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Interference Strategies

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**Interference Strategies: Is It in the Middle?**

If we look at the etymological structure of the word _interference_, we would have to get back to a construct that defines us as consumers of the twin divisions of _interference_ (in between) and _interfere_ (to strike), but with a particular attention to the meaning of the word _interference_ as interpreted primarily as an action word (although perhaps etymologically incorrect) to map the preferable to think of the word _interference_ as a construct of a word, _interference_.

The complexity of the strategies of interference in contemporary political and aesthetic discourses appears to be summed up by the perception that such _interferences_ are a necessarily act that goes on. This perception appears to exclude the fact that sometimes, in the very existence of an artwork is based on an _interference_, on an _interference_ that has come to be: remnant, _interference_ with a political project.

Interfering artworks, which by their own nature challenge systems, were an artwork in the history of art. The cultural and _interferences_ of the National Socialist German regime, _Entartete Kunst_ (1937), the cultural and ideological _interferences_ of the National Socialist German regime, _Entartete Kunst_ (1937). The cultural and ideological _interferences_ of the National Socialist German regime, _Entartete Kunst_ (1937). The complexity of the strategies of interference with contemporary political and aesthetic discourses appears to be summed up by the perception that _interferences_ are a necessarily act that goes on. This perception appears to exclude the fact that sometimes, in the very existence of an artwork is based on an _interference_, on an _interference_ that has come to be: remnant, _interference_ with a political project.

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Interference Strategies: Is Art in the Middle?

If we look at the etymological structure of the word interference, we would have to go back to a construct that defines it as a sum of the two Latin words inter (in between) and ferro (to strike), but with a particular attention to the meaning of the word ferro being interpreted principally as to wound. Albeit perhaps etymologically incorrect, it may be preferable to think of the word interference as a composite of inter (in between) and the Latin verb ferro (to carry), which would bring forward the idea of interference as a contribution brought in the middle of two arguments, two ideas, two constructs.

It is important to acknowledge the etymological root of a word not in order to develop a sterile academic exercise, but in order to clarify the ideological underpinnings of arguments that are then summed up and characterized by a word.

This book, titled Interference Strategies, does not (and in all honesty could not) provide a resolution to a complex interaction - that of artistic interferences - that has a complex historical tradition. In fact, it is impossible, for me, when analyzing the issue of interference, not to think of the Breeches Maker (also known as Daniele da Volterra) and the coverings that he painted following a 1559 commission from Pope Paul IV to ‘render decent’ the naked bodies of Michelangelo Buonarroti’s frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. That act, in the eyes of a contemporary viewer, was a wound inflicted in between the relationship created by the artwork and the artist with the viewer (intento opere and intento auctoris with intentio lectoris), as Umberto Eco would put it. Those famous breeches appear to be both a form of censorship as well as interference with Michelangelo’s vision.

Interference is a word that assembles a multitude of meanings interpreted according to one's perspective and ideological constructs as a meddling, a disturbance, and an alteration of modalities of interaction between two parties. In this book, there are a series of representations of these interferences, as well as a series of questions on what are the possible contemporary forms of interference - digital, scientific and aesthetic - and what are the strategies that could be adopted in order to actively interfere.

The complexity of the strategies of interference within contemporary political and aesthetic discourses appears to be summed up by the perception that interference is a necessarily active gesture. This perception appears to exclude the fact that sometimes the very existence of an artwork is based on an interfering nature, or on an aesthetic that has come to be as non-consonant to and, hence, interfering with a political project.

Interfering artworks, which by their own nature challenge a system, were the artworks chosen for the exhibition Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art) exhibitions to the many images of pompously strutting corporate tycoons and billionaires in museums and art fairs around the globe, glancing with pride over the propaganda, or - better - over the breeches that they have commissioned artists to produce.

Today’s contemporary art should be interfering more and more with art itself, it should be corrupted and disrupting, degenerate and degenerating. It should be producing what currently it is not and it should create a wound within art itself, able to alter current thinking and modalities of engagement. It should be - to quote Pablo Picasso - an instrument of war able to interfere: “No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy.”

If art should either strike or bring something is part of what has been a long aesthetic conversation that preceded the Avant-garde movement or the destructive fury of the early Futurists. In this particular volume the issue of art as interference and the strategies that it should adopt have been reframed within the structures of contemporary technology as well as within the frameworks of interactions between art, science and media.

What sort of interference should be chosen, if one at all, remains a personal choice for each artist, curator, critic and historian.

If I had to choose, personally I find myself increasingly favoring art that does not deliver what is expected, what is obvious, what can be hung on a wall and can be matched to tapestries. Nor can I find myself able to favor art that shrouds propaganda or business under a veil with the name of art repeatedly written in capital letters all over it. That does not leave very much choice in a world where interference is no longer acceptable, or if it is acceptable, it is so only within pre-established contractual operative frameworks, therefore losing its ‘interference value.’

This leaves the great conundrum - are interferences still possible? There are still spaces and opportunities for interference, and this volume is one of these remaining areas, but they are interstitial spaces and are shrinking fast, leaving an overwhelming Baudrillardian desert produced by the conspirators of art and made of a multitude of breeches.
In this introduction I cannot touch upon all the different aspects of interference analyzed, like in the case of data and waves presented by Adam Nash, who argues that the digital is in itself and per se a form of interference: at least a form of interference with behavioral systems and with what can be defined as the illusory realm of everyday’s ‘real.’

Transversal interference, as in the case of Anna Munster, is a socio-political divide where heterogeneity is the monster, the wound, the interfering and dreaded element that threatens the ‘homologation’ of scientific thought.

With Darren Tofts and Lisa Gye it is the perusal of frameworks and interaction parameters firmly set via intentio operis, intentio auctoris and intentio lectoris. As always I wish to thank my team at LEA who made it possible to deliver these academic interferences: my gratitude is as always for Özden Şahin, Çaglar Çetin and Deniz Cem Önduygu.

With Brogan Bunt comes obfuscation as a form of interference: at least a form of interference with being rendered dead and obfuscated by the very process and people who should be unveiling and revealing them.

With Darren Tofts and Lisa Gye it is the perusal of the image that can be an act of interference and a disruption if it operates outside rigid interpretative frameworks and interaction parameters firmly set via intentio operis, intentio auctoris and intentio lectoris.

It is the fear of the unexpected remix and mash-up that interferes with and threatens the ‘purity’ and sanctimonious fascist interpretations of the aura of the artwork, its buyers, consumers and aesthetic priests. The orthodoxy, fanatic and terroristic aesthetic hierarchies that were disrupted by laughter in the Middle Ages might be disrupted today by viral, a-morphological and uncontrollable bodily functions.

My very personal thanks go to Paul Thomas and the authors in this book who have endeavored to comply with our guidelines to deliver a new milestone in the history of LEA.

As always I wish to thank my team at LEA who made it possible to deliver these academic interferences: my gratitude is as always for Özden Şahin, Çaglar Çetin and Deniz Cem Önduygu.

REFERENCES AND NOTES


Interference Strategies

The theme of ‘interference strategies for art’ reflects a literal merging of sources, an interplay between factors, and acts as a metaphor for the interference of art and science, the essence of transdisciplinary study. The revealing of metaphors for interference “that equates different and even ‘incommensurable’ concepts can, therefore, be a very fruitful source of insight.”

The role of the publication, as a vehicle to promote and encourage transdisciplinary research, is to question what fine art image-making is contributing to the current discourse on images. The publication brings together researchers, artists and cultural thinkers to speculate, contest and share their thoughts on the strategies for interference, at the intersection between art, science and culture, that form new dialogues.

In October 1927 the Fifth Solvay International Conference marked a point in time that created a unifying seepage between art and science and opened the gateway to uncertainty and therefore the parallels of artistic and scientific research. This famous conference announced the genesis of quantum theory and, with that, Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. These events are linked historically and inform interesting experimental art practices to reveal the subtle shift that can ensue from a moment in time.

The simple yet highly developed double slit experiment identifies the problem of measurement in the quantum world. If you are measuring the position of a particle you cannot measure its momentum. This is one of the main theories that have been constantly tested and still remains persistent. The double slit experiment, first initiated by Thomas Young, exposes a quintessential quantum phenomenon, which, through Heisenberg theory, demonstrates the quantum universe as a series of probabilities that enabled the Newtonian view of the world to be seriously challenged.

In the double slit experiment particles that travel through the slits interfere with themselves enabling each particle to create a wave-like interference pattern. The underlying concepts upon which this publication is based see the potential for art to interfere, affect and obstruct in order to question what is indefinable. This can only be demonstrated by a closer look at the double slit experiment and the art that is revealed through phenomena of improbability.
INTRODUCTION

When particles go through the slits they act as waves and create the famous interference pattern. The concept is that one particle going through the slit must behave like a wave and interfere with itself to create the band image on the rear receptor.

Interference Strategies looks at the phenomenon of interference and places art at the very centre of the wave/particle dilemma. Can art still find a way in today’s dense world where we are saturated with images from all disciplines, whether it’s the creation of ‘beautiful visualisations’ for science, the torrent of images uploaded to social media services like Instagram and Flickr, or the billions of queries made to vast visual data archives such as Google Images? The contemporary machinic interpretations of the visual and sensorial experience of the world are producing a new spectacle of media pollution, obliging the viewers to ask if machines should be considered the new artists of the 21st century.

The notion of ‘Interference’ is posed here as an anagram between production and seduction, as a redirection of affect, or as an untapped potential for repositioning artistic critique. Maybe art doesn’t have to work as a wave that displaces or reinforces the standardized protocols of data/messages, but can instead function as a signal that disrupts and challenges perceptions.

‘Interference’ can stand as a mediating incantation that might create a layer between the constructed image of the ‘everyday’ given to us by science, technological social networks and the means of its construction.

Mediation, as discussed in the first Transdisciplinary Imaging conference, is a concept that has become a medium in itself through which we think and act; and in which we swim. Interference, however, confronts the flow, challenges currents and eulogizes the drift.

The questions posed in this volume, include whether art can interfere with the chaotic storms of data visualization and information processing, or is it merely reinforcing the noxious nature of contemporary media? Can we think of ‘interference’ as a key tactic for the contemporary image in disrupting and criticizing the continual flood of constructed imagery? Are contemporary forms and strategies of interference the same as historical ones? What kinds of similarities and differences exist?

Application of a process to a medium, or a wave to a particle, for example, the sorting of pixel data, literally interferes with the state of an image, and directly gives new materiality and meaning, allowing interference to be utilised as a conceptual framework for interpretation, and critical reflection.

Interference is not merely combining. Interference is an active process of negotiating between different forces. The artist in this context is a mediator, facilitating the meeting of competitive elements, bringing together and setting up a situation of probabilities.

In response to the questions posed by the conference theme, presentations traversed varied notions of interference in defining image space, the decoding and interpretation of images, the interference between different streams of digital data, and how this knowledge might redefine art and art practice. Within that scope lies the discourse about interference that arises when normal approaches or processes fail, with unanticipated results, the accidental discovery, and its potential in the development of new strategies of investigation.

In “[t]he case of Biophilia: a collective composition of goals and distributed action,” Mark Cypher highlights the interference in negotiations between exhibit organisers, and space requirements, and the requirements for artist/artworks, resulting in an outcome that is a combination generated by the competition of two or more interests. As part of the final appearance of Biophilia, the artwork itself contained elements of both interests, an interference of competing interests, comprising a system in which the artist and the artwork are components, and the display a negotiated outcome. Each element interferes with itself as it negotiates the many factors that contribute to the presentation of art. In this sense the creation of the final appearance of Biophilia is the result of the distributed action of many “actors” in a “network.” (To put this in another form all actors are particles and interact with each other to create all possible solutions but when observed, create a single state.)

In summing up concepts of the second Transdisciplinary Imaging conference, particularly in reference to the topic of interference strategies, Edward Colless spoke of some of the aspirations for the topic, entertaining the possibilities of transdisciplinary art as being a contested field, in that many of the conference papers were trying to unravel, contextualise and theorise simultaneously.

The publication aims to demonstrate a combined eclecticism and to extend the discussion by addressing the current state of the image through a multitude of lenses. Through the theme of interference strategies this publication will embrace error and transdisciplinarity as a new vision of how to think, theorize and critique the image, the real and thought itself.

Paul Thomas

REFERENCES AND NOTES

4. Ibid.

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Special thanks to researcher Jan Andruszkiewicz.
Headless and Unborn, or the Baphomet Restored

Interfering with Bataille and Masson’s Image of the Acephale

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A MONSTROUS EMBLEM

At a certain period in European intellectual history, a comparatively large number of artists and intellectuals – arguably the most important thinkers and artists of the times – were all involved to a greater or lesser degree in the envisioning of a new myth that might lead European civilization out of the gathering darkness of fascism, a myth they hoped would provoke the total and radical transformation of society and culture.

Two principle groups were involved: the Surrealists, constellated around the ideas and political interventions of André Breton, the foremost ideologue of the Surrealist movement, and a group of ‘dissident’ surrealists that included Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris, key figures in the radical boys club, the Collège de Sociologie, which coalesced in 1936. Hovering between these two camps were a number of artists and intellectuals who appeared to loath to choose between the two encampments, or who periodically aligned themselves first with one, then the other. Overriding these vacillating allegiances and the petty clash of personalities was the unifying dream of finding a new myth through which society could be transformed. This dream was at first principally fomented within two vectors of cultural intervention: the journal Minotaure and the political activities of a group of engagés known as Contre-Attaque.

Minotaure saw its first issue in 1933. The editorial philosophy of Minotaure was summed up by the publisher and editor in this way: “Starting from the fact that it is impossible in our era to isolate the plastic arts from poetry and science, the review proposes to associate these three domains.” Thus “the plastic arts, poetry, music, architecture, ethnology, mythology, spectacle, psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis” were all to be included within its pages in an effort to showcase “the most audacious intellectual activity of the day.” In effect this was the reinvention of an experiment

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates Bataille and Masson’s drawing of the Acephale, the escutcheon of Bataille’s esoteric cabal and the journal (Acéphale) that espoused his vision of a violently sacralised society. Masson’s drawing of the acephalic monster is the emblem of Bataille’s negative Absolute, and is therefore the final image, a talisman to wipe out all other images. I unearth a hitherto unsuspected connexion between the Acephale and a magical text, one of the Papyri Graecae Magicae. Noting that the Acephale is an ‘emblem’, I point towards the tradition of the emblematic books, a tradition that began with Horapollo’s Hieroglyphica. I then propose that Caillois’s ‘objective ideograms’ and the idea of mantic decapitation was in part responsible for the production of Masson’s image. Capitalising on these imaginal connexions, I conclude by re-imagining the image of the Baphomet, and in particular Eliphas Levi’s famous drawing of the ‘Goat of Mendes.’ I suggest that the Baphomet is the secret twin of the Acephale, and that it is Levi’s aim to make his Baphomet the ultimate hieroglyphic emblem, the supreme condensation of the mysteries of the occult tradition. Thus the Baphomet is the necessary occult complement to the headless monster of Bataille and Masson.
that Georges Bataille had begun several years before with the publication of Documents, a journal that had sought provocation through a violent juxtaposition of ideas and images, the pages exploiting a paratextual arrangement of essays (on gnostic gems, ethnography, jazz, the big toe, and Buster Keaton, for example) and images from contemporary visual artists, photographs of slaughterhouses and pictures of African and Oceanic art. Documents appeared the year that La Révolution surréaliste ceased publication, Bataille no doubt hoping that it would symbolically represent a final, devastating salvo in Bataille’s ongoing critique of Surrealism and of André Breton in particular.

Boiled down in the alchemic of retrospection, we can see that what was primarily at stake in this drawn out intellectual contretemps between two heavy hitters was the nature and relevance of images, of representation surréaliste – what we might call today the rhetoric of the image – as opposed to what they regarded as a concomitant radical transformation of society and culture. In April of 1936 Georges Bataille resigned from the group. This break with Contre-Attaque is doubly significant in that previous to this severing, Bataille’s participation in the group represented a rapprochement between himself and André Breton, but it also signaled his violent frustration with the manner in which intellectuals had pursued their aims in the recent past. Bataille’s solution to this perceived impasse was to create a secret society – not provisionally, not temporarily, not just for today, but forever, outside of space and time. Bataille traveled to the Spanish coastal town of Tossa de Mar to visit the on again/off again Surrealist artist André Masson, a friend and associate of both Bataille and Breton. It was good timing for a soul in tumult: the Spanish Civil War was just breaking out.

Holed up in Masson’s kitchen, listening to a recording of Don Juan, Bataille witnessed Masson quickly produce a drawing that would become the eschaton of Bataille’s esoteric cabal and the esoteric journal Acéphale that would come to espouse his vision of a new, violently sacralised society. André Masson’s drawing is the emblem of Bataille’s radical break with Contre-Attaque and the pretensions of both Minotaure and the public face of the Collège de Sociologie. It is his rîte du passage, his initiation into another world.

The figure of the acephalic “monster” (as Bataille called it) is described by Masson in this manner:

“I saw him immediately as headless… what to do with this cumbersome and doubting head? – irresistibly it finds itself displaced in the sex, which it masks with a ‘deaths head’. Automatically one hand (the left) nourishes a dagger, while the other kneads a blazing heart (a heart that does not belong to the Crucified, but to our master Dionysus). The pectorals starred according to whim… What to make of the stomach? That empty container will resistably it finds itself displaced in the sex, which only leads to a life without appeal. Secretly or not, it is necessary to long to the Crucified, but to our master Dionysus… The light of the sun, the light of the world that had existed up until the appearance of the acephalic monster, is the manifestation in the phenomenal world of the light of the Absolute beyond it: civilization and its light are one. The Acéphale signals an end to all that. The Acéphale thus becomes a substitute god, a substitute for the Absolute. No more the light of god, no more the light of the image. Masson’s emblematic Acéphale is therefore the final image, the talisman that will wipe out all other images.

Furthermore the Acéphale does not represent this totally Other world without light, it invokes it. The acephalic monster of Masson and Bataille is a talismanic, incantatory machine. Bataille’s introduction in the first issue of the journal Acéphale is entitled La Conjuration Sacrée: There are several possible translations of this: Sacred Conspiracy, Sacred Confederacy, or Sacred Conjuration. All these meanings are possible and all, I would suggest, are necessarily present. It is the last possible meaning, sacred conjuration, that I want to run with here.

The acéphale man mythologically expresses sovereignty committed to the destruction and death of God, and in this the identification with the headness man merges and melds with the identification with the superfans, which is entirely ‘the death of God’.

The last sentence is perhaps a snide reference to Breton’s Nadja and its famous concluding line: “La beauté sera convulsive ou ne sera pas,” and thus Bataille levels his scimitar squarely at Breton and what Breton considered Breton’s barely sublimated yearning for the light. This light is that of the intellectus, the light which streams through the Western philosophical imaginary ever since Plato’s philosopher first struggled out of the cave to apprehend the true sun. The light of the sun, the light of the world that had existed up until the appearance of the acephalic monster, is the manifestation in the phenomenal world of the light of the Absolute beyond it: civilization and its light are one. The Acéphale signals an end to all that. The Acéphale thus becomes a substitute god, a substitute for the Absolute. No more the light of god, no more the light of the image. Masson’s emblematic Acéphale is therefore the final image, the talisman that will wipe out all other images.

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I will make no comment on the obvious Nietzschean aspirations here, it is the identification that Bataille emphasizes which I want to dilate upon now. Bataille’s day job was as an archivist/paleographer/nunumist at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and as such he had access to a large and prestigious collection of rare books and manuscripts. I suggest that among these recordite texts Bataille had discovered a particular text in the collection of Greco-Egyptian magical texts collectively known as the Papyri Graecae Magicae.

The Papyri Graecae Magicae were collected in the 19th century by an enterprising and avoccius diplomat in Alexandria, shipped to Europe and subsequently sold to various libraries, including the British Museum and the Bibliothèque nationale de France. It has been hypothesized that these papyri were originally the collection of one man, a magician, “who was also a scholar, probably philosophically inclined, as well as a bibliophile and archivist concerned about the preservation of the material.”

A man, in other words, remarkably similar to Georges Bataille. His well-known interest in Gnosticism may have inclined him to search out similar material, and inevitably he would have come across the magical texts of the Greco-Egyptian magician.

If this seems far-fetched, one only has to remember that in the early 1930s in Paris, many of the foremost intellectuals and artists of the time – at least, those of the particular persuasions and allegiances of which I am writing – were regularly attending the soirees of occultist Maria de Naglowska, the self-styled “satanic woman” and hierarchess of the Order of the Golden Arrow.

André Breton, Man Ray and his friend the American adventurer William Seabrook regularly attended her evenings of occult weirdness, and certainly Bataille would not have been outdone in this. It is quite possible that Naglowska’s demonstrations of magical rituals and her ideas on ritual practice were a direct inspiration behind Bataille’s formation of his secret society of the Acephale. It is certainly true that Bataille seemed to be emulating Naglowska when he attempted to drag his fellow Acéphalistes into the depths of the forest…for ritual sacrifice.

Amongst the Papyri Graecae Magicae there is one text that stands out from the standard magical spells that provide solutions for petty objectives, the spells for keeping a lover for example, or for getting bugs out of the house. This text is Papyri Graecae Magicae V.96 – 172, named by its English translator as the “Stele of Jeu the Hieroglyphist.”

The ritual begins in this way:

I summon you, the Headless One, who created earth and heaven, who created night and day, / you, who created light and darkness; you are Osaronophis whom none has ever seen…you have distinguished the just and the unjust; you have made female and male; / you have revealed seeds and fruits; you have made men love each other and hate each other.

The being that is summoned is explicitly named Acephalos (Acéphale), the Headless One, in this ritual. What makes this ritual even more unusual, unusual in terms of the entire Greco-Egyptian magical corpus in fact, is that after the standard banishing of demons from the ritual chamber, the magician invokes the “Holy Headless One” into himself, thus becoming the one who “makes the lightning flash and the thunder roll…the one whose mouth burns completely…the one who begets and destroys.”

Masson’s emblem of the Acephale holds a flaming heart in its right hand, and the Headless daemon in the Stele of Jeu the Hieroglyphist says that its name is a “heart encircled with a serpent, come forth and follow.” In his text Sacred Conspiracy/Confederacy/Conjunction Bataille writes:

…and he holds a steel weapon in his left hand, flames like those of a Sacred Heart in his right. He is not a man. He is not a God either. He is not me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster.

A magician who has invoked a Headless daemon into himself is of course no longer a man and not a god, but something that is neither one nor the other. He is himself but more than himself. He is, in other words, an Acéphalic monster, as Bataille avers in the above passage.

If all this seems circumstantial, I totally agree – yet this hitherto unsuspected connexion is certainly not unlikely, and moreover possesses a high degree of immanental logic, if I may use the term. Allow me to proceed a little further in my interference with Masson and Bataille’s Acephale.

I have consistently called this image an “emblem.” I have done this in order to point towards a tradition in which I believe the Acephale is the final arrival. This is the tradition of the emblematic books, a tradition that was kick-started when the text of Horapollo’s Hieroglyphica was purchased by Cosimo d’Medici from a Byzantine monk in 1422. The translation of this text (which was originally written, incidentally, in the same period as the texts of the Papyri Graecae Magicae) caused as much an intellectual furor as Piccolini’s later translations of the Corpus Hermeticum and Plato’s dialogues. The Hieroglyphica purported to explain ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs as emblematic figures containing layers of embedded meanings. The translation of the Hieroglyphica set in motion an entire industry that led to the production of hundreds of emblematic books, and possession of these collections was considered de riguer by the learned in the 16th and 17th centuries. In the hands of a few dedicated publishers (such as Theodor de Bry, who published books by Robert Fludd and Michael Maier, both notable Hermeticists) the hieroglyphic and graphic tradition of the emblem developed into an efflorescence of Hermetic publishing, which would have a defining influence on alchemy.

Allegorical images accompanied by a few cryptic lines of prose or verse, emblems presented to the learned a kind of pictorial riddle containing a solution of a moral nature. But emblems which could easily conceal more than one meaning constituted ideal vehicles for the secret transmission of esoteric information, and as such, were adopted by the alchemists.

Allegorical representation in the form of personification – an ingenious method of encapsulating an abstract idea in the form of a human figure – has probably the longest tradition in the history of Western culture. Emblematic personification was a method in which a host of interconnected, often difficult ideas were subsumed into the one, easily comprehensible image. Examples that are still with us today would include the personification of Justice as a blindfolded woman carrying a sword and a set of scales, and the medieval figure of Fortuna, a woman turning a giant wheel, the symbolism of which perhaps only survives through a certain television game show.

Considering that hermetic emblems were “allegorical images accompanied by a few cryptic lines of prose
or verse,” the cover of the first issue of Acéphale is a perfect example of such an emblem – an hieratic figure beneath which we can see a few cryptic lines: The Sacred Confederacy, or Nietzsche Against the Fascists. Indeed, I would insist that the form and function of this cover serves the very same purpose as the emblem in the hermetic and alchemical books, images the purpose of which is to accomplish much more than mere representation.

Mason and Bataille’s figure of the Acéphale is also an emblem with a special purpose: it is a magical machine that begins the apocalyptic annihilation of images altogether.

As exactly the same figure was reproduced on the cover of the journal Acéphale in each successive issue (there were only three issues), and as only a single line of text on the cover changed with each successive issue (The Sacred Confederacy, or Nietzsche Against the Fascists, for example) – thus serving the function of an allegorical figure with a “few cryptic lines of prose” – one can say that this emblem was envisioned as belonging to that unchanging Other world of the sacral, standing outside of the pornography of images which constantly demonstrate their numerous intersections and sometimes supplies overwhelming, crushing expressions of their unfortunable solidarity. Although their meaning is hidden and ambiguous, such expressions never fail to reach their destination. In short, these are objective ideograms, which concretely realize the lyrical and passional virtualities of the mind in the outside world.

The word ‘mantis’ comes from an ancient Greek word ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ μαίνεται, a person inspired by a ‘divine frenzy’, ‘a person inspired by a divine frenzy’, ‘a person inspired by a divine frenzy’, one who is ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ μαίνεται, “possessed by a god,” as Herodotus says in his Histories (Book 4, 79). Caillois could easily have made this observation when he mentions Bödys’s Demonomania, as the ‘demonomania’ in the title clearly shows this ancient connexion. It is obviously impossible to ‘prove’ that the idea of mantis decapitation was in part responsible for the production of Masson’s emblem, but if one provisionally entertains Caillois’ proposal of the continuity between nature and psyche, and of the consequent complexification of causal chains, then I do not consider this an untenable proposition. It has, at the very least, an imaginal logic, as I have suggested earlier. For my purposes this imaginal logic can be pursued further with one more step.

In his essay Caillois mentions various folk names for the mantis such as ‘Pray-to-God’ and ‘Pray-to-the-Devil.’ At one point he mentions that the predatory sexuality of the mantis could be “correlated with the medieval concepts of the incubi and succubi.”

If one additionally recalls Fredric Jameson’s despair at the “pornography” of images which miscegenate around us at an astounding daily rate, then the figure of the Acéphale must be regarded as a daemonic buzzbomb sent to devastate the endless plain of representation.

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THE BAPHOMET RESTORED

One kind of Locust...stands...in a large erectnesse... by Zoographers called mantis.

– Sir T. Browne, Pseudodoxia Epidemica, 1646.

These thoughts about Bataille and Masson’s hieratic emblem can take a further speculative détournement. Following the momentum of my reasoning, it should be acknowledged that the headless monster of Bataille and Masson no doubt finds at least some of its provenance in the writings and ideas of Bataille’s colleague, Roger Caillois.

As is well known, Caillois’ essay Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia, originally published in Minotaure in 1935, has had a surprising influence on 20th century thought, not the least being that it was partly responsible for Jacques Lacan’s development of the idea of the ‘mirror stage.’ This more famous essay was a development of an earlier essay devoted to a discussion of the praying mantis as the supreme representative of what Caillois called ‘objective ideograms,’ published the year before. For Caillois, the predatory sexual activities of the mantis were evidence of the ‘over-determination’ of the universe: that interconnected causal chains of affective influence stretched from even the mineral and insectoid worlds into the psyche of humankind.

[(I)It is utterly unthinkable that causal series could be totally distinct. This also contradicts experience, which constantly demonstrate their numerous intersections and sometimes supplies overwhelming, crushing expressions of their unfortunable solidarity. Although their meaning is hidden and ambiguous, such expressions never fail to reach their destination. In short, these are objective ideograms, which concretely realize the lyrical and passional virtualities of the mind in the outside world.]

The process of psychological and etymological, he neglects to mention probably one more step. In a further note he suggests that the mantis ideogram can be observed operating in Bodin’s De la Demonomanie des sorciers of 1580 and “other demonographers of the period.” Yet oddly enough, despite Caillois’ synoptic studies of the mantis both entomological and etymological, he neglects to mention probably the most interesting etymological curiosity associated with the insect.

The word ‘mantico’ comes from an ancient Greek word that has the meaning of ‘seer’ or ‘prophet, diviner’ (μαντικός). It’s Proto-Indo-European root form is the origin of our mantis, a person inspired by a ‘divine frenzy,’ one who is ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ μαίνεται, “possessed by a god,” as Herodotus says in his Histories (Book 4, 79). Caillois could easily have made this observation when he mentions Bödys’s Demonomanie, as the ‘demonomania’ in the title clearly shows this ancient connexion. Yet he does not, so this is where I come in.
I have noted the idea of demonological possession in relation to Bataille's conception of the Acéphale and the ancient magical text, the Stele de Jêu the Hieroglyphist earlier in this essay. Capitalising on the etymological/imaginal connexions between the mantis and demonomania, I will now invoke my final image.

In 1307 King Philip the Fair ordered that his once-trusted Crusaders, the Knights Templar, all be arrested and interrogated about their activities in the Holy Land and elsewhere. The Templars were tortured, tried and condemned, and many of their number summarily executed. Following the trials, Philip arrogated the considerable wealth of the Templars to his own fortunes. Considering that the confessions of the knights were all extracted under torture, Philip's epithet must now be regarded as perversely ironic (of course, the epithet 'fair' [le beau] was in reference to his appearance, not his character. Yet it is still true that even in his own time, he was regarded as a particularly unfair monarch.)

Among the list of wrong doings of which the Knights Templar were accused was the charge of idolatry. Specifically they were charged with worshipping an idol in the form of a decapitated head. This beheaded head was called Baphomet, and it was supposedly kept secreted somewhere within the Knights' temple in Paris. There has been considerable debate as to the nature of this head. Was it a sculptured head? A mummified head? Or perhaps it was a reliquary containing a human skull, like that of the hand of St. John the Baptist that now resides in the Topkapı Sarayı in Istanbul?

And what did the name Baphomet mean? It has been assumed that this was a corruption of Mahomet (Muhammed), but no one is really sure. What is certain is that these infamous trials of the Templars, and this mysterious head, the Baphomet, inspired two outré cultural activities both of which have inspired this last section of my essay. The first is that the often contradictory descriptions of the Baphomet led to the creation of a special kind of gargoyles in France, also called Baphomet: a bearded, horned, winged androgynous demon, which can even now be found on the portals of several cathedrals in France. In Italy a figure called Bafometto can be found in a grotto in Padua, the Grotta dei Cavaliere Templari. The second outré activity that was inspired by the Templars and their Baphomet was the creation, many centuries later, of esoteric societies that imagined themselves as heirs to the mysteries and secret rites of the Templars.

These two eccentric streams are the background to the production of probably the best known re-imaging of the image of the Baphomet: Eliphas Levi's (Alphonse Louis Constant) drawing of the ‘Goat of Mendes’ in his Dogma et Rituel de la Haute Magie, published in 1854. Possessing the attributes of the baphometic gargoyles, and symbolising the secrets and rites of the European occult tradition, Levi’s description and defense of this figure aims to rescue it from the demonic and, indeed, the satanic.

Levi states that the Baphomet, “a chimera, a malformed sphinx, a synthesis of deformities” symbolises the ‘astral fire’, the ‘Great Magical Agent,’ the ‘odic force’ and the “devil of M. Eudes de Mirville,” this latter a reference to the now forgotten author of Pneumatologie: Des esprits et de leurs manifestations fluidiques, published a few years before Levi’s magnum opus. Levi asserts that “the frontispiece to this Rituel reproduces the exact figure of the terrible emperor of night, with all his attributes and all his characters,” this benthed emperor being none other than the “Baphomet of the Templars, the bearded idol of the alchemist, the obscene deity of Mendes, the goat of the Sabbath.” He furthermore announces, “let us state boldly and precisely that all inferior initiates of the occult science and profaners of the Great Arcanus, not only did in the past but do now, and will ever, adore what is signified by this alarming symbol.”

The Grand Masters of the Order of the Templars worshipped the Baphomet, and caused it to be worshipped by their initiates; yes, there existed in the past and there may be still in the present, assemblies which are presided over by this figure, for them it is that of the god Pan, the god of our modern schools of philosophy, the god of the Alexandrian theurgic school and of our own mystical Neo-platonists... the god of Spinoza and Plato, the god of the primitive Gnostic schools; the Christ also of the dissident priesthood. Clearly it is Levi’s aim to make of his Baphomet the ultimate hieroglyphic emblem, the supreme condensation of all the great mysteries of the occult tradition. The gesture of Levi’s Baphomet, one arm pointing aloft, the other to the earth, is (evidently) the “the sign of occultism.” Levi says that one of the arms is feminine and the other masculine to represent the mystical androgyne, and that these attributes have been “combined with those of our goat, since they are one and the same symbol.” Here we have the coincidentia oppositorum, the resolution of antinomies, beloved of mystics and occultists alike.

Levi’s attempt to make of the Baphomet the ultimate emblem of all occult secrets, rather than a decapitated head that was an object of worship by the Templars, has received support from a contemporary scholar of Templar lore, Bernard Marillier, in his Essai sur la Symbolique Templière. Marillier asserts that the Baphomet was a symbol of the “rite of the severed head,” which is “the source of all the myths that relate to the primordial Tradition.” Marillier adumbrates a list of related stories from world mythology that serve to support his theory: the head of the Medusa severed by Perseus, the heads which the Celts took from their slain enemies, various incidents of decapitation in the Grail cycle of stories, etc. All these point, he says, to a ‘mythico-initiatic’ tradition to which the Knights Templar were heirs.

According to Marillier the Baphomet was not an idol at all, rather it was the hieratic emblem of “an initiation rite of the heroic-solar type”:

The rite of symbolic decapitation, the Templars... captured the spirit and spiritual power, aligned themselves with the divine, and prepared to defeat both their visible and invisible enemies, the most formidable of which reside in the very depths of their being. Furthermore, The neophyte, by reciting formulas and participating in dramatized scenes, identifies with the deity, allowing him to make his spiritual rebirth in intimate communion with the divine. (My italics.)

In Marillier’s interpretation of the Baphomet, the ‘divine frenzy’ – the manic sublimation – is the summit of the ‘mythico-initiatic’ tradition which the Templars had brought from the East, and of which the Baphomet was the mysterious, ultimate emblem. Regarded in this manner, the Baphomet appears as the secret twin of, and the necessary occult complement to, the headless monster of Bataille and Masson.
The torch of illumination still burns between its antennae, and the emblem is now transfigured into its final form.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. By which I mean a sorcerous fascination – to be entranced and captured by an illusory appearance.
3. My translation of: Il est temps d’abandonner le monde des civilisés et sa lumière, il est trop tard pour tenter à être raisonnable et instruit – ce qui a mené à une vie sans attirer. Secrètement ou non, il est nécessaire de devenir tout autres ou de cesser d’être.
9. McGregor Mathers, hierophant of the late 19th century Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, translated the daemon of this text – inexplicably – as the ‘bornless’ one, a reference found in the title of this essay.
14. The phrase is Cassius: I have stolen it for reasons that I hope will soon become clear.
16. Ibid., 75.
17. In point of fact the transcripts of the confessions of the Templars do not confirm that they referred to their mysterious idol by the name of Baphomet, rather one of the Templars, Gaucerant de Montpezat, refers to a ‘tête baphométique’ (a baphometic head), the meaning of which adjective has eluded scholars ever since.
20. The ‘Tradition’ in this case being the ‘perennial tradition’ espoused by such 20th century esotericists as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr for example.
22. Ibid. “Par le rite de la décapitation symbolique, les Templiers…captaient l’Esprit et la puissance spirituelle, se mettaient en phase avec le divin, et se préparaient à vaincre à la fois leurs ennemis visibles et invisibles, ceux qui flottent au tiroir de l’être, les plus redoutables.”
23. Ibid. “Le néophyte, par la récitation de formules et le jeu de scènes dramatisées, s’identifiait à la divinité, lui permettant d’opérer sa renaissance spirituelle en intime communion avec le divin.”