

Representations of Nature Limited and Unlimited: A Speculative Essay

Norman Simms

We haven't been thinking enough about the multiplication of self-propelled machines, which have put on our streets, avenues and boulevards so many railways that have become miniature trains. Steam-driven and electric tramways, electric tricycles, automobiles, with the danger of being hit or overturning, or exploding. And if you take the trouble to multiply the total of accidents on railway lines where there is surveillance by the number of trains which are limited, and do the same for the mechanical engines circulating everyday in Paris, you will be shocked.

(Marcel Schwob)¹

Introduction

This passage from one of his daily columns in the newspapers of Paris at the end of the nineteenth century shows how fearful and shocked Marcel Schwob, a Jewish journalist and short-story writer, was by the changes happening around him. The world was no longer the one in which he had grown up; technology was making life dangerous. He had seen on that morning, the 20th of April 1898, a young man knocked off his bicycle by a larger vehicle and nearly killed. Schwob set to thinking about not just the crowded streets with all their new kinds of mechanical contraptions tearing along at what seemed incredible speeds, but also about what this sense of crowdedness, speed, and danger might mean for the future. Railways had been around for two or three generations, as had steamships, along with the telegraph, mechanical printing presses, and an ever-increasing range of other contraptions; in the 1890s one would have to add telephones, motion pictures, phonographs, and the first flying-machines.²

Norman Simms was Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Waikato. He is now retired but remains an active scholar with affiliations in Australia, France, and Germany.

¹ Marcel Schwob, '20 April 1898,' in *Lettres Parisiennes* (Paris: Hibouc, 2006), p. 78.

² For a general view of the changes in transport and communication see Rebecca West, *1900* (New York and Avanel, NY: Crescent Books, 1982). See also Julie Wosk, *Breaking Frame: Technology and the Visual Arts in the Nineteenth Century* (New

It was not just technology speeding up transport and communications, changing the way people lived, worked, and related to one another; there were also more and more changes in the way experiences were seen, recorded, remembered, and transformed into the various arts, from painting to sculpture, through music and architecture and dance, with strange new places for performance and exhibiting art, both fine and popular. Moreover, these changes in what was seen and how they were experienced also caused more profound changes in how people perceived, conceived, and thought about their own selves in the world. Not only did these pose problems about what could be represented in the visual arts and narrative fiction, let alone music and poetry, but much more about what representation meant. When people looked around them and into the frames of pictures – on the walls of a gallery, on the screen in a darkened hall, in the aperture of an instantaneous camera – they were no longer sure what the limits were between the outside panorama of natural things and the inner theatre of their own consciousness.³

Thus the title of this volume seems to me profoundly ambiguous and provocative when it sets up the topic of the limitations of representation. What does representation mean and how can there be limitations to it? At first blush, the topic would seem to ask for a consideration of how far artists and literary authors felt drawn towards completing the age-old quest for mimetic accuracy in their descriptions of the world around them, as they saw and felt experience and as far as they could use their imaginations and their various skills to construct apparently real people, places, things, and events that were not factually or historically true, but would persuade viewers or readers that they

Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992). The experience of these changes appears in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, especially in Volume 5, 'The Prisoner'; for the biographical background on these experiences see the memoirs of Céleste Albaret, as told to Georges Belmont, *Monsieur Proust*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003). A somewhat tragic-comical account of the breakdown of these developments during the 1870 Franco-Prussian War appears in Joris-Karl Huysmans's short novel *Sac-au-dos*, trans. L.G. Meyer (London: P.F. Collier & Son, 1907).

³ The instantaneous camera came into being in the last quarter of the nineteenth century replacing the long time necessary for light through the lens to fix itself on a chemical film; once this happened, not only could pictures be taken of the instant, rather than of the moment, but it made it possible to grasp processes of motion, such as horses galloping, birds flapping their wings, and buds flowering. Eventually, in rapid succession these still photos of hundreds or thousands of images could be projected on to a screen as motion pictures or cinema. See, Brian Clegg, *The Man Who Stopped Time: Eadweard Muybridge* (London: Sutton Publishing, 2007).

were at least plausible and probable facsimiles of such fictions. Then, realising that this consideration of the topic was fraught with both epistemological and aesthetic problems, it seemed interesting to follow through to the next part of the title, the question of limits: this could be taken as either the physical or tangible difficulties in creating convincing artistic or fictional scenes and characters because the entire treasure-house of conventions, assumptions, and precedents which the enterprise could be undertaken were now – at whatever time the painters or novelists were operative – inadequate; and so ordinary spectators and perusers of their works, unless they were naïve, gullible, or overly suggestible, would no longer be taken in by the specialists. In other words, from a second perspective, there always are limits to representation because art and literature are, by definition and in essence, duplicitous acts of imitation and products of deceit.⁴

Additional contemplation raises two further questions on the problem associated with the limits of representation. The first of these questions is historical, and has to do with radical shifts that occurred in the relationship of painters or sculptors or literary artists to mimesis over the course of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Thanks to developments in science, technology, and philosophy of mind during this period of history in Europe and North America, what could be known about human experience and the world in which it played itself out was changed because new ways of recording, and then perceiving and recollecting these experiences, had been invented. This, by consequence, transformed the expectations and presuppositions of what constituted reality and the entire premise of art and literature was blown apart; neither the creators nor the consumers of these *objets d'art* and texts wanted to reproduce facts of life. Instead, the purpose of the endeavours was to express the painter's or the novelist's engagement with the media through which he or she worked, to project into such a medium the very processes of creativity and its limitations, and then somehow or other to

⁴ Plato's *Republic* is the *locus classicus* of this point of view, the argument returning again and again in this dialogue, mostly in relation to the Cave Allegory, leading Socrates – Plato's main speaker – to advise the ejection of epic singers, other poets, and painters from his ideal polis or city, on the grounds that they taught the false doctrine of copies of copies of ideals. For the contemporary application of these platonic principles by way of cinema – and it is from the *Republic* that the term *kinema* comes, as it describes the moving images projected on the walls of the cave by the shadow puppets of Socrates' symbolic narrative – see Stéphane Zagdanski, *La mort dans l'œil: critique du cinéma comme vision, domination, falsification, éradication, fascination, manipulation, dévastation, usurpation* (Paris: Maren Sell/ Diffusion Seui, 2004).

make the personality of the artist and the specificity of the struggle against the resistance in the media to disappear. This would have left some kind of pure experience, something that ordinary old-fashioned patrons, critics, and historians would deem anti-art, a defiance of the very society that generated the enterprise, an insult in both the legal and the medical sense to the concept of art.⁵

Because there can only be a limited coverage of all the deeper issues involved in the topic, the second question to come up is more personal and arises from my own scholarly interests. Therefore, I need to set ideological boundaries to what can be discussed. In other words, the place of this topic on the limits of representation needs to be focused on the tradition and concept of Jewish art, something I have been puzzling over and writing about since at least the early 1980s. Putting aside the seeming rejection of all representational art in the Second Commandment and the development of an aniconic religious tradition, how does one account for the actual operational record of Jewish artistry over millennia, the specificity or continuity of the controversially and uniquely Jewish, and the seeming sudden outburst of Jewish artists, art-dealers, critics and historians, museum curators, as well as novelists, critics, publishers, literary historians, and professors within the academy? The anti-Semites of the late nineteenth century, like Edouard Drumont, and more rabid Nazis in the 1920s and 1930s sensed this, though their explanations and extrapolations are extreme and irrational.⁶ It does at times appear that entire fields, if not

⁵ Pierre Assouline, *Discovering Impressionism: The Life of Paul Durand-Ruel*, trans. Willard Wood and Anthony Roberts (New York: The Vendome Press, 2004 [2002]). A wealth of contemporary documents are cited in John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*, 4th rev. ed. (Boston: New York Museum of Modern Art, 1973), and then in his *Post-Impressionism: From Van Gogh to Gauguin*, rev. ed. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1978 [1956]). On the transformation into twentieth century aesthetics see Thomas Harrison, *1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996); and Jacqueline Strecker (ed.), *The Mad Square: Modernity in German Art 1910-1937* (Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW, 2011).

⁶ For it is not some biological urge in Jews or a pact with demonic powers to take over the world by undermining Christian values and traditional European culture. As Jews were released from the political and social restraints of medieval and later legal disabilities, they could venture into new educational fields and begin to assimilate into the modernizing world under construction. Many craft guilds and professional associations remained closed to them, virtually forcing Jews into new areas of commerce, industry, finance, as well as innovative technologies simply because the old exclusionary traditions and rules did not apply. There were indeed historical tendencies favouring Jewish success in business, science, and the arts, inculcated serious habits of

dominated by a Jewish perspective, are at least heavily influenced by this distinctive presence. This occurs even when – and perhaps precisely because – in many instances the Jewish identity is not recognized as such by non-Jews and Jews alike, or taken as a necessitating factor, especially by the artists and novelists who disclaim anything but a dubious ancestry, extraction, or background from which they have broken and against which they claim to be performing, or which is irrelevant, marginal, and incidental to their creativity. Except at particular moments of crisis, only the Jew-haters make this interpretation, labelling any contentious or dangerous modernization Jewish, when it is only the break with traditional restraints that attracts Jewish attention and allows for entry into the field of endeavour.

Yet, if there is anything continuous in Jewish tradition over many generations, it lies in a reaction against idolatry, the chief idols of which would be a belief in the licit visual representation⁷ of the real world, whatever that might consist of, and the even worse idol of vaunting the ego as a deified genius, twisted and tormented or arrogant and self-assured. But this repugnance

study, meticulous examination of details, and co-operative activities of social responsibility; in a negative sense, Jews had no theological restraints on the view of the material operation of nature, its regulation by rational principles, and its need for manipulation and improvement. See James Parkes, *An Enemy of the People: Antisemitism* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin Books, 1945); Walter Sombart, *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*, trans. M. Epstein (Kitchener: Baloch Books, 2004 [1911]); and Harry Waton, *An Answer to all Anti-Semites: A Program for Humanity* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Jews, 1930).

⁷ What was licit was narrowed down considerably in the course of the century, although the structures were set in place earlier: the ejection of mythology and fable except as rhetoric flourishes in art and literature, but the rejection of rhetoric in scientific writing and illustration was also set in place. Then there would be added the neutralization of backgrounds against which objects to be studied, meditated, or enjoyed could be placed, with the removal of distinguishing class, period, and sectarian objects. The world of nature would then be observed as ‘a tangled bank’ or at least as a living, organically related environment, rather than an allegorical stage-set. But, of course, in hindsight, once the new boundaries were recognized and assimilated into the unquestioned illusion of normality, the pictures produced during the nineteenth century still strike us as ‘old fashioned,’ ‘artificial,’ and ‘limited’ in the sense of lacking depth and dynamic relationships. See Edward K. Kaplan, *Michelet's Poetic Vision: A Romantic Philosophy of Nature, Man & Woman* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977). See also Francis D. Klingender (ed.), *Art and the Industrial Revolution* (Norwich: Granada, 1968 [1947]); and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975 [1936]).

in rabbinical writings to depictions of nature or human forms that are suggestive of idolatrous service (*avoda zara*) is countered by the secularization of science that contextualizes the new motives. Jewish experience engendered professional expertise in the medical sciences, for example, as an outgrowth of several factors: Talmudic requirements to recognize and assess the symptoms of animal and human disease; to undertake meticulous care of the injured and the ill; to prevent and correct faults in the environment that cause sickness and distress and to see in these faults neither the moral corrective nor punishment of an innate natural power. Insofar as there are natural laws to be discerned and applied, the Jewish mind would understand them as in need of constant scrutiny and interpretation, thus adjusting experiences to specific temporary and geographical circumstances. This scientific attitude also conditions Jewish entry into the popular and fine arts, an entry that became possible during the period of the Enlightenment and under conditions of political emancipation. Jews did not inaugurate these epistemological and aesthetic changes; they took advantage of them and participated in an increasingly active way.

By the last half of the nineteenth century there were many such radical changes in the way in which Europeans could see both the representations of reality in painting and in literature and in the way they experienced the people, places, things, and events in their own living environment. Popular taste⁸ was still based on the Greek notion of *mimesis*, that is, that the function of art was to reproduce images of reality, including historical persons and events, in such a way as to seem real, though what constituted real was often a matter of style and taste, as well as of official ideologies. For aristocratic and religious leaders,

⁸ By *popular* we mean more than the uneducated, unsophisticated, traditional tastes of the lower classes in both rural and urban areas of the nations of Western Europe; and the mentality as well of those in more educated and sophisticated classes, for society across the spectrum was class-bound, even given minor variations from country to country. The term can refer to the predilections and perceptions of the middle to upper classes as well, insofar as they did not share the emerging special ways of seeing, reproducing, and discussing the world through the specialized discourses (visual as well as verbal) that both the sciences and the arts were creating by means of developed technologies, instrumentalization, and radicalization of aesthetics. Painters, for example, though they depended on patrons, dealers, gallery directors, museum curators, and critics to achieve their own recognition, became more and more alienated from popular tastes, with the old support-network reduced as well by the cultural divide that was no longer dependent on class boundaries, financial means, or educational level. Taste was being transformed into the ability to see and appreciate. Elizabeth Gilmore Holt (ed.), *The Triumph of Art for the Public: The Emerging Role of Exhibitions and Critics* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books/ Anchor Doubleday, 1979).

the real was a depiction of how they wished to be seen and their actions, including those of their ancestors, to be remembered. Though there were structures in Christian beliefs that changed over close to a millennium and a half, the function of artistic mimesis for western Europeans had emphasized the picture of reality as religion wished it to be seen, sometimes in regard to the characters and events in the life of Jesus Christ, along with those biblical persons who prefigured his career and especially his Passion, and those saints who imitated the essence of his behaviour and ideals; such religious art imitated how the world should be, and the way it really was if the sinful accidents of everyday experience could be purged and clarified. During the Renaissance and beyond, the representations of painting, sculpture, and other visual arts began to include depictions of great men and women, or of ordinary men and women in the process of sanctifying their own individual lives. By the time of the French Revolution, however, the purpose of artistic imitation was to produce such vivid images of great men and great deeds.

Outside of small *avant-garde* groups, most people, including most artists, critics, teachers, and the general public, could not recognize in the new art forms what they presumed to be the real world, both the external and the internal realms of experience.⁹ Putting aside petty jealousies and ambitions, established artists and prestigious critics tended to view the work of the new Impressionists as offensive nonsense; they seemed to see only meaningless blotches of colour, incomplete and incomprehensible canvases, and unrecognisable persons and places. Similarly, general readers and literary reviewers thought of writers such as Gustav Flaubert and Emile Zola as pornographers, purveyors of smutty language, and botchers of plot and character. Similar reactions to music and dance also occurred, as when symphonies or ballets we now find lush and romantic were hissed off the stage as cacophonous and confused. But at the same time, from the 1860s through to

⁹ If one takes one of the most popular and lucrative painters, such as Ernest Meissonnier, and compare him to the names we now think of as standard or classical for the mid-nineteenth century, such as the Impressionists, it is evident that it was not only politics and taste that governed access to exhibiting at the Salons in Paris or the awarding of prizes and contacts, but something far deeper. The academies were official institutions, as were the schools attached to them, and their sense of what constituted legitimate art – and thus licit representations of reality through art – were not matters of taste and popular trends, but deep-seated distinctions in the way the world could and should be seen, reproduced, remembered, and interpreted. See Ross King, *The Judgment of Paris: The Revolutionary Decade that Gave the World Impressionism* (New York: Walker & Co., 2006).

the end of the century, these same audiences and readers took as accurate representations of the world the lithographs in newspapers and magazines, the wax figures in museums of actuality, the gaudy and overly sentimentalised scenes on the stage and in popular novels. Trains, telegraph messages, steamships, and telephones also transformed people's sense of what was real and what were acceptable representations of that reality, so that not only expectations of what to see and hear about the world were in the process of change. Therefore, the reality itself was reconstructed to match the new expectations. These reconstructions were not peaceful, orderly, or gradual; they were often violent, disruptive, and sudden as, on the one hand, the opening up of new territories for settlement in America, Africa, and Oceania or the destruction of old streets and buildings to create a new version of Paris, and, on the other hand, the Great War of 1914-18 and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

All these changes are not, as I said, merely matters of taste or style, or even very much under the conscious will of the senders or receivers of the mental messages. They are deep events, hidden in the imagination and embedded in the sensory apparatus of perception, or to use the modern metaphor, hard-wired into the systems that constitute the mind, and perhaps not so metaphorically at all, occurrences in the ongoing expression of genetic abilities and proclivities. In regard to Jewish painters, sculptors, musicians, architects, and other artists, including vaudeville dramatists, photographers, and motion-picture-makers, the radical shifts were, in a sense, not so radical, insofar as the individuals discovered themselves. Sometimes some of them never realized this phenomenon, returning to the very cultural mentality they assumed they had broken away from or had forgotten.

To understand these changes and how they shifted boundaries and stretched the *limites* or horizons of perception, developed new models of knowing, created new things to be seen and recollected, and even to generate new meanings for reality and nature, we have to deal with at least four main issues almost simultaneously. The first matter derives directly from the topic given for this volume; the supposed limits of representation in art and literature. I will consider the visual arts mostly, and will focus on changes made in the last decades of the nineteenth century. To do so there must be questioning about what is meant by representation, what constitutes art, an artist, and what he or she does.

The second matter has to do with the supposed or implied contrast between the mechanical representation of the world created by photographs and other apparatuses developed in the nineteenth century such as cinema and x-rays, and the aesthetic representation created by painters, sculptors, and other persons calling themselves artists. I will argue that for the most part this

contrast or tension between technology and art is an illusion or a delusion: it is a myth and an ideological premise, not a fact; it is a reason in an argument, not a given truth of the world. Instead, science and art are not mutually exclusive, and from the beginning of the new technology it was evident that what photography revealed was both more and other than the naked eye could see. At the same time, it was also a lesser, distorted version of what artists and philosophers believed they could see at a time when natural history was still a branch of philosophy, and moral philosophy designated what came to be known as psychology, and when theologians were often scientists and religion was given a logical and moral rationale by mathematics and the direct observation of nature.

The third matter I will deal with concerns the reasons why and how the discrepancy and opposition of art and science came into being, along with the struggle between religion and science. In other words, why and how artists thought of what they were doing was better, truer, and a more spiritual thing than what both scientists and theologians were engaged with. It could also be expressed this way: in the nineteenth century, artists and patrons or so-called consumers of art began to believe that art was a new religion because only the artist, whether painter, sculptor, musician, or architect, could experience the spiritual truths of the world.

The fourth matter has to do with why, in the late nineteenth century, a large number (though still a small percentage) of the people engaged with the production, distribution, and appreciation of art were Jews, and what their Jewish backgrounds, beliefs, and practices had to do with the change in the way art was seen and valued in Europe. On the one hand, representing the new movements in science and aesthetics as dominated by or at least inordinately influenced by Jewish personalities and values was an anti-Semitic smear, from the time of Eduard Drumont's horrible *France juive* through to the Nazi's attempt to discredit all modern art as a product of Jewish decadence.¹⁰ These

¹⁰ The usual slanders are set forth in this bizarre and yet extremely popular book by Drumont – in fact, it was one of the best-sellers of the 1890s – by a journalist of no great intellectual abilities and suggested that: the Jews have invaded France, especially the more openly despicable examples of the species from Eastern Europe; they bring disease, crime and uncontrollable lust with them; they have already undermined traditional French morality by their take-over of popular entertainments, the press, and economic institutions; they are an unassimilable danger in society, culture and the spiritual life of the nation; and they stand for all in modernity that seeks to destroy the virile, Christian, Aryan qualities of the 'real' France. By such reasoning, Drumont and other anti-Semites could stigmatize any person or idea they disliked, or felt threatened

same Jew-haters decried psychoanalysis, theories of relativity, and other new ways of seeing, measuring, and controlling the world as ‘Jewish,’ as somehow against the basic principles of Christian civilization and the laws of classical logic.

Turning the Lens

And the work of man has characteristics which make it superior even to nature, for nature is a simple, direct effect of God’s creative act, whereas human action is a continuation, completion, and in a sense *perfecting* of this act itself.¹¹

Jules Michelet, the French historian, who was writing in the mid-nineteenth century, provides a good starting point for a discussion of this topic. The passage below comes from a book entitled *The Insect*.¹² Though he is discussing what happened at least three hundred years earlier, what he says fits even more with the technological advances made in his own century, and with the epistemological and aesthetic implications those changes made. He is talking about Galileo and the telescope, and Swammerdam and the microscope:

An astounding revolution! The abyss of life was unfolded in its profundity with myriads upon myriads of unknown beings and fantastic organizations of which men had not even dared to dream. But the most surprising circumstance is that the very method of the sciences underwent a total change. Hitherto men had relied on their senses. The severest observation invoked their testimony, and they thought that no appeal could lie from their judgment. But now behold experiment and the senses themselves by a powerful auxiliary, confess that not only have they concealed from us the greatest part of things, but that, in those they have laid bare, they have every moment been mistaken.¹³

Michelet argues that Galileo and Swammerdam did not just show the rest of Europe that there were whole new worlds to explore above and beneath the limits of what commonsense had always considered the extent of reality, but that scientific thought, and then the artistic eyes and hands, would have to be able to articulate the unexpected perceptions that were now revealed and

by, by simply calling it Jewish. See Édouard Drumont, *La France Juive* (Paris: C. Marpon and E. Flammarion, 1873).

¹¹ Elijah Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, trans. and ed. Maxwell Luria (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1994 [1914]), p. 198.

¹² Jules Michelet, *The Insect*, trans. W.H. Davenport Adams (London, Edinburgh, and New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1871). See Kaplan, *Michelet’s Poetic Vision*.

¹³ Michelet, *The Insect*, p. 130.

shockingly opened to exploration into words, images, and tangible forms. In addition, once the dimensions of the known and knowable universe were stretched in both directions from the core of ordinary experience, future European thinkers and artists would have to learn how to deal with the legacy of commonsense, that is, traditional and logical conceptions they were being forced to admit as wrong.

There would have to be new ways of seeing through artificial instruments, so that there would be new things to measure and depict in the vast reaches of outer space; before, there were only dreams, fantasies, and the infinitely regressive inner space where nothing at all was suspected of existing. What if the old language and logic no longer worked? What if the traditional ways of drawing, painting, and sculpting could not contain these unexpected portions of the universe? With a huge corpus of preconceived notions, speculations, and beliefs to be pushed aside, how does one deal with the confusion, the wonder, the dizziness, the anger, the frustration, the danger, the sense of freedom and exaltation? Where does art begin and fantasy end? When do fantasising run out and speculation and analysis begin?

Projecting his sense of surprise and exaltation back three hundred years, however, Michelet had the benefit of hindsight to express his wonder in the superlatives and sublime terms of Romanticism. He thus filled out the contours of the tragic figure of Jan Swammerdam, whom he calls the Dutch Pascal, finding him tragic because he was not only rejected by his family and contemporary scientists, but also because he did not have the mental apparatus or structures to contain the explosion of new ways of seeing and therefore of throwing out old epistemologies and worn-out scholastic categories of thought.

If Pascal saw an imaginary abyss opening before him, what would happen to this Dutch Pascal, who saw the limitless profundity of the unexpected world? It was not a matter of a decreasing scale of abstract greatness or of inorganic atoms, but of the successive envelopment and prodigious movements of being which the one in the other. For the little we see, each animal is a tiny planet, a small world inhabited by animals still more diminutive, which in their turn are inhabited by others very much smaller. And this without end or rest, except from the powerlessness of our senses and the imperfection of optical science.¹⁴

What had been opened up in the nineteenth century, even more than in the sixteenth and seventeenth, were the concepts and the experiences of space and time. Galileo showed everyone how nearly infinite were the extremes of

¹⁴ Michelet, *The Insect*, p. 139.

outer space and Swammerdam how endless the world was below the dimensions of the naked eye. Now something happened to the world within which everyone assumed they could live comfortably in the environment of nature and urban space. Photography first showed that what ordinary perception (“the naked eye”) observed was not all that there was to see: the earliest cameras picked up details, shades, outlines, and relationships people had not and could not have noticed. Sped up and slowed down, moreover, the still photograph and then the cinematic camera revealed processes and realities below the reach of the eye’s lens and the brain’s ability to grasp; and the x-ray undermined the differences between inside and outside. Time itself was thus not what everyone always assumed it to be: it was now composed of multiple instants, it was reversible, and it was virtually the same as space. One could hardly believe one’s eyes any longer, and one could hardly believe anything that had been taught in the schools or in the church.

By the end of the nineteenth century, technology and art seemed to pull apart, so that some people could take as a truism that the function of art and the artist was to see something more and other than that which common sense and the photograph could show. It was assumed, on the one hand – and even Proust says this – that a photographic reproduction of a scene or a family was dead or at least distorting. Still photography as well as moving pictures presented a false version of reality partly because they did not discriminate or focus on what was important or meaningful and partly because they presented fragments of life; such pieces were false and diminished the dynamic of real persons, places, events, and time. In a sense, this is a reductive version of the old Platonic canard: that since only pure ideas are real, not only is a painting or a sculpture a false image of reality, but it was also only a copy of a copy, because anything existing in the world of time and space was in itself only an accidental version of what was eternal, beyond time, and infinitely larger than any conceivable space.

These were not merely Platonic objections in the realm of philosophical theory rendered through the filter of medieval Christianity, where it picked up new ideas of iconology and sacramental reality. It was a different kind of hesitation and rationalization of imitations and copies of the world of natural things and the higher world of spiritual entities; that is, the biblical injunction against graven images, idols, and hypostatic depictions of nature.¹⁵ The nature

¹⁵ Though Zagdanski takes a highly classical and Platonized view of this alleged deathly power of the dominant eye of cinema, disappointing readers who expected more emphasis on Jewish tradition, particularly discussions of Talmudic view on vision, reproduction of images, and methods of analysis in iconic circumstances, he

of rabbinical accommodations of the first three commandments will be shown in a later section of this article to fit into both scientific and aesthetic movements of the late nineteenth century.

When we take all these philosophical and aesthetic concepts down to the level of ordinary day-to-day life in regards to transport and communication, we find someone saying at the end of the nineteenth century what we cited from Marcel Schwob in our headnote.¹⁶ But these changes were not only in how people experienced the new world coming into focus around them; it was also in *what* was seen and how they were experienced, causing more profound changes in *how* people perceived, conceived, and thought about their own selves in the world. Photography, cinema, telegraph messages; all those things were inventions, part of a technology that caused a further wave of tremendous changes in epistemology and aesthetics. This was not just a way of absorbing and assimilating the revolutionary transformations Michelet saw in telescopes and microscopes, where the nature of the universe shifted to an awareness of vast new ranges of reality; it also suggested the consequent need to cleanse the Augean Stables of the muck of the millennia, to adjust one's inner thoughts and feelings to new ways of seeing and those new things that could be seen. What the nineteenth-century machines of seeing and knowing changed were experiences of time and space: time would no longer consist of moments in succession, orderly units and measurable patterns of progress, and historical development and rational perfection. It would consist of unexpected and previously unimaginable instants: charged, dynamic, uncontrollable atoms, themselves susceptible to further explosiveness, until time itself had to be accepted as relative, reversible, and incommensurable.

does raise crucial issues, some of which we have attempted to deal with in this article. See my further remarks in the forthcoming study of Alfred Dreyfus. See Zagdanski, *La mort dans l'œil*; and Norman Simms, *Man, Milieu, Mentality and Midrash* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012).

¹⁶ A good survey of these technological developments and their impact on artists may be found in Wosk, *Breaking Frame*. Wosk discusses the ambiguous feelings most people, especially painters, sculptors, and architects, experienced in the face of the tremendous new powers of speed and energy in their lives, as well as tracing some of the debates in regards to industrial design itself, the use of artificial materials for domestic and personal use, and the general impact of these changes on how life was imagined. Her analysis, however, is relatively superficial, and in particular overlooks the subject of representation of nature through the medium of these technological transformations. The biggest drawback, so far as the topic covered in my presentation, is her limitation almost exclusively to British and American authorities and examples.

For this reason, when ordinary people – the great unwashed and the *parvenus* middle-class – judged paintings and sculptures against the standard of realism as seen in daguerreotypes or kinematoscopes, the elite, the aesthetes, the philosophers, and the artists arched their backs and answered that it was not the function of art or artists to reproduce such a flat, dead, and meaningless version of the real world. At the same time, these refined thinkers argued that the role of the artist and of art was to see more and other than common sense perceived; that the deeper insight came because the artist himself was a lens through which a higher, deeper, more significant reality could be passed. The painter painted not so much what was supposedly out there in the real world, but what was in his or her heart and soul – what was stimulated by the impressions received from the outside environment, particularly light and shade, atmospheric conditions, and profound emotions within his or her own experience.

With reason, some artists and critics began to speak of the function of art as the expression of these highly personal, eccentric, and sensitive feelings using the images, the colours, the shapes, and the intensities of light from out there; what was created was not a picture of a natural scene or a particular person, but of the artist themselves or, rather, of the process by which art is created. This can include the energies that confront the irresolvable tension between what art can glimpse in instantaneous, transient moments of ecstasy and what the medium can contain, whether colour, shape, musical sound, choreographed motion, or literary words.

By such reasoning, intuition, and ideological assertion, another presumed truism was confected, namely, that the person who proclaims him or herself an artist – no matter what the ecstasy or despair of this proclamation – is more important than the thing created and, as a further corollary to this, that the artist is a person of a different quality and constitution than the ordinary middle-class consumer of culture. Whatever the self-proclaimed artist does is art, and that work and object of art – not really the product of work and not really an object like any other – is to be valued or worshipped in and of itself, as in art for art's sake, purely because it expresses the artist's painful joy in creation and because it offends and confuses the unsophisticated spectator or auditor.

Coming back to our opening statement about the contrast or the mutual exclusivity of art and photographic reality, it has been implied that all this is an ideological construct, a romantic myth, and a self-indulgent delusion. Why? First of all, if we examine closely what was going on in nineteenth-century Europe in regard to the technological innovations of photography in its broadest sense, from daguerreotypes through cinema to x-rays, we find that

both scientists and artists were shocked to discover that what was reproduced did not match either their experiential perceptions of the real, natural world or their inherited logical paradigms or aesthetic conventions. They came to realize almost from the first moment of being able to fix images from a *camera obscura* apparatus that the impersonal machine had as many limits as the naked eye.

Thus, in the second place, when comparing the natural perceptions of the world and the artistic conventions that had developed since the Renaissance to represent the environment in pictures and in statues, to the images and forms revealed by the photograph, there was a difference in both what was seen and how it could be interpreted. The camera showed everything so that the mental discrimination that had evolved to help people operate in the world and make vital decisions without being diverted or confused by irrelevant or dangerous details was now shown up for what it was: blinkers, filters, and censors. A scene of nature or a portrait of a person or a family did not contain all that was there, and reality consisted of things, angles, colours, shapes, and relationships that had been overlooked and denied. Yet, our experiences had been influenced without that influence being registered.¹⁷

In other words, both what common sense seemed to have always seen and what artistic tradition had taught us to understand as important and meaningful could no longer be trusted. Yet, the photograph also missed out on many significant facets of reality, precisely those tonalities, intensities, and perspectives that each human being experienced in their address to the world around them. The camera could also not be trusted to offer reality at face value. To equate reality with a snapshot was as unsophisticated as to accept what the Academy of Fine Arts taught was real or historic or true. Impressionistic painters were making variations of realistic or romantic versions of reality; when they took into account the colour of shadows or the seasonal changes in the way light filters through the air, they were still trying to depict what made an impression on them.

These major changes in perception, conceptualization, and evaluation of the real world and the world of art and science did not just happen in the elite atmosphere of Paris or Vienna, Berlin or London. There were two other places

¹⁷ The main authority for these matters remains Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974 [1968]). Many of the early motion pictures discussed in Scharf are available on YouTube. See also King, *The Judgment of Paris*; Peter H. Feist, *Impressionism in France*, ed. Inigo F. Walter (Koln: Taschen, 2010 [1993]); and Julien Bell, *Mirror of the World: A New History of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007).

for the transformations in epistemology and aesthetics, and they sometimes literally infringed on the elite salons and lecture theatres; they all overlapped and interloped with each other.

As we have already suggested, the changes occurring in the popular imagination were also moving into matters of taste and style; that is, into what was experienced in the street, at the fair, on the music-hall stage, and inside the newly darkened rooms where cinema was shown. In fact, it was precisely out of the rather low 'popular' venues of magic lanterns, prestidigitation performers, circus clowns, and side-shows with freaks, nude artists, and pornographic dancers that the old-fashioned trickery of the phantasmagoria elided with the post-impressionistic and modernist experiments and experiences of the *avant garde* artists.

A phantasmagoria is not only a metaphorical phenomenon, wherein gaudy and seductive lights, sounds, actions, performers, and images concentrate themselves. It is a type of popular stage performance based on trickery, duplicity, and illusion. Instead of this historical designation, many authors have used the term *fantasmagorie* to categorize delusive imaginings. Others have taken the word to describe reasonable or aesthetically illuminating arguments, convincing investigations and demonstrations of what is true, good, and beautiful in areas where it may be questioned and challenged, so that the phantasmagoria offers magic and mystification in a metaphorical sense. It is therefore nothing less than a festival of delusion and hysteria and an idolatrous copy of a misconstrued reality.¹⁸

Second, again as I have hinted, the theoretical and imaginary changes of the *fin de siècle* were pushed forward because of the large and inordinate number of Jews who were entrepreneurs, impresarios, directors, composers, performers, actors, and critics: the changes were not Jewish changes, as the anti-Semites charged. In fact, some of the most profound critics against these trends were Jewish intellectuals, like Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau, who saw imbecility, madness, criminality, degeneration, and other unnatural forces let loose by these ideas in art and philosophy.

The popular and refined arts were, more than other areas of the modernizing and secularizing societies where they appeared, open or at least tolerant of Jews; Jews, breaking away, so they thought, from archaic and degrading situations and backgrounds, felt more at home, more warmly

¹⁸ For references and further discussions see Norman Simms, 'The Phantasmagoria of Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism,' *Mentalities/Mentalités*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2010), pp. 52-64.

welcomed, and better appreciated by the non-Jewish colleagues and associates, audiences, and patrons than anywhere else they had traditionally been, including in their own families.¹⁹ As Kenneth E. Silver puts it:

suddenly, at the beginning of the twentieth century, as if a mist had lifted, there were scores of Jewish artists to be seen on all the artistic horizons and nowhere more densely concentrated than in Paris.²⁰

In a sense, these Jewish painters, musicians, and critics, along with others at various points in the great chain of art production, distribution, and preservation, entered into a kind of marriage with their non-Jewish partners and rivals. But it was a problematic kind of a marriage, and one that was riddled with difficulties all along the way, falling apart into relatively amicable separations and into rancorous divorce with sometimes deadly consequences.²¹

¹⁹ The cliché that usually comes up is that Jews represent a caricature version of modern man insofar as he is beset by anxiety that leads to introspection and the gouging out of new interiorized space in consciousness and unconsciousness, discomfort that leads to innovative research in the arts and sciences, and restlessness that leads to the breakdown of traditional modes of relationship and the invention of highly individualized and temporary paradigms of personality in the group. But the cliché is reinforced by the anti-Semitic ravings of the nineteenth and twentieth century, so should be used with caution, except insofar as these Jew haters often sense changes in the atmosphere, even if they misattribute the causation entirely to Jews and then demonize the Jew for the madness they experience in themselves.

²⁰ Kenneth E. Silver, 'Introduction,' in *The Circle of Montparnasse: Jewish Artists in Paris, 1905-1945*, eds Kenneth E. Silver and Romy Golan (New York: Universe Books for The Jewish Museum, 1985), p. 10.

²¹ A vile and vicious discourse on these matters can be found in a booklet like that by Lucien Rebatet, *Les tribus du cinéma et du théâtre* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Françaises, 2007[1941]). Rebatet was one of the gang of French Nazi sympathizers who after the war was condemned to be hanged but was somehow pardoned. He and his ilk published a series of four books under the rubric 'Les Juifs en France' in 1940-1941 in a collaborationist press established to circulate anti-Semitic propaganda for the occupying Nazis; see the reprinted inaugural promotion booklet by Lenculus in Paris in March 2008 (*Librairie Excommuniée Numérique des Curieux de Lire les USuels*), the cover of which proudly displays a certificate of 'Politiquement Incorrect.' For all this, such books are valuable for at least three reasons: (1) they reveal the names and thoughts of those Frenchmen and women who eagerly shared the Nazi racist ideology or were cynically and amorally willing to collaborate in the anti-Semitic project; (2) they bring back into view many of the persons involved in the establishment of the cinematic and popular theatrical world in France during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, names forgotten or suppressed almost everywhere else in discussions of motion pictures and music hall entertainments; and (3) they transmit,

Roger Fry believes that the breakdown in accommodation between all the innovative knowledge and speculations of the nineteenth century and the vast heap of inherited ideas and images occurred around the year 1910. In England, at an exhibition of contemporary art from France, the public response could not be denied: people could not fit the new styles and fashions into their traditional patterns of reception. This V-spot that triggered the divorce arose from the ancient concept – and controversy – of *mimesis*.

The difficulty springs from a deep-rooted conviction due to long-established custom, that the aim of painting is the descriptive imitation of natural forms [*mimesis*]. Now, these artists do not seek to give what can, after all, be but a pale reflex of actual appearance, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality. They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life. By that I mean that they wish to make images which by the clearness of their logical structure, and by their closely-knit unity of texture, shall appeal to our disinterested and contemplative imagination with something of the same vividness [*enargeia*] as the things of actual life appeal of to our practical activities. In fact, they aim not at illusion but at reality.²²

To Fry and others on both sides of the debate over the purposes and values of modern art, what is missing in their argument are precisely those qualities of the new ideas in science and aesthetics that drew in so many Jewish men and women out of their customary homes and study-halls and into studios, laboratories, art galleries, natural history museums, and even to the salons of the aristocracy and the upper middle-class; the cafes of the bohemians and the political radicals where they felt welcomed as equals and sometimes as leaders.

As hinted above, the nature of rabbinical accommodations of the first three commandments fit into both scientific and aesthetic movements of the late nineteenth century.²³ The first commandment proclaims the unique and all-

hidden in the poisonous soup of racial hatred and slander, some interesting ideas about the nature of Jewish aesthetics, because, as we have suggested elsewhere, most people, Jewish and non-Jewish, have denied, controverted, or ignored these suggestions. These are ideas that need to be examined in a more sympathetic light.

²² Roger Fry, 'The French Post-Impressionists,' in *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1928), p. 195.

²³ Rather than essentialising the Jew as the anti-Semites do, and attributing to this iconic personality powers of transcendent timelessness and extrasensory perceptions – all Jews always know at any time what every other Jew feels and thinks, and the conspiracy is a spontaneous act of racial demonology – it is important to recall that Jews have not always been a conglomerate of different social, cultural, and spiritual

encompassing divinity of God, thus denying an independent, autonomous, or self-signifying realm of Nature with its own energies and laws. The second asserts an objection to the making or worshipping of idols, including any sense that works of art have a spiritual value or meaning on their own. The third, in decreeing a necessary observance of the Sabbath in memory and honour of the creation of the world *ex nihilo*, involves mankind in a contractual relationship to God to continue the work of creation and to subordinate the material, shape, and power of the created world – *ha-olam hazeh* – to the world in the process of always becoming, above and other than this one, the world to be (*ha-olam habah*).²⁴

Yet, as conceived by Jewish tradition, the processes of creation and perfecting of the universe, engaged in both by human beings and by God, do not lead to the abolition of time and space, or of the material and shape of this world, but to its sanctification. The heavens and the earth created by God were designated as good, not perfect or completed: good for human beings to work in and to bring towards greater and greater perfection, morally and aesthetically. Just as one says a blessing upon seeing some beautiful feature of the environment – a rainbow, a sunset, a field of flowers – so one ensures that the Torah, the house of prayer, and the persons involved are adorned so as to honour and bring admiration on the Creator of all.

More than these fundamental principles of beauty, honour, and worship that lie at the heart of Judaism and the laws that permeate its views of the universe, there are other more operative features that make the Jewish artist feel more particularly at home in the secularized trends of science and aesthetics in the late nineteenth century. These have to do with the way in

beings arguing over a relatively limited set of primary texts; in the nineteenth century a new range of options for individual and group choice opened up. The question should not be what do Jews feel, think, and believe in. Instead, one should ask what do various Jews argue about and how are their arguments framed and conducted. From this will rise the other questions we are grappling with: why did so many Jews, when they found themselves uncomfortable with their traditional domestic, social, and religious backgrounds, choose to go into the arts and sciences, and why did they succeed so well, with their success usually not recognized as a Jewish phenomenon, except by the anti-Semites?

²⁴ This essay updates and expands on issues I first raised in Norman Simms, 'Jewish Symbolism and Art,' *Journal of Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1999), pp. 7-13; and then ten years later in Norman Simms, 'Fantasia, Enargeia, and the Rabbinical Midrash: The Classical Way to Read Jewish Texts,' *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2009), pp. 10-24.

which many Jews deal with a social and political environment that is not Jewish and often hostile to Judaism and Jewishness. In brief, these are the processes of midrashing the world, of studying deeply and of analysing, interpreting, and applying the interpretation purposefully and morally in the world.²⁵

The annoying doggedness with which Jews, in general and by tradition, engage in these questions and challenges – their insistence that laws be based on rationality and that justice be based on lawful reasons – has been a constant irritant in almost every society they have lived in throughout their dispersion around the world. The ideal of a horizontal society, rather than a hierarchical pyramid, at the summit of which sits a self-proclaimed king or pope or emperor who claims to be the source of all law and power, directly or indirectly, does not sit well with those who, by birth, education, or historical circumstance, feel comfortable only in such an authoritative and stable relationship. This is the so-called V-spot found in Joan Lakhar's work, the trigger point of controversy, persecution, and worse. It is a sore spot in regard to hierarchies and authoritarian structures in art and science, in academies and in universities, in control of funds, honours, and the institutionalization of ideas.

Midrashing in Art and Science

Pour parvenir, ils prirent deux moyens: le maintien de la hiérarchie en leur faveur, la transformation des valeurs. Ils triomphèrent du monde en le dévalorisant. Le renversement qu'ils opèrent est donc différant de celui des décadents; ceux-ci subissent l'évaluation spontanément antinaturelle de leur instinct affaiblis. Les Juifs, eux,

²⁵ Midrash has become a fairly common term in art and literary criticism today, but in the process has often been vitiated into meaning nothing more than a radical commentary or a poetic enhancement without systematic or scientific rules. More accurately, and especially as I use the term as a verb (to midrash, to be midrashed, and so on), it should be understood to be a dynamic and creative extrapolation of traditional rabbinical methods: to learn to read a sacred text by careful philological knowledge, grammar, etymology, and literary history; to begin to explode the accepted given meanings and applications of the text through recontextualizing, that is, shifting the boundaries of coherence and continuity; to find appropriate new interpretations and applications by adjustment to real-world situations and circumstances; and to open up the original textual poetic, creative, speculative 'play' in the sounds, shapes, and configuration of the words and phrases used. Midrashing can and does include visual and tactile transformations, from the marginal illuminations in manuscripts through to visual depictions of ceremonial or historical events all the way to purposive redirection of political and psychological choices in life.

volontairement donnèrent l'illusion d'être des faibles, en prirent le masque pour pouvoir demeurer en vie.²⁶

This kind of midrashing, as opposed to a purely textual practice, happens first by questioning the givens served up by all societies as the true, the beautiful, and the natural. These acts of interrogation undermine the unquestioned certainties that are hidden beneath myth, ideology, and iconic imagery. Secondly, the powers-that-be which claim authority by virtue of their strength and control over violence are challenged, not so much by acts of counter-violence, but much more by assertions of independence of thought. These include scepticism and principles of reason and commonsense, ironic and satiric ploys to undermine presumptuousness itself, exposing its dependence on sheer bravado and intimidation, and forced exposure of the duplicity and mendacity of the pretence by courageous defiance of the misplaced law and the command of irrational obedience to that authority.

Such defiance, cunning, and stiff-neckedness are, within rabbinic codes, described as beautiful actions, attributes of individuals and groups who manifest the beauty and harmony of their coordination of soul, heart, and mind. Third, insofar as Judaism conceives of all races and nations as created by God and endowed with the divine spark, whatever is good, true, and beautiful in the nations and individuals in the world can and indeed must be incorporated into the Jewish mentality and culture. In other words, the Jewish artist and thinker in general draws towards, participates in, and creates out of the dynamic conjunction with traditions around him or her new ideas, images, sounds, forms, and objects for the sake of heaven.

Put another way, those Jews who emerged from their ghettos and *shtetlech* in the nineteenth century to participate in the technological and artistic advancements were already prepared to see, feel, think, and articulate themselves in ways that were similar to the developments underway in the non-Jewish European world since the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Not only does a midrash question and challenge a given text, manipulating and enhancing it, but it does this by moving away from the notion of time as either cyclic, teleological, or fixed and endlessly repeating itself. *Zman*, time, is

²⁶ “To succeed in this world, they pursued two ways: maintaining the hierarchy in their favour, transforming values. They triumphed over the world by devaluating it. The inversions they used were thus different from the techniques of the decadent who surrendered their suppressed natural instincts to such a value, while the Jews voluntarily gave an illusion of being weak, wearing a mask in order to stay alive.” Sarah Kaufman, *Les mépris des Juifs: Nietzsche, les Juifs, l'antisémitisme* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), p. 88.

dynamic, explosive, and it shatters: so that while there appear to be periods of development and momentous occasions, times of remembrance and celebration or mourning, time is also shattered into instants, and these instants, like sub-atomic particles, are worlds in themselves or even worlds within worlds, infinitely reassembling themselves into temporary shapes and forms with a vast variety of colours and textures. Like the Impressionist painters, for instance, who attempted to depict the impressions made on their psyches through the lens of their understanding and skills, the midrashist begins – but only begins – by parsing the appearance of the text, analyzing its grammar and syntax, recontextualizing its narrative or logical discourse, and interpreting its meaning by finding a just and ethical application. Then the midrashing proceeds further by interrogating itself, reassembling its particles, and pushing aside or expanding the envelopes of conventionalized time and space.

It is therefore not the personal or group significance of a specific individual or generation that is most important, but the process of debate and dialogue, of questioning and challenging, of moving further and further back into memorable time and space to experience what seemed over and completed, and also more and more into a future that is open and indeterminate, which are all at the same time bound into the original energies of creation; an energy which is also, as Einstein pointed out, a temporary and reversible quality of matter.²⁷

The self that constitutes the lens through which the inside and the outside of consciousness communicate with each other in the late nineteenth century is shown to be dynamic as well, partly composed of innate genetic and evolutionary forces, partly composed of debatable and challengeable spiritual authority and moral guidance. In fact, this specifically Jewish attitude goes beyond what scientists and artists were trying to say to themselves about the new innovations in the *machines à penser* that were more and more available during the nineteenth century. For instance, Eugène Durieu, with potential application in our own argument concerning Jewish aesthetics, stated: “The camera is not a simple optical contraption which responds mechanically to the first comer who cares to try it out, but an instrument that the photographer can direct and control according to his personal feelings.”²⁸ While it is respectful of

²⁷ Silvano Arieti, *Abraham and the Contemporary Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); José Faur, *The Horizontal Society: Understanding the Covenant and Alphabetic Judaism* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010); Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Lire aux éclats: éloge de la caresse*, 3me ed. (Paris: Quai Voltaire, 1992); Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Le livre brûlé: philosophie du Talmud*, nouvelle ed. (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1993).

²⁸ Cited by Scharf, *Art and Photography*, pp. 141-142.

individual initiative, and honours even arguments that tradition holds to be wrong because they were propounded for the sake of heaven and also because the energy of debate is itself the great engine of discovery and analysis, it is not the individual who becomes the cultural lens for the period in which he or she lives in rabbinical tradition, but all the participants in the debate and conversation.

Conclusion

I wish to close by pointing to an interesting, provocative, and yet inexact paradigm, one drawn from psychohistory, in which the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish artists and scientists are compared to the partners in an abusive marriage. Joan Lachkar²⁹ suggests that it is possible to see in the kind of *danse macabre* that takes place between this complementary pair one person suffering from and needing the abuse of the other; the second, usually the male, seeks to project into the other the very pains and humiliations he requires to punish in order to gain some momentary relief from discomforts he may not even be aware he is experiencing. What seems to trigger the episodes of violence, whether in actual physical abuse or in terms of mental bullying or passive-aggressive intimidation, is the way each one “pushes the buttons” of the other, that is, how they provoke each other into the event that takes their relationship to the brink – or beyond – of breaking apart.

This sore spot or point of contact between them arises from what psychologists call an ‘archaic injury.’ In individuals this is some unresolved pain or humiliation in their earliest memories of childhood; in groups, such as nations or faith communities, this is some defining moment which separated out the founders of the group from their original family, tribe, or religion, a moment of definition that caused suffering and unresolved grief, which remains a source of irritation when jerked back into collective consciousness. This vulnerable point or V-spot – analogous to the well-known concept of the G-spot that gives extreme sexual pleasure, often associated with some part of the body not necessarily located in a primary or secondary sexual zone – is described by Lachkar in these terms:

It is the raw spot of early childhood traumatic experience that gets aroused when one partner triggers an emotional sensitive spot in the other. The V-spot is designed to parallel the G-spot...It is marked by

²⁹ I am extrapolating from, as well as paraphrasing, the argument in Joan Lachkar, ‘The Psychopathology of Terrorism: A Cultural V-Spot,’ at primal-page.com/lachkar. Accessed 31/12/2011. Provided by the author in a personal communication on 5 April 2011.

Representations of Nature

the slightest provocation: one wrong word/movement and it's off. It blows!

Marilyn N. Metzler describes the process of such arousal in a review of Joan Lachkar's new book on the V-Factor:

The two dance around one another as long as they can until the relationship explodes. It takes two to tango – and to sustain a long-term abusive relationship. The abuser and the abused form a bond, a dynamic, and a dependence. Expressions such as “*follies à deux*” and the “Stockholm Syndrome” (Trauma Bonding): capture facets – two of a myriad of this *danse macabre*. It often ends fatally. It is always an excruciatingly painful affair.³⁰

Though Lachkar and others have developed the psychohistorical implications of this phenomenon in terms of contemporary terrorism and instanced the relationship between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East as a model example of extrapolated psychological circumstances to a group event in a historical context, the model is also rich in implications for understanding how Jewish thinkers and artists related to their non-Jewish colleagues in the movements and schools associated with profound philosophical and aesthetic transformations in the *fin de siècle*. These changes have occurred from popular through to high culture and in the fields of quantum mechanics, relativity theory, psychoanalytical studies of dreamwork, painterly debates on the value of impressionistic and post-impressionistic art, as well as a myriad other controversies that mark the period.

For non-Jews, a part of a process of epistemological and perceptual readjustments occasioned by new technologies of seeing, feeling, and thinking, experiencing varying degrees of disappointment, alienation, depression, and exhilaration, culminated around the year 1910 with an epidemic of suicides among these intellectuals and artists. The Jews, though in many ways undergoing similar kinds of negative and positive reactions to the scientific and artistic transformations, not only did not go through the same trauma of separation from their families and formal educations – as these outsiders from excluded communities which had turned in on themselves in regard to rabbinic institutions and modes of study wished to enter the mainstream Christian world and found that world more welcoming as it became increasingly secular and

³⁰ Critical comments on Joan Lachkar, *The Narcissistic/Borderline Couple: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Marital Treatment* (1992), at http://www.amazon.com/V-Spot-Healing-Vulnerable-Emotional-Abuse/product-reviews/0765703920/ref=cm_cr_pr_redirect?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0#RIURNCRMCYGHX posted on amazon.com. Accessed 21/02/2011.

tolerant, yet most open to them among the *avant garde* of thinkers and artists who were in a state of rebellion – these Jews were also able to discover in themselves and images in their personalities and in their cultural heritage that already reverberated positively with these rebellious movements.

The apparent harmonious and fertile marriage between the two groups, the large and dominant Christian group and the smaller and subordinate Jewish group, was thus based on unsustainable delusions. The more the Jews among them pushed forward in advancing the new ideas and techniques of the philosophical and artistic transformation, the more unknowingly – often to both sides – they provoked anger, jealousy, resentment, and other negative feelings in the society that seemed to tolerate both the Jews and the intellectual and scientific trends they were seeking to expand and embellish. But, as can be seen in the way the majority of people, including the radical thinkers and artists, reverted to nationalistic clichés and exclusivist rhetoric with the outbreak of World War I, the Jewish presence and participation was felt to be intrusive, distorting, and decadent. Very often, of course, both Jews and non-Jews denied that this was the site of their discomfort; but by the 1920s, it was already evident to almost everyone that the happy marriage was over. The limitations of tolerance and debate had been reached, and would explode again into outright violent repression of ‘degenerate art,’ of ‘the Jewish sciences’ such as psychoanalysis and atomic relativity, and of democratic liberalism. Nature was distorted and twisted again, partly into the pseudo-logic of racism and extreme nationalism, and partly into an irrational spirituality of environmentalism. What happened during and after World War II remains to be discussed.