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GAVIN PARKINSON

Esteemed by formalists, modernists, and classicists since the 1920s, Georges Seurat at first seems an unlikely candidate for retrospective “Surrealization.” Yet in that decade, André Breton had touted the artist’s name with approval alongside that of his favorite, Gustave Moreau, those of two other Symbolist-related painters, Paul Gauguin and Odilon Redon, as well as Pablo Picasso’s in an article of March 1923 that attempted to identify what Breton perceived as the crisis in art caused by World War I: namely, the return to figuration and craft by artists through their infatuation with the classical tradition. Breton also tackled in that text the “overly formal research” in art criticism, especially as it was applied to Cubism, which was just beginning a domination of the reception of Seurat that would last for over half a century. That sequestration is now well known even if its history has never, to my knowledge, been narrated. Yet it can be demonstrated that there was a parallel Surrealist interpretation of the artist and, when contextualized within the evolution of Breton’s theoretical and critical writings over the same period, its essentially dialectical structure is revealed.

A SURREALIST SEURAT?

More notably for art historians than that early mention of Seurat, and well known to them, the artist turned up again in Breton’s Manifesto of Surrealism the following year in the widely quoted sentence referring mainly to precursors in the visual arts, appended as a footnote to supplement the familiar list of pre-Surrealist writers that followed the definition of Surrealism as “[p]sychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.” Seurat heads the inventory of painters “in the modern era” whom Breton regarded as close to Surrealism yet “had not heard the Surrealist voice.” That is to say, those individuals had not obeyed their own inner voice, the one by which Breton detected “authentic” Surrealism, synonymous with authentic writing and art. Although it is tempting to match Seurat’s proclaimed aim made to the Belgian poet Émile Verhaeren to thwart “efforts restricted by routine and dreary practices” with Breton’s insistence in the Manifesto that automatism guaranteed its user liberation from the “preconceived ideas” still clung to even by the movement’s precursors, it could not be clearer that Seurat strayed far from the creative program posted there.

The techniques or inquiries that characterize Surrealism’s interventions in art at its beginnings in the Manifesto of Surrealism and subsequently as they changed with the development of the movement through the 1930s—the speed, spontaneity, and license one witnesses in the “literary” or poetic art of André Masson and often in that of Joan Miró; the adaptation of or to the unconscious, dream, or psychoanalytic theory in that of Giorgio de Chirico, Salvador Dalí, or Max Ernst; or the outright philosophical reflection on the nature of words and things that drove the painting of René Magritte—must be set against the purely painterly, scrupulous, and methodical practice of the artist whom Edgar Degas called “the notary” and whose theoretical interests lay less in books of literature, poetry, or philosophy than in theories of color and form more directly yoked to the act of painting. Seurat’s custom was to
create studies for his major paintings—many for the earliest important statements *Bathers at Asnières* (1883–84) and *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte—1884* (1884–86). Following the display of the second of these at the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition of May 15 to June 15, his first truly perceptive supporter, Félix Fénéon, wrote in 1886 of the “deliberate and scientific manner” of the Neo-Impressionists, and four years after the appearance of Breton’s *Manifesto*, Seurat’s friend the Symbolist poet Gustave Kahn testified to the artist’s fastidiousness by recalling that he “completed a large canvas every two years.”

Seurat’s process of painting, then, as much as his preparatory method, was slow and steady. As another friend, the Symbolist writer Teodor de Wyzewa, recalled soon after his death: “He wanted to make of painting a more logical art, more systematic, where less room would be left for chance effects,” and even Breton himself would later concede, “Nothing could be more premeditated than his enterprise.” Once the extensive studies he made were drafted on to canvas, as in the *Grande Jatte*, Seurat was prepared to “sign on to years of probing,” in the words of Richard Shiff, who adds: “The depths he attempted to explore were indeterminate.” The darkening mood of Shiff’s phrase opens a passage of a sort into the shadow land of Surrealism, yet it will be necessary to take a scenic route through abstract art to get there, in search of a definition of the “Surrealist Seurat” that the Surrealists themselves were reluctant to give.

**SEURAT IN THE 1920S: CALLS TO ORDER AND TO DREAM**

The logical, disciplined attention paid by the “rigidly proper” Seurat to his regulated and precise craft, apparently at the expense of intuition and accident, makes all the more remarkable his continual presence throughout Breton’s *Surrealism and Painting* (1965), where only Marcel Duchamp and Picasso are cited with greater frequency. Admittedly, no single essay is devoted entirely to the artist in that volume, yet Breton’s recognition of Seurat at all in his writings on art spanning 1925 to 1965 went against the main current of the art market as well as state-sponsored and popular taste in France for most of that period. This general attitude might already go some way toward explaining the enthusiasm that Seurat aroused in the Surrealists, who frequently proclaimed their hostility regarding nationalism and the state, most fervently and enduringly around the time of the riot at the banquet held for the Symbolist poet Saint-Pol-Roux in July 1925. As detailed by Françoise Cachin, the official evaluation of Seurat’s significance in his own country following his death was subdued in comparison with the recognition of the artist’s achievement elsewhere. Although France finally bought its first works by Seurat in 1947 (three panels for the *Poseuses* of 1887–88, purchased at the second, posthumous sale of Fénéon’s collection) and Seurat could be described by one writer as France’s Leonardo at the time of the major retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago early in 1958, his reputation was still mixed at the institutional level compared to those of the generation after Impressionism—Paul Cézanne, Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh—by the end of the period covered by *Surrealism and Painting*. In the decades after Seurat’s death, the promotional and critical efforts of his friends Fénéon and Paul Signac, who had been appointed by the family to arrange the artist’s professional affairs with another painter, Maximilien Luce, led to few sales of his work in France outside the circle of his contemporaries. In 1900, his family sold the *Grande Jatte* for 800 francs and *Circus* (1890–91) for 500 (roughly $2,935 and $1,835 respectively in today’s currency). Duchamp’s recollection late in life of the period around 1907 was that “Seurat was completely ignored” by his own friends and acquaintances in Montmartre—“one barely knew his name”—though there is some conflict within the personal and historical accounts of Seurat’s status among artists at the time. It is usually conceded that his paintings or technique were
admired or even partly emulated by some Fauves in the early years of the twentieth century and by abstract artists, Cubists, Futurists, and Purists in the years following the large showing of 205 paintings, studies, and drawings at the Bernheim-Jeune galleries from December 14, 1908, to January 9, 1909. All of the major works except the Poseuses were displayed at that event, which was coordinated by Fénéon, who oversaw the exhibition and transaction of contemporary works at the gallery from 1906 until he retired in 1924. In 1910, Duchamp’s friend Guillaume Apollinaire could still refer briefly and flipantly in his art criticism to Seurat as “the microbiologist of painting,” but after he read the republication of Signac’s D’Éugène Delacroix au néo-impressionisme in 1911, Apollinaire revised his opinion, writing of Seurat as a “great painter” whose “importance has not yet been fully appreciated.” Later that year, in a review of an exhibition from which the artist’s work had been excluded, he referred to “the great painter Seurat, whose name I wish particularly to emphasize.” From that point up to World War I, Seurat’s status only grew in the estimation of Apollinaire, perhaps due to further discussion with his artist friends, and he was soon calling him “one of the greatest French painters” and “one of the greatest painters of the nineteenth century and an innovator whose reputation will grow with the centuries,” before bemoaning his absence from the walls of the Musée du Luxembourg, Paris, in 1914 as part of his ongoing campaign against the conservatism of that institution. Apollinaire’s insightful appraisal of Seurat and glowing enthusiasm for the artist were no doubt communicated to his protégé Breton in the three years they knew each other, from 1915 to 1918, but his art criticism failed to reconcile a larger audience with the artist. In that decade, there were no solo exhibitions given over to his art, no books, and only four articles, as shown by Kenneth Silver, and as Breton would later complain, the general public in France had greeted Seurat’s art with jeering disdain before the war.

The reputation of Seurat truly reached its nadir among museums and collectors in the 1920s in his own country at the moment Breton began to cite him and as his stock began to rise among artists and critics. Fénéon curated a solo exhibition of his work, consisting of sixty-two paintings and drawings, at Bernheim-Jeune from January 15 to 31, 1920. Probably because of that event, Apollinaire’s friend the poet André Salmon eulogized Seurat, in a way that would hardly have appealed to Breton, as part of “the great tradition”: as a link in the distinguished chain of Franco-Latin classicism that included former Fauves André Derain and Maurice de Vlaminck and reached back to the Renaissance via Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Eugène Delacroix, and Jacques-Louis David to Raphael. Yet in that decade all of Seurat’s major paintings were sold to collections abroad: Chahut (1889–90) to the Netherlands in 1922 (the Musée du Louvre, Paris, had turned it down in 1914); Bathers at Asnières to England from Fénéon’s collection, and the Grande Jatte to the United States, both in 1924; and Young Woman Powdering Herself (1889–90) and Poseuses to England and the United States respectively in 1926. John Quinn had purchased Circus in 1923 on the advice of Duchamp’s close friend Henri-Pierre Roché, who acted as the American collector’s European art buying agent. Bequeathed by Quinn to the Louvre on his death in 1924, it returned to France in 1927, presumably met by an embarrassed or bemused silence within that venerable institution, since the critic Florent Fels marked its return with the words, “Seurat is unknown to the general public.” The absence of all these major works from France meant that as late as 1957 Germain Bazin could lament the impossibility of organizing a Seurat retrospective in that country in spite of his efforts and those of the historian and curator René Huyghe since World War II.

From 1908 to 1928, Parade de cirque (1887–88) languished on sale at Bernheim-Jeune, with Fénéon in attendance, until it followed the Grande Jatte and Poseuses into the welcoming arms of American collectors in 1930. (Breton must have seen the forlorn masterpiece there...
because around 1910 or 1911, as a teenager, “he sometimes stopped to exchange a few words” with Fénéon, according to his biographer, and he might even have seen the 1908–9 Seurat exhibition held at the gallery.) Only one sale of a Seurat was made in the 1920s in France, the sparsely drawn red, yellow, and mainly blue oil on canvas sketch for *Circus* dated 1890–91 (Fig. 1), purchased from Fénéon by the fashion designer Jacques Doucet in 1924 on the razor-sharp advice of his young librarian and art adviser, the author that year of the *Manifesto of Surrealism*, André Breton.  

In spite of the trusted Apollinaire’s advocacy of Seurat, Breton’s curiosity and astuteness about the artist who prioritized “exacting logic,” as Roger Fry put it,34 are not at all easy to explain in the shadow thrown by the *Manifesto* across “logical methods,” which, according to Breton, were “applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest.”35 It is true that in the years after the appearance of the *Manifesto* Breton, in his earliest extended discussions of art and Surrealism in *La Révolution Surréaliste*, observed Seurat’s deployment of what he called “the litho [ce chromo] . . . used so mockingly and so literally as the basis of inspiration for his painting Le Cirque [sic],” and the elusive, sardonic humor he and others have perceived there, as we will see, would eventually lead Breton to a theory of the artist inclusive to Surrealism.16 Yet to this he added hesitantly in parentheses: “it is open to question whether what he is generally considered to have achieved technically in the field of ‘composition’ is truly significant.”37 The doubt he expresses about the importance of what some were already lauding as the “formal design” of Seurat’s work alongside open-mindedness here, as opposed to the incomprehension he had conveyed and the tone of outright censure he had chosen a few years earlier in speaking of Cézanne’s reputation, leaves us to wonder along with Breton at this juncture as to where the “surrealist” elements lie in the art of Seurat. His vacillation over the artist and our own reservations about the task he had set himself are perfectly warranted in light of the historical evidence that Breton’s 1927 query coincided with enthusiasm for Seurat’s work in France by those advancing and defending what Alfred H. Barr Jr. called at the time, in accounting for Seurat’s prominence at the end of the decade, “the so-called neo-classic phase [of vanguard art] of the last ten years”—which goes some way further toward making a Surrealist Seurat incomprehensible.18 Silver has charted the “new esteem” achieved by Seurat’s art with the advent of the classical revival of the 1920s, arguing that “the degree to which Cézanne was devalued was the degree to which Seurat gained new prestige.”39 For instance, Salmon’s 1920 *Burlington Magazine* article on the artist, written by a critic who thought revolutionary art “tended only towards the rediscovery of the ways of Classicism” and who imagined even Cubism had classical roots.40 Further tributes to Seurat came in the pages of Purism’s mouthpiece *L’Esprit Nouveau* in 1920, where a color reproduction of *Young Woman Powdering Herself* (Fig. 2) was used to exemplify the idea insisted on in the dry statement that opened the first issue of the journal that “the spirit of construction is as necessary to create a painting or a poem as it is to build a bridge”41 and in the heavily illustrated article on Seurat...
in that same number of the journal by the artist Roger Bissière aligning him (and Cézanne)
with Giotto, Nicolas Poussin, Antoine Watteau, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, David, and
Ingres. Meanwhile, Lucie Cousturier’s 1921 monograph reasonably compared Seurat to Pierre
Puvis de Chavannes and in the same breath hypothesized the relation between the structure of
his compositions and those of Greek architecture; Amédée Ozenfant, in Cahiers d’Art in 1926,
compared his composition to that of the “old Greek geometers,” claiming his landscapes had
“the dryness of the great French tradition” while paying homage in a telling phrase to Seurat’s
“common sense”; and Waldemar George praised his “classic style, of a modern sentiment”
in a monograph on Seurat in popular format that Breton owned, and which appeared exactly
contemporary with Breton’s tentative note on the artist’s composition when it was reprinted
from La Révolution Surréaliste in Surrealism and Painting.

These opinions could be found among the eight monographs and thirty-four articles
that accompanied the five solo exhibitions devoted to Seurat in the 1920s, which represent
a completely revised view of his work among critics and collectors, if not yet at the level of
France’s institutions and that of the general public. As well as registering the mood of a post-
war cultural elite in that devastated nation that saw in Seurat’s art “an image of the world,”
in Silver’s words, “that they found reassuringly ordered, geometric, and much like the world
that they themselves hoped to reconstruct,” the awakening to Seurat as a modern classic was
perfectly consistent with Seurat’s own obvious interest in classicism fed by his time at the École
des Beaux-Arts in 1878–79, an education that had led to deep suspicion among his own circle
of artists. However, such features of his art are entirely irreconcilable with Breton’s counter-
argument against the shortsighted ideology of clarity, order, reason, and progress inherited
from the same tradition, which the Surrealists blamed for the war. This was displayed in
Breton’s protest of the 1920s aimed in the Manifesto against the “absolute rationalism that is
still in vogue,” his impatient claim there that “experience . . . leans for support on what is most
immediately expedient . . . protected by the sentinels of common sense” and his advancement
of hallucination, fantasy, superstition, the unconscious, dream, and the marvelous (“romantic
ruins, the modern mannequin”) as the bases for a new epistemology. Breton’s budding enthu-
siasm for Seurat seems willfully contrary, if not perverse, amid the conflicting cultural reme-
dies touted in the 1920s that helped recuperate the artist. Indeed, his attitude toward Seurat
remained intuitive and largely unexplored in his own writings in that decade. Given these
incompatibilities, where might we find a space for Seurat in Surrealism?

ABSTRACTIONIST AND SURREALIST

The beginning of an answer to this question was given accidentally in a 1936 article in the
Burlington Magazine by the then-abstract painter Jean Hélion, whose work carried occasional
glimpses of content indebted to Surrealism but who was closer stylistically to Fernand Léger
in the 1930s. In fact, as a founding member of the Association Abstraction-Création, set up
in 1931, he was more alarmed than anything else about the growing importance of Surrealist
painting internationally, and he had recently been implicitly subject to derision in Dalí’s ridi-
cule of Abstraction-Création.

The teleological assimilation of Seurat’s work that would be carried out by Hélion
was typical of arguments privileging form, abstraction, or both, and they dominated in this
period. Hélion’s name by no means heads the list of these chronologically. They had begun
in the second half of the 1920s with Fry, who called Parade de cirque (Fig. 3) “as abstract, as
universal and as unconditioned as pictorial art ever attained to, at least, before the days of
Cubism.” Comparable arguments isolating form, style, or geometry continued to lead the
scholarship on Seurat from the 1930s (with the exception, as we will see, of the writing of
Meyer Schapiro)—for example, in the schematic drawings of the “straight-line” and “curved line” organization of the Grande Jatte published by Daniel Catton Rich in 1935. Hélon’s Burlington article was published only three months after the exhibition Cubism and Abstract Art closed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which featured three small oils and a drawing by Seurat as well as two paintings by Hélon himself, so he might have seen the show. He would certainly have known its catalog, which integrated Seurat into the museum’s expanding modernist teleology by claiming that his theory of art was “as abstract as that of the later Cubists, Suprematists or Neo-plasticists.” In later years, Clement Greenberg, Robert L. Herbert, and Norma Broude repeated Hélon’s view that the obvious “outcome” of Seurat’s sometimes fl attish and caricatural, even cartoonlike style was abstract art in Europe and the United States, an opinion that was shared in France by the mid-1950s. The habit has been hard to break in the years after modernism: in a review of Seurat’s drawings at the Museum of Modern Art in 2008, Yve-Alain Bois attacked this precursor game as “seriously flawed,” and even “toxic” and “utterly useless,” while outdoing his predecessors by adding a whole roster of European artists to the post-Seurat canon, such as Robert Delaunay, Wassily Kandinsky, and Piet Mondrian, and American ones like Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Ryman, and Richard Serra (ending his review essay with the inert observation: “Seurat, we could say, invented process art”).

Of course, like those critics and artists who were inclined toward modernism as an ideology, Surrealism, too, would seek to rationalize and strengthen its position by despecifying itself historically with reference to precursors such as Seurat and Gauguin. This happened mainly after World War II, in the wake of the canonical status achieved by those artists largely through the efforts of American museums, critics, and collectors. Once that historical specificity is returned, modernist abstraction and Surrealism can be seen to inform each other, and Hélon’s interpretation of Seurat clarifies Breton’s early, against-the-odds interest in the artist.

Whatever the lines of inquiry it helps extend, the point of Hélon’s article was to give abstract art some historical foundations in earlier modern art by arguing for the pure opticality of Seurat’s work. The spare and orderly painting The Gravelines Canal, Evening (1890, Fig. 4), for instance, “has no other reality than that of its optical existence,” Hélon commented, in the sense that although it begins by taking elements from the outside world, such as boats, a lamppost, the sky, a building, a harbor, and anchors, they are only the raw materials for an art that adapts and arranges unstructured nature.” These rudiments are taken, oriented, refined, “reformed, rebuilt, reconceived,” and “written” for sight, not for the body, Hélon asserted:
Seurat’s picture goes entirely through my eyes. I feel no resistance, no difficulty of accommodation, no need to walk into it. It makes me live entirely through sight. It is organized for sight as a radio-set for waves. Its organization is not like mine, but compatible with mine. It is intelligible, it is within the range of man’s means, of man’s intelligence, the way it has been formed and developed by our culture, a culture that is not natural, but proper to man.

The weight placed on the optical in painting here could not be greater—“It makes me live entirely through sight”—and it seems at first that because of this, equally, such an art could not be further from the Surrealists’ ambitions. After all, Breton had maintained in his first dedicated writings on Surrealism and painting in 1925 that the decoration of the “external world” through painting was a waste of the artist’s gifts, and he set out his differences with realism and Impressionism by insisting that “the plastic work of art will either refer to a purely internal model or will cease to exist.” It was exactly the emphasis on “mere” opticality, then, that Surrealism sought to overturn by transforming or reinfusing art with poetics or, more precisely, with metaphor to create an art not simply of perception but of allusion, one that did not rest as surface pattern on the retina but pointed beyond itself. It was for this reason that Breton did not question Seurat’s actual achievement in composition in the same extended essay in La Révolution Surréaliste but, rather, wondered whether that mattered at all. Surely art should be doing something else?

It turns out that it was through his prioritization of specifically painterly opticality, taken to an extreme degree—which Hélion noted and honored in the context of abstraction and, ironically, implicitly opposed to Surrealism—that Seurat achieved this “something else.” By means of this process, his painting was nudged by degrees away from the realism of the outside world and closer to the dialectical surreality that is both derived by the imagination from that material and imposed by the mind on it. Here is Hélion on Seurat again:

Once he has seized the elements, he stylizes them beyond all resemblance, even to caricature, without consideration for taste, prettiness, normality. The appearance of his picture is never compatible with that of nature. Compared with figures by Courbet or even the deformed figures of Cézanne, Seurat’s personages look like pictures of dummies full of straw. He did not care. . . . [The figures in the Grande Jatte exist entirely in sight, no more referring to any possible existence outside the picture.

Hélion’s excellent description of the purely painterly, nonrepresentational purpose of Seurat’s art approaches Fry’s earlier observation that the “syntax of actual life” in Parade de cirque “has been broken up and replaced by Seurat’s own peculiar syntax with all its strange, remote and unforeseen implications.” It strikes me as closer to defining the active-passive procedure his method surely demanded than Tamar Garb’s agenda-driven half-truth that “Pointillism posited an authorial subject who was entirely in control.”

But as Fry let on here, it is equally, if accidentally, a definition of the surreal, as another modernist critic, T. J. Clark, also unintentionally revealed in his Rimbaudian observation that Seurat’s technique “show[s] us a world where ‘Je est un autre.’” The same was perhaps irresistibly so for Hélion, too, given the ubiquity of Surrealist painting by the time he wrote about the artist in 1936, the year of the International Surrealist Exhibition at the temporary New Burlington Galleries in London and of Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism at the Museum of Modern Art. Hélion was rejecting realist representation and diminishing the significance for abstraction even of Cézanne, as still too governed by the world beyond the painting—“Cézanne looks at the motif. Seurat looks at his canvas”—and the resulting departure...
from nature achieved by Seurat led to some eccentric results amenable to the Surrealists and their friends.

This might have been predicted given what some believe to be the debt Surrealism owed to Symbolism. Although Seurat’s version of nature cannot simply be assigned to that movement, it did indeed escape from the artist as he relentlessly applied his method in a way that met Breton’s demand in the critical essay he wrote on Symbolist poetry for *Minotaure* in 1936. In this piece, Breton held that the value of Symbolism, like all the work that followed it in the twentieth century, came about not from the author’s conscious intention to create mystery but from the mind’s preparedness to be mystified. That is to say, it was made by those “who did not try to find out where the Sphinx, with all his claws in their flesh, was leading them, and who did not attempt to outwit him.”66 As Hélion put it: Seurat did not care where his method took him.

Since Breton’s view on the “correct” subject matter for art did not change substantially over the years—after all, he republished *Surrealism and Painting* in augmented editions in 1945 and 1965 with the same core argument given in the initial 1928 version—we can explore it further by moving forward to the postwar period to look at Duchamp’s repudiation of “retinal painting” made in an interview in *Arts* late in 1954, which would become a touchstone for the Surrealists. Breton quoted it admiringly for the first time a few weeks after Duchamp’s remarks had appeared in print. His aim was to give some justification for the inclusion of ostensibly motley works in the 1955 exhibition *Pérennité de l’art gaulois* by Impressionists, so-called Postimpressionists, and Neo-Impressionists, as well as Kandinsky and contemporary abstract artists and Surrealists, alongside the Gaulish coins equally and thankfully free “from Graeco-Latin contagion,” in Breton’s words.67 This massive and now-forgotten exhibition was held in 1955 at the Musée Pédagogique in Paris’s Latin Quarter, the modern art half of which Breton

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5 Georges Seurat, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, 1884–86, oil on canvas, 811/2 × 1211/4 in. (207 × 308 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago (artwork in the public domain; photograph © Granger Historical Picture Archive, provided by Alamy Stock Photo)
had helped curate with the art critic and Gauguin specialist Charles Estienne and the expert on Celtic art Lancelot Lengyel. Breton wrote:

The organizers [of the exhibition] thought that it might be fruitful to allow certain aspects of contemporary art to benefit from this very particular scrutiny. The criterion which presided over the choice and presentation of the works of this nature is exactly that which emerges from some remarks made very recently by Marcel Duchamp: “Since the advent of Impressionism, the new works of art halt at the retina. Impressionism, Fauvism, abstraction, consist always of retinal painting. Their physical preoccupations—the reactions of colors etc.—put the reactions of the grey matter into the background. This does not apply to all the protagonists of these movements, a few of whom have gone beyond the retina…Men like Seurat or Mondrian were not retinal painters even though they appeared to be so.”

In other words, optical painting as figurative art like Seurat’s or even abstract art in the way Hélion had expressed it (if not exactly in the way he meant it) is not retinal, even if Seurat himself in his notes on artistic technique advanced the importance of the “synthesis” of tonal values and colors caused by “the phenomena of the duration of the impression of light on the retina.” The resulting paintings are not mere pattern but are allusive and metaphorical; at the very least, humans are transformed by Seurat’s method into dummies (Fig. 6)—archetypes of the Surrealist imaginary. At the most, the world we live in becomes irrelevant to those paintings. That is how Breton could also detach Gauguin, Odilon Redon, and Seurat from Impressionism’s “retinal” opticality a few years later in March–April 1958, on the occasion of the exhibition Dessins symbolistes, by quoting Duchamp’s notion again in order to explain the criticism pitched at such artists by purveyors of color from Fauvism to Abstract Expressionism, which was then well into its ascendancy. It also explains why Greenberg and Duchamp could use the same language to praise Seurat as a revolutionary, yet from entirely dissimilar points of view.

Duchamp and the Surrealists could not have conceded a limited version of Hélion’s argument for Seurat’s opticality, then, the one that made him a retinal painter. They could accept that interpretation only at its most extreme. In the case of Duchamp, who once reportedly proclaimed, “I have forced myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste,” that extreme was where the rigid truth to opticality built on Seurat’s method ultimately led beyond the discernment of the eye to the subversion of “routine and outmoded practices” or, in the words of Robert J. Goldwater writing on Seurat, to “some means other than his own taste, sensibility, and judgment by which to produce a good work of art” (as Hélion put it, once again: “he did not care” where his procedure took him). For the Surrealists, that extreme was where his art made contact with another, metaphoric dimension that was indifferent and even blind to the world. It is unlikely that Hélion would have wanted his argument to be taken so far into “poetry,” but for the Surrealists, there was nowhere else to go.

A DIALECTICAL “VISUALITY OF THE SEA”

From here, I want to move toward a major case study in Breton’s later writing, where a fully developed dialectical theory of Seurat’s art, which has remained unexamined till now, confirms the dialectical surreality that I have drawn out with reference to Hélion in order
to bridge Breton’s early unformulated interest in Seurat to his later, Duchamp-inspired advocacy. Although he would not have known of Hélion’s 1936 Burlington Magazine article, it came at a time when Breton’s interest in Seurat was growing appreciably in resistance to the persistent version of the artist as a modern French painter in the “classical” mold of Ingres and Puvis de Chavannes, which was overlapping elsewhere and more prominently in English-language art history with formalist accounts of his significance. By contrast, we can designate Breton’s enthusiasm for Seurat as initially poetic, allusive, metaphoric, and analogical, an attitude that was registered programatically and unequivocally in the lecture “Qu’est-ce que le surréalisme?” that he gave on June 1, 1934, in Brussels, in which he submitted an account of the origins and theoretical development of Surrealism. To do this, Breton quoted extensively from publications by the Surrealists, including his own Manifesto of Surrealism, its precursor list amended to reflect his new reading of the intervening ten years and his increasing knowledge of art. To that end, Picasso and Seurat were promoted from a footnote to the main text, the former being “Surrealist in Cubism,” while Seurat is called “Surrealist in design/pattern [le motif].”

Breton’s resurgence of interest in Seurat would be unflagging from this point well into the 1950s. It was fueled by many opportunities to see the painter’s work in Paris and London—he spent at least a fortnight in London in June 1936 organizing and opening the International Surrealist Exhibition, so he could have seen the Bathers at Asnières at the National Gallery and Young Woman Powdering Herself in the Courtauld collection at Home House—and in New York and Chicago while living in the United States during World War II. His developed knowledge and increased appreciation of the art of Seurat were aired before his return to Europe from the Americas in the lectures he gave in the university law department at the University of Haiti in Port-au-Prince from late December 1945 till late January 1946 to accompany the exhibition of Wifredo Lam’s paintings at the nearby Centre d’Art. He arrived there as a kind of cultural ambassador for France on the invitation of his friend the Surrealist Pierre Mabille, who had been made French cultural attaché to Haiti after the war. The texts of the lectures remained unpublished in his lifetime; among them is his major statement on Seurat.

Under the guise of an art historian, complete with color slides, Breton imparted a conventional, simplified introduction to modern art since 1880 for a large, professionally mixed audience. He gave passing yet unexpectedly effusive credit to Édouard Manet as “the magnificent painter of Olympia [1863] and of Bar of the Folies-Bergère [1882]” while skipping the Impressionists as optical realists who were “indifferent to philosophy and poetry.” His main aim was to provide an overview of the art of the painters who followed Impressionism, and to this end Breton gave his lengthiest analysis of Seurat’s work. It would come in the form of a dialectical reading, and it is signaled initially by a union of Seurat’s painting and Henri Rousseau’s at the origins of modernism; as Breton reasoned, “the modern taste in art fluctuates between an intellectually evolved oeuvre,” such as that of Seurat, and “a totally instinctive oeuvre,” like Rousseau’s.

That fallacious appraisal of Rousseau’s sophisticated project demonstrates that Breton’s presentation of early modernism carried as many misleadingly compressed judgments as any university survey course, alongside its expected Surrealist biases, omissions, and emphases. Nonetheless, its lengthy passages on Seurat, supported by his reading of Signac’s D’Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionisme, were introduced by way of an original thesis that enriches and gives a historico-theoretical rationale based in dialectics for the hypothesis of the abstract-made-surreal described earlier. Breton approached this initially by asking: “what idea is formed, at the beginning, in the sensibility of Seurat?” Here is his answer:
It is during his military service in a Brittany port at Brest that Seurat assumes, I am arguing, his taste for a visuality of the sea. From that date, in fact, he would opt for the little ports and beaches as motifs. He knew the boat by heart. His correspondence, moreover, bears witness to a complete knowledge of boats:

“The masts,” he wrote, “are so slender, so fine, so graciously arranged in the air. And those yards that make a cross shape with them at intervals and that rise thinner and thinner and shorter and shorter up to their spindly summits; those lattice tops whose whiteness stands out among the guy ropes, like the wooden part of a harp under these inverted strings; and those thousands of tensed ropes in every direction, from high to low, from starboard to port, from fore to aft, separated, mingling, parallel, oblique, perpendicular, intersecting in a hundred ways, and all fixed, appropriate, tidy, vibrating at the slightest breath of air; all this so harmonious, so complete, so admirably matched in its least details, that a coquette could not invest more art and magic in the sensual arrangement of her evening preparations.”

Breton takes what he calls “an animism” from Seurat’s passage, surely drawn from the third chapter of Sigmund Freud’s Totem and Taboo (1913), where animism is associated with magic to this extent: “the principle governing magic, the technique of the animistic mode of thinking, is the principle of the omnipotence of thoughts,” and is said to have survived the succeeding epochs (religious and scientific) in only one field in our civilization, namely, art.

Although Breton would bring this chapter from Totem and Taboo to bear on the thorny task of defining “magic art” in tribal societies later on in the 1950s, Freud went unmentioned in the Haiti lecture. Instead, Breton extrapolated Seurat’s animism initially by means of an interpretation indebted to “mechanical selection,” the notion developed by Le Corbusier and Ozenfant in L’Esprit Nouveau that objects constructed by the human hand acquire beauty through their “request” for refinement in their structure as that is determined by their function. However, Breton then adds a proviso that draws Seurat in the direction of Surrealist poetics and dialectics:

But this idea, if it were not strongly underlaid by a poetic view of things, would risk leading to an emaciated conception of the work of art, reduced to relying essentially on mechanical progress. Consequently, Seurat, his thought gliding from the boat that drifts far out at sea to the woman devotedly immersed in her mirror in the evening, utters the words magic and sensuality. Magic and sensuality, which are indeed the highest resources [plus hautes ressources], operate here by fusing [confondre] on an emotional level the boat and the woman, [otherwise] so diverse in their [physical, external] accoutrements [appearance], their relation made relevant by the fact that both of them, in that very same instant, contribute as best they can in generating a sense of life.

Whether arguing for a “fluctuation” between Seurat’s intellect and Rousseau’s instinct as the synthesizing movement in the history of modern art, or a “fusing,” “intermingling,” or “merger” —or even an “interpenetration,” to use one of Friedrich Engels’s terms for the operation of the dialectic—of boat and woman, expounding a hitherto concealed erotic relationship between the two, it is clear that Breton was seeking a dialectical language here. Breton owned the Dialectics of Nature and numerous other volumes by both Engels and Karl Marx; they obviously informed his own conception of dialectics, which is not, however, reducible to their definitions and terminology, especially by the 1940s, when Breton was distancing himself
from Marxism. Moreover, as is now well known, he had been a close reader of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel since at least 1919 and had long been aware of the adaptation of Hegel’s dialectic in a tradition of writing on aesthetics extending from German Romanticism through the work of Victor Hugo and Charles Baudelaire to that of Apollinaire.86

Indeed, Breton’s terminological inconsistency or imprecision might be the outcome of his free recollection of various sources of the method in social science, philosophy, and mysticism. In December 1942, he had stressed the centrality of the dialectic, “that of Heraclitus, of Meister Eckhart, of Hegel,” in his lecture at Yale University, New Haven;87 at the beginning of his stay in Haiti, he continued to sponsor “true dialectical materialism”—while “reserv[ing] possible rights for the sacred”—when he welcomed (and perhaps scripted) in an interview the poet René Bélance’s statement that “Surrealism is the application of dialectical materialism to the realm of art”;88 and he would highlight the importance of dialectics again with reference to his recent discovery of Charles Fourier in an interview with Jean Duché of October 1946.89

In the midst of this discourse of the 1940s, we see in the Haiti lecture an explicit formulation of the dialectic of Seurat’s art, from the diverse, public, rational, and mechanical subject matter of the sails and masts of marines such as The “Maria,” Honfleur (1886, Fig. 7) that “interpenetrates,” in Breton’s term, with the intimate, domestic, warm, and tender image of the self-absorbed preparation of the coquette, lovingly portrayed in Young Woman Powdering Herself (Fig. 8). This is achieved within the scope of Breton’s dialectical notion of “convulsive beauty,” theorized in his Mad Love of 1937—in which two of the three conditions of beauty are “erotic-veiled” and “magic-circumstantial,” meaning that it arouses passionate feelings and is the outcome of a meaningful encounter”—condensing Seurat’s dialectic poetically in a single punning sentence: “he knew the boat by heart.”
There is more to it, however. Breton’s main inquiry into the dialectical function of the art of Seurat, inferred from the lengthy passage attributed to the artist, implicitly sustains and is enhanced by its potential extension into a historico-theoretical interpretation of Surrealism’s contradictory aesthetic position vis-à-vis Purism’s, as well as the inner logic of Surrealist art itself. But it achieves these only on the way to its more notable and expansive historical construal of the inner logic of the competing claims on Seurat in the twentieth century between classicism and Surrealism as I set them out earlier. Ultimately, it even accommodates Seurat’s frequently quoted remark made of literary people and critics to Charles Angrand and much later recalled by Angrand for Gustave Coquiot, which had entertained only one-half of the dialectic: “they see poetry in what I do. No, I apply my method and that’s all.” No, the Surrealist would have countered: your method is the very means by which your work is invested with poetry.

Breton’s formidable and comprehensive proposal of a dialectical motor driving the content, creation, and reception of Seurat’s art as well as the historical logic of modern art itself is all the more remarkable for being based on thoroughly erroneous information. To begin with, the quotation he attributed to the artist is not in Seurat’s correspondence but was republished, from the writing found among the remaining pages of the notebook he kept during his year of military service in Brest (beginning in November 1879), in the 1924 monograph by Coquiot that Breton owned; second, and more important, Fénéon had told John Rewald at some point in the years just preceding Breton’s quotation of the passage in 1946 that the descriptions of boats in the notebooks were not Seurat’s at all but “copied by him from some publication,” as becomes obvious when its lyrical manner is compared with the telegrammatic style of the artist’s mainly staccato, blunt, and factual letters.

That publication, which has remained obscure in the scholarship on Seurat, can now be identified as the first installment of the four-volume history of the French at sea, edited and partly authored by Amédée Gréhan and titled La France maritime, which appeared in 1837 and was republished several times from 1848 (Fig. 9). Each volume contained a set of accounts of maritime life, biographical, anecdotal, descriptive, or historical, edited by Gréhan to create a general impression of how the French have viewed the experience of the sea. The poetic passage accurately transcribed by Seurat (except for a slight edit toward the end) was taken from page 12 of the first volume and is from a text of three pages, each of two columns, titled “Le navire” (The Ship) and signed “Chevalier.” This was the work of the journalist, novelist, and historian of Brittany Pierre-Michel-François Chevalier, called Pitre-Chevalier (Fig. 10), future editor of the popular magazine Musée des Familles, where Jules Verne published his earliest stories.

Proposing to examine “in its details and in its totality, at rest and in action, this marvelous floating machine,” “Le navire” is an ornate eulogy to the ship and initially and particularly to the charms of “the French schooner,” remorselessly and tiresomely characterized by Pitre-Chevalier as a dainty coquette:

light, elegant, neatly formed, soaring like a little fish; the schooner with its sheer gently lowered in the middle and raised coquettishly towards the rear like the arched back of a Creole; with all of its harmonious proportion; its elongated shoulders, its sharp poulaine and its hips shaped like a heart above the water. The schooner is the little mistress of our ports; whether she flies on the waves where her wake leaves no traces, or glides and frolics among reefs, she is the swallow of the sea.

A ship such as the brig of Le Havre or of Nantes is less attractive, less elegant, less coquettish than the schooner. . .

We discover from this text, effusive and adoring throughout, that it was in fact not Seurat but Pitre-Chevalier who knew the ship “by heart.” Also, as though Breton had read the
whole of the text and not just the part of it copied out by the artist into his notebook, we learn the importance to Pitre-Chevalier of the relation between utility and beauty in the vessel when just before he plunges into the passionate accolade that captured Seurat’s attention, he writes of the extraordinarily complex equipment as it meets the eye: “each part of this machinery is necessary,” he declares, yet “the beauty found there is so intimately linked to utility that at first sight one sees only, in place of design, an elegant coquetry, and one is carried away by the well-groomed appearance of the ship, that which is, above all, for its protection and is its indispensable attire.”

Volume one of La France maritime and the three that follow it are illustrated throughout with engravings of ships of various kinds, many of which demonstrate the delicate complexity of naval equipment that Pitre-Chevalier admired (Fig. 11). No doubt the book supplemented for Seurat historically and technically the Impressionist imagery of boating on the Seine that he would have known well, but it also introduced him to harbor drawing and etching, the subgenre of maritime visual culture, even though he did not sketch any ships at the time. He would only embark on the marines in 1885 after making his name as a painter of modern life in Paris and at five years’ distance from his military service, not in Brest but further east along the Channel coast, at Grandcamp, Honfleur, Port-en-Bessin, Le Crottoy, and Gravelines (all some way north of Pitre-Chevalier’s beloved Nantes). It is not unreasonable to view those paintings as the realization of a long-held aspiration to paint the sea that began while Seurat was in Brest at the beginning of the decade. It is enticing and even cautiously rewarding to compare his marines with the engravings in La France maritime, especially those with ambitious renderings of rigging such as Corner of a Dock, Honfleur (Fig. 12), and The “Maria,” Honfleur (Fig. 7), both of 1886. In these, the technical detail of the various boats shows a truer coexistence of industry and leisure than Clark could find in Claude Monet’s 1870s paintings of the Seine at Argenteuil. Seurat’s images easily exemplify the reciprocity of utility and beauty that I just showed Breton extending dialectically into a poetics of the image.
11 Mâture de Brest, from Amédée Gréhan, ed., La France maritime, vol. 1, Paris: Chez Postel, 1837, n.p. (artwork in the public domain; photograph by the author)

12 Georges Seurat, Corner of a Dock, Honfleur, 1886, oil on canvas, 31¼ x 25¼ in. (81 x 65 cm). Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo (artwork in the public domain; photograph by Peter van Evert, provided by Alamy Stock Photo)
It matters little that the poetic passage quoted by Breton was not Seurat’s; since he took the trouble to transcribe it to his notebook and retain it, it obviously held some value for the artist and presumably reflected his own feelings. Furthermore, Rewald, Kenneth Clark, and others have made speculations comparable to Breton’s about the formative nature of Seurat’s brief period of military service. We might even surmise that the pleasure Seurat took from the elaborate passage stood in for that he normally gained from his artistic practice, since he did not paint and sketched little during that year. If Breton’s interpretation made accidentally via Pitre-Chevalier receives substantial weight from the subsequent importance of Seurat’s brief period of military service. We might even surmise that the pleasure Seurat took from the elaborate passage stood in for that he normally gained from his artistic practice, since he did not paint and sketched little during that year. If Breton’s interpretation made

In the Haiti lecture, Breton remained initially within his dialectical reading of Seurat in viewing Chahut (Fig. 13) as another “synthetic conception,” in the sense that the painting arrested the gestures of the dancers at their very extremity. This is in keeping with the third condition of convulsive beauty, namely, “exploding-fixed,” where movement expires at its limit, illustrated in Mad Love by Man Ray’s photograph immobilizing a dancer (Fig. 14). Yet Breton broke off because he wanted to pin down the mocking humor he had discerned in Seurat’s work since his earliest writings on the artist in the 1920s, which he had returned to recently in his Anthology of Black Humor. The book, prevented from

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13 Georges Seurat, Chahut, 1889–90, oil on canvas, 67 1/2 × 55 1/8 in. (171.5 × 140.5 cm). Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Alamy Stock Photo)

distribution in 1940 by the Vichy government in France, had come out just as he arrived to speak in Port-au-Prince. In its introduction, Breton had referred to art in which “humor can be sensed but at best remains hypothetical—such as in the quasi-totality of Seurat’s painted opus.” He then examined the humor of Chahut in the 1946 lecture as follows:

this painting seems to me to shelter a good many other intentions, which have not yet been aired and make it one of the works whose impact is still in large part to come. Not enough has been made in La Chahut [sic] of its contribution to an icy humor that is entirely modern, which, freezing here impossibly the scene which insists upon the most boisterous treatment, engenders a feeling of extreme vanity and absurdity, corroborated by the inane or blissfully satisfied expressions of one and all.  

Breton then extended the “exploding-fixed” humor toward the “magic-circumstantial” through the isolation of the brightly lit bow on the shoe of the foremost dancer, which for him was the key component in the composition. He perceived this “entirely poetic heroine” of Chahut as a core form insofar as it binds the painting analogically: its “wings” complement and even reinforce the movement of the dancer’s raised leg; they match the shapes of the upturned corners of the mouths and mustaches of the painting’s figures, as well as the leaves of the tulip-shaped gas jet at center left, and its coloration harmonizes with the wall lighting. It is as though it were a “Will-o’-the wisp,” in Breton’s words, which “communicates to the canvas its exorbitant life.”

AFTERWORD: FORMALISM, SURREALISM, AND MODERN ART

It is perhaps not surprising that Seurat’s work was available to Breton’s dialectical reading, nor that those paintings could be esteemed by critics of art who were ideologically diametrically opposed, given the artist’s admiration from an early age for both Ingres and Delacroix, two artists stereotypically set in opposition by competing camps of artists and writers. In the early 1960s, Herbert hinted at the possibility that Seurat’s exceptional drawings could also be seen in divergent terms, perhaps recalling the artist’s work shown at Cubism and Abstract Art. Adopting the art historical language of that period, which just about remained the one of his own time, Herbert saw them as open to two separate readings:

an arrangement of certain flat forms and a number of illusionary realities which those forms suggest. In the twentieth century, dominated by formalistic considerations, the former has assumed such prominence that our view of the latter has been prejudiced. We delight in investigating the abstract components of art, and too often give a secondary place to the artist’s ties with the tangible world. Because Seurat did not deal in anecdote, because he seldom showed the features of his subjects, he is too readily presumed to have been interested only in form for its own sake.

While pointing in the direction of a more content-led means of interpreting the artist, Herbert’s subject is not the Surrealist Seurat, naturally. Although “illusionary realities” might be taken to imply a proto-Surrealist sensibility in the drawings, this is then corrected by reference to “the artist’s ties with the tangible world” to designate Seurat the political artist or at least the social historian who painted peasants as “simple people of immense dignity, always at work.”

Written at the time that the challenge to the dominance of formalism in modernist art history was beginning, Herbert’s passage reveals at once the possibilities held by Seurat’s drawings for discussion beyond their formal properties and the suppression of such interpretation...
NOTES

I would like to thank the editorial staff at The Art Bulletin and the peer reviewers of this text for their extremely helpful advice and suggestions. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.


2. Ibid., 106. His editors allege that it was L’Esprit Nouveau, the periodical of Purism, that Breton had in mind here: André Breton, Œuvres complètes, ed. Marguerite Bonnet et al., 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1988–2008), 11:121.


4. Ibid., 271n.


20. See the brief account of the study of Seurat by artists of that generation given by Alfred H. Barr Jr., Cubism and Abstract Art (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 22.


28. Breton, Conversations, 246.


33. See Breton, Conversations, 76. Breton had urged Doucet to purchase work by Seurat in 1923; see Breton, Oeuvres complètes, 3:1232.

34. Fry, Transformations, 195.


46. Silver, Esprit de Corps, 337.

47. Ibid.

48. I refer to the well-known remark in the letter from Camille Pissarro to Signac made at a low point in their relations with the ambitious younger artist in 1888: “Seurat est de l’école de l’École des Beaux-Art; il en est impregné… . Prenons donc garde, là est le danger,” quoted (with ellipsis) in John Rewald, Georges Seurat (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1948), 115.

49. Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” 9, 10.

50. Ibid., 16.


55. Tamar Garb, “Powder and Paint: Framing the Feminine in Georges Seurat’s Young Woman Powdering Herself,” in Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siècle France (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 115–43, at 143.


58. Ibid.


60. I am referring to Hélion’s prickly submission that “part of this generation finds its reasons to paint in curiosity for below-the-belt motives, Freudian associations, scandalous or fantastic events.” Hélion, “Seurat as a Predecessor,” 13.

61. Ibid., 10.


63. André Breton, “Le merveilleux contre le mystère: À propos du symbolisme,” Minotaure, no. 9 (October 1936): 25–31, reprinted as “Marvelous versus Mystery” (1936), in Free Rein, trans. Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline d’Amboise (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 1–6, at 5, rendering of translation modified. Although it would have made the procedure attempted here more straightforward, Seurat cannot simply be aligned with Surrealism through Symbolism, even though the extensive overlap between the styles and substance of Neo-Impressionism and Symbolism has been recently restated by Cornelia Homburg, ed., Neo-Impressionism and the Dream of Realities (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). This is partly because of the indifference shown toward him by Symbolist writers such as Émile H ennquin, J.-K. Huysmans, and Teodor de Wyzewa and the general inclination of the Symbolists for Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau, and Odilon Redon, and partly because the Surrealists had mixed feelings about that movement, at least about its poets and artists. Earlier in the 1930s, for instance, Breton had reckoned
“Naturalist writers . . . on the whole, much more poetic than Symbolists,” expressing his admiration for the naturalist writer and journalist Robert Caze, whose circle Seurat frequented: André Breton, Communicating Vases, trans. Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 79, 80, rendering of translation slightly modified. See the comments on Seurat and Caze and Seurat and the Symbolist aesthetic, as well as speculation on the Symbolist audience for the marine paintings, in Thomson, Seurat, 94, 150–32, 177–81. In later years, Gustave Kahn put his and his Symbolists’ admiration for the paintings of Seurat and Paul Signac at least partly down to their youthful naïveté: Kahn, Drawings of Georges Seurat, viii. For the Surrealists, “the author of La Parade [sic] and Chabut was a Symbolist only inadvertently,” José Pierre, L’univers surrealiste (Paris: Somogy, 1983), 58.


69. Seurat to his friend Maurice Beaubourg, August 1890, quoted in Walter Pach, Georges Seurat (New York: Duffield, 1952), 25. This important statement was quoted accurately in French for the first time in a generally unreliable book owned and used by Breton: Gustave Coquiot, Georges Seurat (Paris: Albin Michel, 1924), 231–35, at 233.

70. Statements similar to Hélion’s have regularly been continued serviceability can be witnessed in its appearance in its use: see Belinda Thomson, Post-Imagination (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6–10. Its tenacity and perhaps continued serviceability can be witnessed in its appearance in the title of the respected 2007 volume by Mary Tompkins Lewis, ed., Critical Readings in Postimagination and Post-Impressionism: An Anthology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), where Orton and Pollock are absent even from any kind of critical discussion; and its equally uncritical indulgence in the more recent exhibition held at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Masterpieces from Paris: Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne & Beyond: Post-Impressionism from the Musée d’Orsay, 2012.


76. Although he did not care for the Grande Jatte, Clement Greenberg wrote of the talent to “sense contemporary reality naively and express it directly, untrammelled by reminiscences and precedents that in an art such as painting could be escaped from by dint of conscious effort on the part of a sophisticated genius like Seurat”. Greenberg, “The Camera’s Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston” (1946), in The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 2, Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 60–63, at 60. “I’m sure that when people like Seurat started to do something, they really just wiped the past right out,” Duchamp, quoted in Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, 103.


80. Breton, “Conférences d’Haïti, III,” 241: “Mais cette idée, si elle n’était fortement sous-tendue par une vue poétique des choses, risquerait cependant de conduire à une conception décharnée de l’œuvre d’art, réduite à s’appuyer essentiellement sur le progrès mécanique. Aussi Seurat, sa pensée glissant de la barque qui vogue au loin sur la mer à la femme tout entière tendue vers son miroir le soir, prononce-t-il les mots de magie et de volupté. La magie et la volupté qui sont en effet les plus hautes ressources consistent ici à confondre sur le plan émotionnel la barque et la femme dans leurs apprêts si différents, les rapports entre elles se soutenant du fait qu’elle l’entreprit à cet instant aident de leur mieux à l’accompagnement de la vie.”


84. Breton, “Conférences d’Haïti, II,” 241: “Mais cette idée, si elle n’était fortement sous-tendue par une vue poétique des choses, risquerait cependant de conduire à une conception décharnée de l’œuvre d’art, réduite à s’appuyer essentiellement sur le progrès mécanique. Aussi Seurat, sa pensée glissant de la barque qui vogue au loin sur la mer à la femme tout entière tendue vers son miroir le soir, prononce-t-il les mots de magie et de volupté. La magie et la volupté qui sont en effet les plus hautes ressources consistent ici à confondre sur le plan émotionnel la barque et la femme dans leurs apprêts si différents, les rapports entre elles se soutenant du fait qu’elle l’entreprit à cet instant aident de leur mieux à l’accompagnement de la vie.”

85. Friedrich ENGELS, Dialectics of Nature, trans. Clemens Duffield (Welford Publications, 2007), 63. Dialectics is also termed there “the science of inter-connections” and “the reflection of the motion through opposites” (63, 214).

86. For this lineage and outline of the French reception of Romanticism, see Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 16–23; and for Friedrich von Schlegel’s 1798 definition of the movement as a dialectical one, see Nina Athanasoglou-Kallmyer, “Romanticism: Breaking the Canon,” in “Romanticism,” special issue, Art Journal 12, no. 2 (Summer 1953): 18–21, at 19. A convincing discussion of the operation of Hegel’s Aesthetics (1835) in Breton’s thought from the time of The Lost Steps and especially as it functions in Surrealist Situation of the Object: Situation of the Surrealist Object (1935), in Breton, Manifestoes, 255–78, can be found in Steven Harris, Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche.

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of a magic theory of Seurat’s art—see Fer et al., Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism, 77, 81.
92. Seurat, quoted by Charles Angrand, in Coquiot, Georges Seurat, 41: “ils voient de la poésie dans ce que je fais. Non, j’applique ma méthode et c’est tout.”
93. Coquiot, Seurat, 122–123. The transcription is faithful except for Breton’s curious replacement of the original word “parure” (finery) with “toilette” in the all-important passage he emphasized, a word he then reinserts in his subsequent interpretation; Breton, “Conférences d’Haïti, III,” 240 (I have restored from Coquiot the missing word “minces” [thin], illegible to the editors in Breton’s manuscript). The editors of this third volume of Breton’s Oeuvres complètes could not locate the lengthy quotation in the Seurat scholarship, presumably because they looked only at the artist’s correspondence, where Breton himself thought it resided; rather, they suggest he could have received this document from Meyer Schapiro, his neighbor in New York, who had published on Seurat in ways that corresponded with Breton only a few years before the Surrealist arrived in New York and with whom he probably discussed the artist; Breton, “Conférences d’Haïti, III,” 132. See Schapiro, “Nature of Abstract Art,” Marxist Quarterly 1, no. 1 (January–March 1937): 77–98, at 84. The brief remarks in the second of these two points toward the conclusions reached later in Meyer Schapiro, “Seurat” (1958), in Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries: Selected Papers, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978), 101–9.
94. John Rewald, Georges Seurat (New York: Wittenborn, 1943), 715. This book was placed prominently among others in the shopwindow display installed by Duchamp at the Gotham Book Mart in New York in April 1945 to promote Breton’s book Arcane 17 (New York: Brentano’s, 1944). When Rewald referred to his knowledge of the passage being copied out in his later expanded volume on Seurat, he made it clear that Pénéon proffered the information “in conversation with the author”; Rewald, Seurat: A Biography (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 212n6.
96. Ibid., 10: “dans ses détails et dans son ensemble, dans son repos et dans son action, cette merveilleuse machine flottante.”
97. Ibid.: “la goélette française.”
98. Ibid.: “légère, élégante, fine de formes, élancée comme un petit poisson; la goélette avec sa tonture doucement flottante au milieu et relevée coquettement vers l’arrière,”
99. Ibid., 12: “chaque pièce de cet appareil a sa nécessité”; “le beau s’y trouve si intimement lié à l’utile, qu’au premier aspect on n’y voit, au lieu de calcul, qu’une élégante coquetterie, et l’on est porté à prendre pour la toilette du navire, ce qui en est avant tout la défense et l’indispensable vêtement.”
101. See Rewald, Georges Seurat, 3; and Kenneth Clark, Looking at Pictures (London: John Murray, 1960), 134: “there is no evidence that the young Seurat showed the faintest interest in open-air painting till after he had spent his year of military service at Brest; and it is characteristic of him that the revelation of light should have come to him as he gazed on the sea during the hours of sentry duty.” Also see the remarks in Germain Seligman, The Drawings of Georges Seurat (New York: Curt Valentin, 1947), 34 and Henri Perruchot, La vie de Seurat (Paris: Hachette, 1966), 25–26.
105. Breton, “Conférences d’Haïti, III,” 243: “ce tableau me paraît receler bien d’autres intentions qui n’ont pas encore été mises en évidence et font de lui une des œuvres dont la répercussion est encore en grand partie à venir. On n’a pas assez fait dans La Chute [sic] la part d’un humour glacé à la moderne, qui, figeant ici comme par impossible la scène qui se veut la plus endiablée, engendre un sentiment de vanité extrême et d’absurde, corrompu par les expressions naïves ou bêtement satisfaites des uns et des autres.”
106. Ibid.: “[h]’erreur toute poétique.”
107. Ibid.: “feu follet”; “communique à la toile sa vie exorbitante.”
109. Ibid., 96.