nadja* (1928), but others are presented in another autobiographical and theoretical tract, *Mad Love* (1937), defiantly closer to the language of divination, no matter, he writes, 'how medieval such a way of seeing, in the eyes of certain positivistic minds, may seem.'<sup>60</sup> The outbreak of war had forced consideration along the lines of esotericism of the epistemic failure of European civilization, as it had during and after the First World War, leading the poet Benjamin Péret to extend Surrealist poetic theory fully from prophecy to non-modern magic specifically. This

<sup>56</sup> Jachec, 'Modernism, Enlightenment Values, and Clement Greenberg,' 126.

<sup>57</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Matisse Seen Through Soviet Eyes: Review of *Matisse: A Social Critique*' [1948], *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, 203-04, 203.

<sup>58</sup> Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 117, 97.

<sup>59</sup> The most insightful history of the subject is by Tessel M. Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult: Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014.

<sup>60</sup> André Breton, *Mad Love* [1937], trans. Mary Ann Caws, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987, 110.

took place in his loosely written 1943 volume *La Parole est à Péret*, translated that year in an abridged form in the New York poets' magazine *View* as 'Magic: The Flesh and Blood of Poetry.'<sup>61</sup> It was prefaced by a statement of solidarity that declared agreement with Péret's conclusions, signed by seventeen Surrealists in nine countries in their absence and by Breton, Duchamp, Charles Duit and artists Max Ernst, Matta and Yves Tanguy in New York.<sup>62</sup>

Breton's next major book *Arcane 17* appeared (in French) in New York in 1944, taking a major step towards formulating the movement's shift towards esotericism by reinforcing the charges made against realism and positivism by the *Manifesto of Surrealism* twenty years earlier. The grievance was extended in *Arcane 17* through denunciation of the 'monopolistic and intolerant character' of the 'positivist interpretation of myths,'<sup>63</sup> declaring that, by contrast:

Esotericism, with all due reservations about its basic principle, at least has the immense advantage of maintaining in a dynamic state the system of comparison, boundless in scope, available to man, which allows him to make connections linking objects that appear to be farthest apart and partially unveils to him the mechanism of universal symbolism.<sup>64</sup>

Following this intervention, the movement's concerted shift towards magic, superstition and occultism or esotericism generally reached a wider public in the form of the International Exhibition of Surrealism or *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, held back in Paris. Indeed, occultism specifically became a means of comprehending the totality of Surrealism in the writing of Michael Carrouges from that year.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Benjamin Péret, *La Parole est à Péret*, New York: Éditions Surréalistes, 1943. In the previous issue, *View* avowed in its editorial that the 'artist should be understood as a contemporary magician,' ending with the declaration: '[s]eers, we are for the magic view of life,' presumably influenced by Péret's recent text, which was advertised as forthcoming in the review on the back of that issue: Anonymous, 'The Point of *View*,' *View*, series 3, no. 1, April 1943, 5. Greenberg had already passed corrosive judgement on the 'putrescent' writing in *View*: Clement Greenberg, 'The Renaissance of the Little Mag: Review of *Accent*, *Diogenes*, *Experimental Review*, *Vice Versa*, and *View*' [1941], *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, 42-7, 43; the first use of the term 'positivism' in his criticism, to my knowledge, followed in his very next piece of writing, to characterize 'the typical biases of the American mind,' Clement Greenberg, 'Aesthetics as Science: Review of *The Structure of Art* by Carl Thurston' [1941], *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, 47-9, 47.

<sup>62</sup> Péret, *La Parole est à Péret*, 7. For more detail, see Richard Spiteri, 'Péret, Freud et Frazer,' *Mélusine*, no. 16 ('Cultures – Contre-cultures'), ed. Henri Béhar, Paris: L'Age d'homme, 1997, 125-31.

<sup>63</sup> André Breton, *Arcanum 17* [1944], trans. Zack Rogow, Toronto: Coach House Press, 1994, 87, 86.

<sup>64</sup> Breton, *Arcanum 17*, 87.

<sup>65</sup> See Michel Carrouges, 'Surréalisme et Occultisme,' *Les Cahiers d'Hermès*, no. 2, Paris: Éditions du Vieux Colombier, 1947, 194-218. This reappeared amended as the first, long analytical chapter of the highly regarded Michel Carrouges, *André Breton et les données fondamentales du Surréalisme*, Paris: Gallimard, 1950, 19-85; Michel Carrouges, *André Breton and*

Let us remind ourselves that this culmination took place in the very year that Greenberg came to see as the one in which an American school of abstract artists began to be established.<sup>66</sup> At the time, a few months after the closure of *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, Greenberg wrote as follows in an important statement that aspired towards what is now to us a familiar formulation of the logical extension of the French avant-garde into the contemporary American vanguard, along with an attempt to identify the predicament of the latter:

The Impressionists and those who came after them in France put themselves in accord with the situation [created by 'bourgeois industrialism'] by implicitly accepting its materialism – the fact, that is, that modern life can be radically confronted, understood and dealt with only in material terms.... From now on you had nothing to go on but your states of mind and your naked sensations, of which structural, but not religious, metaphysical or historico-philosophical, interpretations were alone permissible. It is its materialism, or positivism ... that made painting the most advanced and *hopeful* art in the West between 1860 and 1914 ... The School of Paris rested on a sufficient acceptance of the world as it must be, and it delighted in the world's very disenchantment, seeing it as evidence of man's triumph over it. We, confronted more immediately by the paraphernalia of industrialism, see the situation as too overwhelming to come to terms with, and look for an escape in transcendent exceptions and aberrated states. True, it was a Frenchman who eminently taught the modern world this way out – but one suspects that one of the reasons for which Rimbaud abandoned his own path was the realization that it was an evasion, not a solution, and already on the point of becoming, in the profoundest sense, academic.<sup>67</sup>

Given the dominant themes of Surrealism's Paris show and Breton's standard references in his introductory catalogue essay to Arthur Rimbaud in his inventory of pre-Surrealist 'visionaries,' this could almost be read as a direct rebuttal of Surrealism's esotericism in 1947 if Surrealism had still mattered to Greenberg by that year.<sup>68</sup> Although he was capable of acknowledging the importance of Surrealist painting to Pollock when it suited him, here in 1947 Pollock's work was cordoned off as 'positivist, concrete' in spite of its quasi-Surrealist debt to 'intuition.'<sup>69</sup>

A few months earlier, Greenberg had even managed to extend the panglossian, 'common sense' opinion given here, that 'in all great periods of art,

---

*the Basic Concepts of Surrealism* [1950], trans. Maura Prendergast, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1974, 10-66.

<sup>66</sup> 'For some reason '47, '48, there was a swing. New recruits,' Greenberg quoted in Florence Rubinfeld, *Clement Greenberg: A Life*, New York: Scribner, 1997, 107; Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 89. It was also the year of Pollock's first 'classic' 'drip' painting: Jachec, 'Modernism, Enlightenment Values, and Clement Greenberg,' 129.

<sup>67</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture' [1947], *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, 160-70, 164-5.

<sup>68</sup> André Breton, 'Before the Curtain' [1947], *Free Rein*, 80-87, 85, 87.

<sup>69</sup> Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, 166.

scepticism and matter-of-factness take charge of everything in the end,' to a favourable but very strange review of the recent *oeuvre* of Brauner.<sup>70</sup> Shown at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York from 15 April till 1 May 1947, signature works on display such as *The Mechanical Bride* (1945) were all from the previous two years and inspired by Brauner's interest in mediumism and magic since 1939. However, this went entirely unmentioned by Greenberg in favour of their 'flatter and tighter handling' afforded by their main material, wax, and the 'flat-patterned, ornamental, emblematic kind of painting' on view, 'that clings as closely to the picture surface as inlay work,' even as it is Paul Klee's influence that takes up virtually all of the review.<sup>71</sup> The suppression of their content by Greenberg extended to the catalogue for this first solo show of Brauner's in America, which included a text by Breton written at the very time he repudiated Impressionism and its legacies in his letter to the artist. No doubt Breton's essay was ignored by Greenberg for its equally objectionable, reverie-like style and comparison of poets and artists with 'mages, heretics [and] "initiates" of all sects,' and more so for Breton's claim that the wax in Brauner's pictures possessed the power of exorcism.<sup>72</sup> Those were views entirely aligned with the tendency of Surrealism and supported by the artist's own esoteric musings on magic in the same catalogue, just as Greenberg's were of a piece with his ongoing disrobement of modern art of any religious, philosophical or occultist vestiges – whether 'God, David Hume, or Hermes Trismegistus' as he put it in 'The Decline of Cubism' in the following year – which would be continued into the 1950s.<sup>73</sup>

### Symbolism, Surrealism and the return of Impressionism in the 1950s

Throughout Surrealism from the mid 1940s, magic and (poetic) enchantment as traditionally understood, but substantiated often with reference to psychoanalysis, became the ground upon which Surrealist art criticism and art history could contest what the movement perceived to be the 'positivism' of Impressionism and modernist formalism. This is evident in Breton's major volume *L'Art magique* (1957). Revising the Western canon and, more specifically, the modernist one, *L'Art magique* relocated both on the high altar of magic and it stands as the main statement on the subject within Surrealism. Breton opposed there the functionalism, positivism and objectivism of J. G. Frazer, Marcel Mauss, Émile Durkheim and even Sigmund Freud by drawing upon the writings of those who were immersed in magic such as Éliphas

<sup>70</sup> Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, 166

<sup>71</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Review of an Exhibition of Victor Brauner' [1947], *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, 147-50, 148. For a full list of the twelve works shown at the exhibit, see Camille Morando and Sylvie Patry (eds.), *Victor Brauner: Écrits et correspondances 1938-1948*, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2006, 316 n. 57.

<sup>72</sup> André Breton, 'Victor Brauner: Entre chien et loup' [1946], *Surrealism and Painting*, 123-7, 124, 126. The essay had first appeared in *Cahiers d'Art*, no. 20-21 in 1945-6 to coincide with Brauner's March-April 1946 solo show at the Galerie Pierre in Paris: André Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 4, Paris: Gallimard, 2008, 1288; Morando and Patry (eds.), *Victor Brauner*, 386, 401.

<sup>73</sup> Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, 214.

Lévi and Louis Chochod.<sup>74</sup> Both Impressionism and abstract expressionism go entirely unmentioned in this history of art, whereas Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh – all of the ‘four fathers of modern painting’ as they could still be characterized in the same year by Goldwater – were referred to at some point in *L’Art magique*.<sup>75</sup> Breton went so far as to assert ‘[m]agic is everywhere in the *oeuvre* of Gauguin,’ and to credit his art as ‘a mythological quest.’<sup>76</sup> This was a means to unfasten it from readings that lamented its ‘literary’ burden while giving precedence to its ‘decorative’ aspects.<sup>77</sup> Clearly, it was the formalist interpretation of Gauguin’s paintings that Breton had in his sights, which disparaged, ignored or argued for the lesser relevance of their content as mere ‘literature.’<sup>78</sup>

Monet’s painting had been thoroughly revived by then. The inconspicuous acquisition and display of his *Poplars at Giverny, Sunrise* (1888) by MoMA was scoffed at by Newman in an open letter of 3 July 1953 addressed to the President of the museum, suggesting that ‘the first important picture by an Impressionist painter *ever* acquired by the museum’ was a tacit reversal on its ‘false art history that modern art began with Cézanne.’<sup>79</sup> Partly determined by the success of abstract expressionist painting, the revival was furthered by supportive art historians such as William Seitz and Thomas B. Hess who wrote on both, prompted by the ‘late’ Monet exhibition at Knoedler in New York in 1956.<sup>80</sup> Greenberg’s contribution had come a little earlier in

<sup>74</sup> André Breton, *L’Art magique* [1957], Paris: Éditions Phébus, 1991, 37, 46-7, 55, 70.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Goldwater, *Gauguin*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1957, 9.

<sup>76</sup> ‘La magie est partout dans l’oeuvre de Gauguin’; ‘une quête de la mythologie,’ Breton, *L’Art magique*, 235.

<sup>77</sup> Breton, *L’Art magique*, 235.

<sup>78</sup> Breton would not have read the remarks about ‘the “mystical literature” that [Camille] Pissarro accused Gauguin of trying to inject into modern art,’ Clement Greenberg, ‘Review of the Exhibitions of Paul Gauguin and Arshile Gorky’ [1946], *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, 76-80, 78; and for ‘Gauguinesque decoration,’ see Clement Greenberg, ‘Cézanne and the Unity of Modern Art’ [1951], *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, 82-91, 90. Breton might have known of the sources of Pissarro’s complaint about his former student: see the letter of 20 April 1891 concerning *Vision of the Sermon* and Gauguin being a schemer not a seer, and the one of 13 May that year in Camille Pissarro, *Letters to his Son Lucien* [1946], ed. John Rewald, trans. Lionel Abel, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, 163-4 and 169-71. Also see the later illuminating remarks about ‘the illustrated subject – or let’s say “literature,”’ in Clement Greenberg, ‘Complaints of an Art Critic’ [1967], *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O’Brian, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, 265-72, 271.

<sup>79</sup> Barnett Newman, ‘Open Letter to William A. M. Burden, President of the Museum of Modern Art’ [1953], *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O’Neill, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992, 38-40, 39.

<sup>80</sup> Seitz wrote of ‘the great precursors who put forth the premises which culminated in abstract painting’ and viewed ‘[t]he optical qualities of Impressionism’ as ‘integral to the abstract painting of the forties and fifties,’ William Seitz, ‘Monet and Abstract Painting,’ *College Art Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1, Autumn 1956, 34-46, 45, 34, 35. Hess viewed the vogue for Monet as a change of heart by formalist criticism brought about by the success of American abstraction: Thomas B. Hess, ‘Monet: Tithonus at Giverny,’ *Art News*, vol. 55, no. 6, October 1956, 42. For the critical reception of Impressionism before and after abstract expressionism, see Lewis, ‘Introduction,’ Lewis (ed.), *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*,

the triumphant text ‘“American-Type” Painting’ (1955), proposing the recent attainment by certain late Monets of a ‘power they never had before. This expansion of sensibility has coincided with the emergence of Clyfford Still as one of the most important and original painters of our time.’<sup>81</sup> To this, Greenberg added that the late Monets suddenly seemed ‘more advanced in some respects than Cubism,’ and indicated that Newman, whom he now regarded as the foremost contemporary artist in the US, had ‘studied late Impressionism.’<sup>82</sup>

The trend that returned Monet to a position of prominence in the fifties was certainly driven by American artists, critics, curators and institutions. But it was equally evident in Europe at the sequential exhibitions held in 1952 at the Kunsthaus in Zürich, Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris and Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, as well as in the acclaim heaped on Monet by certain theorists of *Tachisme* in France.<sup>83</sup> In fact, it is generally agreed by historians that the resurgence of interest in Monet was instigated by the opinion given prominently in the French art magazine *Verve* at the end of 1952 by none other than André Masson, now a former Surrealist, whom Seitz would quote and Hess mention.<sup>84</sup> The first indication of this new devotion of Masson’s had come as early as 1946 with a passing word on the ‘genius’ of Monet;<sup>85</sup> writing more expansively in *Verve*, Masson viewed him as a revolutionary who created a ‘[n]ew way to see, to feel and to love nature.’<sup>86</sup> His effusive text culminated in the very quotable estimation that the *Water Lilies* (1920-26), installed and largely disregarded since 1927 at what was then the Orangerie des Tuileries, comprised ‘the Sistine Chapel of Impressionism.’<sup>87</sup> One can well imagine Breton’s reaction to such a claim and precedent, exacerbated, no doubt, by the illustrious phrase from the *Manifesto of Surrealism*, cheekily dropped in by Masson to make the case for Monet of all artists: ‘here the imagination regains its rights.’<sup>88</sup>

---

1-19, 10-14. The recovery in the US would culminate in exhibitions in 1957 and the major Monet show of 1960 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that went to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art: see Michael Leja, ‘The Monet Revival and New York School Abstraction,’ London: Royal Academy of Arts, *Monet in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 1998, 98-108 and 291-3.

<sup>81</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘“American-Type” Painting’ [1955], *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, 217-36, 228.

<sup>82</sup> Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, 230, 231.

<sup>83</sup> André Masson, *Le rebelle du surréalisme: écrits*, ed. Françoise Will-Levaillant, Paris: Hermann, 1976, 189.

<sup>84</sup> Masson wrote of the ‘perte de la popularité’ of Monet while his editor noted the ‘rareté et la minceur des publications sur Claude Monet dans les années 1920, 30, 40,’ viewing Masson’s article as one of the very first signs of ‘une nouvelle ère dans l’appréciation critique de l’oeuvre de Monet,’ André Masson, ‘Monet le fondateur,’ *Verve*, vol. 7, nos. 27/28, December 1952, 68; Masson, *Rebelle du surréalisme*, 189.

<sup>85</sup> André Masson, ‘Peinture tragique’ [1946], *Rebelle du surréalisme*, 119-24, 120.

<sup>86</sup> ‘Nouvelle manière de voir, de sentir, d’aimer la nature,’ André Masson, ‘Monet le fondateur,’ *Verve*, vol. 7, nos. 27/28, December 1952, 68.

<sup>87</sup> ‘la Sixtine de l’Impressionisme,’ Masson, ‘Monet le fondateur,’ 68.

<sup>88</sup> ‘ici l’imagination reprend ses droits,’ Masson, ‘Monet le fondateur,’ 68. ‘The imagination is perhaps on the point of reclaiming its rights,’ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 10 (translation modified).

In 1958, during a period in which Surrealism existed in a kind of historical limbo, Breton would protest one final time the now apparently irreversible pre-eminence of Impressionism and the 'literary' label given by some to any art that was neither realist nor merely for visual delectation. This took place on the occasion of *Dessins Symbolistes*, the little-known exhibition he curated with the collector and gallery owner Mira Jacob at her Bateau-Lavoir gallery, which had opened three years earlier specializing in works on paper from the late nineteenth century onwards. Breton used his catalogue essay to try once again to tip the historical record in favour of Symbolism and Surrealism, but he must have had the modernist-formalist promotion of US abstraction in mind as much as Impressionism when he complained that Symbolist art 'appeared for a long time to have been swept away entirely by the tide of Impressionism,' quoting again for support from the conclusion of Gauguin's dismissive remarks about that movement.<sup>89</sup>

In his text, Breton also roped in the equally disparaging observations made by the chronicler of Gauguin and Symbolism, Charles Chassé, and by Odilon Redon: Impressionism, Breton wrote, 'shares with naturalism the characteristic of attempting to achieve a position of subservience in relation to positivism: "It is a question of painting humbly, stupidly, the plays of light which pass before the artist's eyes."' <sup>90</sup> Breton was quoting here from the passages in Chassé's *Le Mouvement symboliste dans l'art du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1947) in which Impressionism was viewed as 'one of the phases of the positivist movement' – a position inherited uncritically from Symbolists, as I noted earlier – and derided by Chassé for its obtuseness.<sup>91</sup> He also quoted Redon via Paul Sérusier via Chassé, who recalled in *Le Mouvement symboliste*: 'Paul Sérusier several times repeated to me in conversation that Redon said to him: "I refused to embark on the Impressionist boat because I found the ceiling too low."' <sup>92</sup>

Breton had never had much time for the Fauves whom he felt had failed to live up to the example set by Gustave Moreau, the one-time teacher of several of them, referred to in *Dessins Symbolistes* as the 'great visionary and magician.'<sup>93</sup> More

<sup>89</sup> André Breton, 'Concerning Symbolism' [1958], *Surrealism and Painting*, 357-62, 360.

<sup>90</sup> Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 360.

<sup>91</sup> 'une des phases du mouvement positiviste,' 'humblement, bêtement,' Charles Chassé, *Le Mouvement symboliste dans l'art du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris: Librairie Floury, 1947, 19.

<sup>92</sup> 'Paul Sérusier m'a plusieurs fois rappelé ce propos de Redon lui disant: "J'ai refusé de m'embarquer sur le bateau impressionniste car je le trouvais trop bas de plafond,"' Chassé, *Le Mouvement symboliste*, 47-8; Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 360. The anecdote is repeated in Charles Chassé, *The Nabis & their Period* [1960], trans. Michael Bullock, London: Lund Humphries, 1969, 26; and again in the survey of pre-Surrealist art by Pierre, *L'Univers surréaliste*, 57. Breton owned Chassé's book on Symbolism as well as signed copies of the later ones on Gauguin and the Nabis. In 1913, Redon held forth on the artists of his generation as follows: 'True parasites of the object, they cultivated art on a uniquely visual field, and in a certain way, closed it off from that which goes beyond it, and which might bring the light of spirituality into the most modest trials,' Odilon Redon, *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists* [1979], trans. Mira Jacob and Jeanne L. Wasserman, New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1986, 110. The traditional opposition of the two movements has been viewed as an invention of historical writing by one art historian: 'Symbolism and Impressionism, as understood around 1890, were not antithetical,' Schiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, 7.

<sup>93</sup> Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 361.

unexpectedly, his youthful confidence, from the time of his earliest writing on art, in the capacity of Cubism to transport its audience to a 'future continent' had gone by then, and it had been brought equally low as Impressionism in his estimation, caused partly by Picasso's all-too-real conversion in this world to Soviet communism.<sup>94</sup> At the moment of Impressionism's restoration at the origins of modern art, Breton now felt the time was right to:

reconsider the situation during that era, and ... declare null and void the facile solutions which have been imposed upon us for so long by Impressionism and its off-shoots (Fauvism and Cubism, which both limited themselves strictly to an external view and insisted on wasting our time with trivial objects physically within reach).<sup>95</sup>

When considered alongside the title of Breton's catalogue essay, 'Préface-Manifeste,' *Dessins Symbolistes* points to a wish to counter both the modernist canon and the formalist means by which it was validated by the dominant modernist criticism and writing. The continued vigour of the latter could be viewed in the very year Breton was writing where the supposed proto-modernism of Seurat was restated by Robert L. Herbert at the time of the slightly early 'centenary' exhibition held for the artist in Chicago, which ended on the day *Dessins Symbolistes* began.<sup>96</sup> It had only recently started to recede in the 1970s when José Pierre sharpened Breton's complaint unequivocally by asserting that formalist criticism since Maurice Denis 'tends to regard [the lineage of Symbolism/Surrealism] with extreme disdain even to the point of trying to eliminate it historically.'<sup>97</sup>

It was modern positivism and modernity conceived as 'the disenchantment of the world' in Max Weber's well-worn phrase – meaning secularization and the decline of magic with the escalation and intensification of capitalist utilitarianism, intellectualization and scientific, bureaucratic, legal and political rationalism under the banner of 'progress' – that Surrealism aimed to combat from the early 1940s in its concerted take up of magic and the occult and its location of a future for the human race in the past. Surrealism's first historian Walter Benjamin read Weber closely and one other sympathizer of the movement recently evoked this central critique of Weber's to set up his defence of Surrealism as a 'precise instrument' for escape from the 'rigid and narrow-minded confines of use value.'<sup>98</sup> However, there is no evidence that Breton, Louis Aragon or any other first generation Surrealist knew of Weber's assertion of the dissolution of 'mysterious incalculable forces' with 'increasing intellectualization and rationalization' in what he called 'Occidental culture,'

<sup>94</sup> Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 6.

<sup>95</sup> Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 360.

<sup>96</sup> 'Seurat's planar and often geometric forms encourage us to stress his importance as a forebear of modern abstract art,' Robert L. Herbert, 'Seurat's Drawings,' Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, *Seurat: Paintings and Drawings*, 1958, 22-5, 24.

<sup>97</sup> José Pierre, *Symbolism*, [1976], trans. Désirée Moorhead, London: Eyre Methuen, 1979, n. p.

<sup>98</sup> Michel Löwy, *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia* [2000], trans. Jen Besemer and Marie Stuart, Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 2009, 2, 37.

entailing a society and civilization in which 'one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.'<sup>99</sup> Yet, like Surrealism itself, it was a contention determined by the mechanized catastrophe of the First World War and made at the very moment Surrealism was being born, diagnosing its future orientation.

Contrary to Greenberg's positivist account of the history of modern painting, sketched out here, T. J. Clark has viewed modernism as, in fact, a stand *against* the disenchantment observed by Weber.<sup>100</sup> As noted near the beginning of this article, Clark has looked on Monet's art as driven 'by a cult of immolation,' and he sees this flavoured by the mood evoked by the likes of Surrealist hero Gérard de Nerval, no less.<sup>101</sup> Clark has also argued counter-intuitively, or at least against the view taken from the late nineteenth century and largely sustained into the late twentieth as discussed above, that 'we have barely begun to discover the true strangeness and tension of nineteenth-century art,' from Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres to van Gogh, where even Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot's themes 'declare themselves as strategies, or magic against modernity in general.'<sup>102</sup> Quite other to its tendency to condemn Impressionism as positivist, Surrealism elsewhere offers art historians a porthole onto this enchanted, strange and magical nineteenth century, since the art of the 'four fathers' received interpretation within the movement that was entirely dissimilar to the largely formalist one given by modernist art historians. This piecemeal Surrealist history of early modern art, ignored or suppressed by art history, is only now being compiled. Clark unintentionally showed something of it in his Rimbaudian observation that Seurat's technique 'show[s] us a world where "Je est un autre."<sup>103</sup> My use of the term 'positivism' to convey part of the debate on Impressionism in the 1940s and 1950s comes, then, at a moment when the understanding of the art of the late nineteenth century is changing, sometimes at odds yet elsewhere compatible with the one developed within Surrealism.

**Gavin Parkinson** is Senior Lecturer in European Modernism at The Courtauld Institute of Art, London, and editor of the Routledge series Studies in Surrealism. His books are *Futures of Surrealism* (YUP 2015); *Surrealism, Art and Modern Science* (YUP 2008); *The Duchamp Book* (Tate Publishing 2008); and the edited collection *Surrealism, Science Fiction and Comics* (LUP 2015). He is a former Reviews Editor of *Art History*

<sup>99</sup> Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation' [1919], *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, London and New York: Routledge, 2009, 129-56, 139. For further discussion of this core idea, see Max Weber, 'The Social Psychology of the World Religions' [1922-3], *From Max Weber*, 267-301.

<sup>100</sup> Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 9, 12.

<sup>101</sup> Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 12.

<sup>102</sup> Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 12.

<sup>103</sup> Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 108. For an argument that demonstrates the complexity of the issue, pulling in the opposite direction by claiming nothing less than the strictly scientific nature of Symbolism, see Maurice Denis' reading in and recourse to positivism in his theoretical writings in the service of a 'positivist circumscription of subjective deformation,' posited by Allison Morehead, 'Defending Deformation: Maurice Denis's Positivist Modernism,' *Art History*, vol. 38, no. 5, November 2015, 890-915, 912.

Gavin Parkinson

Positivism, Impressionism and Magic: modifying the modern  
canon in America and France from the 1940s

and has published in *Art History*, the *Oxford Art Journal*, the *Art Bulletin*, the  
*Burlington Magazine*, *Word & Image* and other journals.

[gavin.parkinson@courtauld.ac.uk](mailto:gavin.parkinson@courtauld.ac.uk)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)