Dali: Paranoia as Artistic Strategy

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Abstract

The connection between paranoia and the artistic imagination was established a long time ago. The mental alienation, in which the ancients saw as a divine favour or a punishment, and which, in in other moments of art history, passed for magic, became subject of scientific analysis in the nineteenth century. Since then, the fascination seems to have been mutual. The ineffable character of artistic creation, the enigma of genius have often demanded the concepts, the instruments and the methodology of psychology and related sciences. Artists too have searched and found in it solutions to the problems of artistic production. In his own confrontation with the "irrational", Salvador Dali drew the attention of his fellow surrealists to the poetic resources of the paranoiac delirium. By using the potential of "madness", the painter questioned the ever moving borders between normality and the pathological. In this study, we attempt to identify the ensemble of principles of his paranoiac-critical method, its structuring into a coherent explanatory system, in relation to the doctrine of surrealist automatism promoted by de André Bréton, whose limits, Dali aimed to overcome.

Key Words: *Dali, surrealism, paranoiac-critical method, Bréton; Freud, myth, surrealist object.*

Someone like myself, who claimed to be a real madman,
living and organized with a Pythagorean precision.
Salvador Dalí, *Diary of a Genius, 17.*

In the first *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924), André Breton postulates the supremacy of mind over matter and, through a free interpretation of Freudian theory, the expression of the processes of unconscious thinking with a minimum of rational control:

> SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express-verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner-the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.. (*Manifestoes of Surrealism,* 1969: 26).)

In his opinion, automatism involves the artist's descent into the depths of his / her own self, the practice of spontaneous writing, as a means of articulating the unknown world from the inside (the unconscious), conceived as an essential source of inspiration. By allowing the haphazard, or the accidental to manifest itself, the artist frees the act of creation from the censorship of the super-ego. As a result, the artistic product could thus better convey the deepest experiences of the individual.

The surrealists were also the first to link contemporary psychological theories to the idea of artistic creativity and production, and they did not hesitate to value mental diseases and sources of creation. In 1930, André Breton and Paul Eluard, publish *The Immaculate Conception,* a book which gathers in its pages some of the key texts of Surrealism, first of all, "The Automatic Message", the preface-essay written by Breton, but which also contains a

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series of essayistic contributions, signed by diverse authors, written in such a manner so as to mimic various states of mental instability (debility, acute mania, dementia praecox, general paralysis, the delirium of interpretation included), with a view to suggesting that the border between insanity and normality is a simple social convention, directly connected to the degree of suppression of the creative manifestations of the individual subconscious, in the Freudian sense.

However, none of the members of the group, except Salvador Dali, showed such an exclusive and persistent interest in psychosis so as to make of it the focal point of a method of artistic creation.

In the early '30s, the founder of the surrealist movement insistently spoke about a „fundamental crisis of the artists object", which was no longer thought of as an external fixed object, but as an extension of the artist's subjective self, instead:

> In recent years, it is essentially the object that surrealism has gazed at with even more lucid eyes. It is the very careful examination of the numerous recent speculations to which this object has publicly given rise to (the oneiric object, the object with symbolic function, the real and the virtual object, the phantom object, the lost object, etc.), it is this examination alone which will allow the present tendency of surrealism to be fully grasped. (quoted by Carrouges, 1974: 163)

The Dalian „paranoiac-critical method" emerged out of some surrealist experiments comparable to the psychological ones, such as the creation of an image by means of the *frottage* technique developed by Max Ernst, which involves the passage of a pen or a piece of chalk over a textured surface and in the subsequent interpretation of the fantastic figures that thus become visible on the canvass, as well as in the writing and drawing experiments of Leonardo da Vinci[1]. The Spanish painter presented his ideas in a series of articles and essays published between 1930 and 1940, in *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution* and *Le Minautore*, or in separate publications, such as *La femme visible* (1930) or *Le Mythe Tragique de L'Angleus de Millet* (1936).

Dali binds this activity, as its name seems to suggest, to a form of mental delusion--paranoia—understood as a derangement of one's personality, and characterized by systematic self-delusion, which however he deliberately simulates. His famous statement „There is only one difference between a madman and me. I am not mad.!" (May 1952 entry, in Dali, *Diary of a Genius*, 2007: 17), gains in this context a more specific meaning. In other words, Dali makes of his own psychoses substance of his pictorial works, while preserving the analytical distance typical of the analyst. In a dense seminal study, *Dali, ou le fillon de la paranoia* (1995), Ruth Amossy draws attention to the fact that the Dalian "paranoiac-critical method" applies not only to the deciphering of the meanings inscribed in his paintings, but also of the reading of the reality that he constructs. Within the framework sketched by the approach, Dali proposes „[nous] propose un vaste ensemble autobiographique allant des tableaux au récit personnel et au journal intime en passant par la mise en scène spectaculaire de sa propre personne." [. . .] L'artiste appose sur son image corporelle et son récit de vie la grille de l'interprétation paranoïaque.", giving us „une présentation de soi théâtrale et voyante", thus adding a totally new dimension to his own work: „de la vie de Salvador Dali considérée comme une œuvre d'art" (*Idem*: 91-92)

[1] It is, in a sense, a prolongation of a psychological phenomenon known as *pareidolia* (from the Greek *para-* —„besides", „with" or „together with"- signifying, in this context, something wrong, deficient *eidolon*—„image") which refers to a characteristic feature of the human mind to identify as significant a vague or haphazard stimulus (an image, for instance).

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Drawing his inspiration from the interpretative vision of the paranoiac, Dalí explores the psychic „mechanism" specific of this mental disease, an mechanism that actually unveils a derangement of perception, but which allows him, through the systematic association of the features of an external object with those of the object that haunts his mind, to re-create them, according to a logic of subconscious drives, over-determining their contents and structure, in order to call attention to what he call the "obsessive image". In other words, the paranoiac interpretative system deconstructs the object in order to immediately re-construct it in accordance we with the structural schemes of the phantasm, thus generating alternative forms. In a 1930, entitled *L'Âne pourri [(The Rotting Donkey]*[2], Dalí presents his intentions as follows:

> An activity having a moral tendency could be provoked by the violently paranoiac will to systematize confusion.
>
> The very fact of paranoia and, in particular, consideration of its mechanism as a force or power, leads us to the possibility of a mental crisis, perhaps of an equivalent nature, but in any case at the opposite pole from the crisis to which we are also subjected by the fact of hallucination.
>
> I believe the moment is drawing near when, by a thought process of a paranoiac and active character, it would be possible (simultaneously with automatism and other passive states) to systematize confusion and thereby contribute to a total discrediting of the world of reality.
>
> The new simulacra which the paranoiac thought may suddenly let loose will not merely have their origin in the unconscious, but, in addition, the force of the paranoiac power will itself be at the service of the unconscious.
>
> These new and menacing simulacra will act skilfully and corrosively with the clarity of physical and diurnal appearances: a clarity which, with its special quality of self—reserve and modesty, will make us dream of the old metaphysical mechanism which has something about it that may readily be confused with the very essence of nature, which, according to Heraclitus, delights hiding itself.
>
> [. . .] Paranoia makes use of the external world in order to set off its obsessive idea for others. The reality of the external world serves as an illustration and proof, and is placed thus at the service of the reality of our mid. (1998: 223)

The term "paranoia", as used by Dali, consequently refers to a state of abnormality, in which someone creates an idiosyncratic model of reality, yet which has a perfect functional internal logic, no matter how absurd this may seem at first sight, and how much it deviates from the ordinary understanding of reality. Naturally, Dalí does no proclaim a voluntary state of madness, instead, he admires the mental agility the imaginative creativity specific of the paranoiac. The painter is interested, first of all, in the affective perceptions of the paranoiac: "an individual endowed with a sufficient degree of this faculty, might as he wishes see the successive changes of form of an object perceived in reality, just as in the case of voluntary hallucination: this however, with the still more devastatingly important characteristic that the

[2] The word "rotten" for the French *pourri* has special meanings for Dali. The title of the article had been suggested to him by the book of Juan Ramon Jimenez, *Platero y Yo* (1917), about a donkey, which brought his author, otherwise a little-known poet, an immense popularity, but also the vehement reaction of the young painter who complains that, in writing *Platero,* Juan Ramon Jimenez, could not imagine a poetry the sterilized poetry of rotting donkeys. For Dali, the rotten corpse of the animal represents not the poetical decomposition, but the fight against it. Putrefaction is a form of „"cleansing", and contains in itself the seed of a new aesthetics, which explains the iterated presence of the image in his paintings. In "The Rotten Donkey", a eulogy of "putrefaction" the image is central, because it is related to "the agony" and "the darkness", typical of the mental disease. (Fanés, 2007, pp. 69-70)

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various forms assumed by the object in question will be controllable and recognizable by all, as soon as the paranoiac will simply indicate them" (*Idem*, p. 224). The painter insists on the force with which the subconscious images impose on perception, and does not see reason as a corrective of the interpretative automatism of sight: on the contrary, rational thinking intervenes only *a posteriori,* yet it does correct, but makes explicit the interpretation of the real operated by sight, to shed light on the systematization operated by the delirious perception.

The "paranoiac-critical method", which owes much to the interpretation of dreams elaborated by Sigmund Freud, is, for Dali, a technique that involves the use of the active processes of mind to visualize images in the artistic work, with a view to incorporating them in the final product. Dalí argues in favour of developing the artist's capacity to discover, perceive and paint various images—his celebrated "double images" – in a single physiognomy of forms, which however invite various reading:

> It is by a distinctly paranoia process that it has been possible to obtain a double image: in other words, a representation of an object that is also, without the slightest pictorial or anatomical modification, the representation of another entirely different object, this one being equally devoid of any deformation or abnormality disclosing some adjustment..
>
> The attainment of such a double image has been made possible thanks to the violence of the paranoiac thought which has made use, with cunning and skill, of the required quantity of pretexts, coincidences, and so on, taking advantage of them so as to reveal the second image, which, in this case, supersedes the obsessive idea..
>
> The double image (an example of which might be the image of a horse that is at the same time the image of a woman) may be extended, continuing the paranoiac process, with the existence of another obsessive ideas being suffice for the emergence of a third image (the image of a lion, for example) and thus in succession until the concurrence of a number of images which would be limited only by the extent of the mind's paranoiac capacity. (*Ibidem*)

Sharing the surrealist precept, according to which the inner world of the mind is infinitely more fascinating and more truthful than the simple and material perception of external reality, Dalí rejects the idea that the method he lays down is simply a gratuitous gesture. On the contrary, through the intense and traumatic nature of the visual images, while preserving the appearance of the objective reality, the artist is thus capable of dealing directly with profound mental states--"lyrical" ones-- in which memories and ideas bind together, on the basis of the data of his personal experience, rather than on the outside reality, a process that would otherwise simply reproduce conventional, routine thought. He found scientific confirmation of this idea in Jacques Lacan's, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* (1933)[3], and in a series of article the latter published in *Le Minautaure*, in which the young psychiatrist emphasizes that the delusional experience of paranoiac subjects has the imaginative force and the complexity that comes close to the greatest artists. The definition that Lacan gives to the paranoia in his doctoral thesis comes very close to Dalí's own opinions, since both of them consider paranoia as an alteration of a subject's perception of the world.

[3] Since 1933, Dalí quotes several times the thesis of Lacan to legitimize his own theory (cf. Dali, "New General Considerations Regarding the Mechanism of the Paranoiac Phenomenon from a Surrealist Point of View (Nouvelles considérations générales sur le mécanisme du phénomène paranoïaque du point de vue surréaliste" (1932).

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Some Dalian formulas remind forcefully of the language of the works of Sérieux and Capgras, or of those of Kraeplin[4], who, let us remind, consider that the basis of the psychosis [paranoia] lies in a type of personality that compels the individual to firstly misjudge certain aspects of one's own lived experience, but who, afterwards, then interprets them and constructs a discourse, controlled by the primal mechanisms of reason. The difference consists in the fact that in the case of Dalí's method the "paranoiac delirium" remains only a mode of perception. As Astrid Ruffa (2008) convincingly demonstrates, the Spanish painter build to a large extant his own conception on paranoia on the basis of the ideas, today largely ignored, of Gabriel Dromard, a French psychiatrist, fascinated by the relation between literature, art and madness, seen as a creative process[5]. It is from Dromard that Dali seems to have taken over the idea that the inaccuracy of the paranoiac judgment is the product of some deviation of one's intelligence and sensitivity: the paranoiac, whose logic is predominantly affective, groups his ideas in accordance with his own impulses.

Dali conceives of his method as a means of improving the principle of surrealist "automatism", which he appraises as being too passive, too preoccupied with "pure experience", at a time when, political imperatives demanded the artist to put his ideas "at the service of an imminent crisis of consciousness, at the service of the Revolution" (1998: 226). For him the "paranoiac-critical method" was meant to destabilize the world, and the way we perceive it, although in a somewhat nihilistic sense—„ [i]dealists partaking of no ideal", as he himself defines the Surrealists (*Ibidem*) — thus suggesting that what one sees may be potentially different. This allows the artist to freely experiment with similitudes and associations of ideas, images, etc., in a vital, essential "game". As it results from such unconscious projections, the Dalian object preserves only a minimum of "mechanical sense":

> The paranoiac giving birth to the image of multiple figuration endows our understanding with a key to the birth and origin, the essence of the simulacra whose furor dominates the aspect under which are hidden the multipole appearances of eh concrete. It is precisely the violence and the traumatic essence of the simulacra with regard to reality, and the absence of the slightest osmosis between reality and the simulacra, which lead us to infer the (poetic) impossibility of any kind of *caparison*. There would be no possibility of comparing two things, unless it would be possible for them to exist with no links whatsoever, conscious or unconscious, between them. Such a comparison made tangible would clearly serve as illustration of our notion of the gratuitous.
>
> It is by their lack of congruity with reality, and for what may be seen as gratuitous in their existence, that the simulacra so easily assume the form of reality with the latter, in its turn, may adapt itself to the violence of eh simulacra, which materialist thought idiotically confounds with the violence of reality.
>
> Nothing can prevent me from recognizing the multiple presence if simulacra in the example of the multiple image, even if one of its states adopts the appearance of a rotting donkey and even if such a donkey is actually and horribly purified, covered with thousands if lies and ants; and, since in this case one cannot infer the meaning of these distinct states of the image beyond the notion of time, nothing can convince me that

[4] See Sérieux, P., & Capgras, J. (1909). *Les Folies raisonnantes, le délire d'interprétation*. Paris: J.-F. Alcan; Kraepelin, E. (1920). *Maniac-Depressive Insanity and Paranoia*. From the English-German Edition of the "Text-book of Psychiatry", vols iii and iv. (G. M. Robertson, Ed., & M. R. Barclay, Trans.) Edinburgh, UK: E. & S. Livingstone.

[5] G. Dromard et Alexandre Antheaume, *Poésie et folie. Essai de psychologie et de critique,* 1908; he is also the author of a theory on the "delirium of interpretation", developed in three articles, entitled "L'interprétation délirante. Essai de psychologie", published between 1910 and 1911, in *Journal de psychologie.*

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this merciless putrefaction of the donkey is anything other than the hard and blinding glint of new precious stones.

Nor do we know if these great simulacra, excrement, blood, and putrefaction, do not expressly conceal the coveted "treasure island".

Connoisseurs of images, we have long ago learned to recognize the image of desire hidden behind the simulacra of terror, and even the awakening of "Golden Ages' in the ignominious scatological simulacra.| (*Idem:* 225)

The artist or the writer, far from subjecting himself to the world, on the contrary dominates reality modelling it according to his own "delusion". By placing his creative act at the Freudian level of the unconscious, Dalí sometimes concedes to the imperatives of the libido; his paintings contain a symbolism that is often explicitly sexual, but other elements too, whose presence in them remains difficult to interpret.

Nothing seems more illustrative to the essayist-painter than the "abrupt" and "reactional" character of the phenomenon, the intense alteration of the object, the simultaneous presence of the systematic fact and of the implicit interpretation, etc., that portray the "paranoiac face", reproduced in the fourth number of *Surrealism in the Service of the Revolution* (*Idem:* 260).

The attempt to communicate to the onlooker the pleasure of world governed by "paranoiac understanding" led Dalí to the development of the "surrealist object", an initiative for which the Spanish painter was responsible to a large extant.[6] In 1931, at the demand of Bréton, he proposed in an article entitled, "Surrealist Objects", published in *Le surréalism au service de la révolution*, 3, 1931: 16-17), six different types of object, as follows:

I. *Objects functioning symbolically* (automatic origin,
II. *Transubstantiated Objects* (affective origin),
III. *Objects to be thrown* (oneiric origin),
IV. *Wrapped Objects* (diurnal fantasies),
V. *Objects-Machines* (experimental fantasies),
VI. *Objects- Mouldings* (hypnagogic origin)
(1998: 231, emphasis added).

André Breton enthusiastically saluted the Dalian method, underlying its instrumental value and versatility, in a conference, "What Is Surrealism?" held in Bruxelless, in 1934:

> Dali has endowed surrealism with an instrument of primary importance, in particular the paranoiac-critical method, which has immediately shown itself capable of being applied with equal success to painting, poetry, the cinema, to the construction of typical surrealist objects, to fashions, to sculpture and even, if necessary, to all manner of exegesis. (quoted by Ades, 1995: 119).

From this moment on, the "paranoiac-critical method", even if not acknowledged by everyone, came to dominate surrealist practice in this decade, and even caused a scission within the movement. Dalí continued using the term until 1933. In an early article published in *Le Surrealisme au service de la Revolution*, "The Rotting Donkey" (1930), he discusses his new approach using the simple term "paranoia", which he directly links to the surrealist theory of

[6] In 1936, the Surrealists opened and exhibition at Charles Ratton Galleries in Paris where visitors were allowed to touch the objects: Dalí's contribution materialized in the *Telephone Lobster*, and *The Face of Mae West That Can Be Used as a Surrealist Apartment*.

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art. Nevertheless, Dali perceives a crucial difference between paranoia and hallucination, for the former is voluntary, it is an active mental process, not a passive one.

In "New General Considerations Regarding the Mechanism of the Paranoiac Phenomenon from a Surrealist Point of View (Nouvelles considérations générales sur le mécanisme du phénomène paranoïaque du point de vue surréaliste" (1932), Dalí even speaks of "the poetic drama" of surrealism, generated by „the antagonism [demanding dialectical conciliation] between „the passive confusion of automatism" (promoted by André Breton, the founder of the movement) and "the active and systematic confusion illustrated by the paranoiac phenomenon" (his proposal) (1998: 260). For him, the "paranoic-critical method" looks like a window open to the unknown of the subconsious world, an active filter, yet freed from the danger of psychic instability.

The "paranoid-critical method" is therefore a process through which the artist discovers new and unique ways of looking at the world around him. It materializes in the artist's and onlooker's ability to perceive multiple images within the same configuration. The new images of this "concrete irrationally", tending towards their physical and actual "possibility", go beyond the domain of phantasms, or psycho-analysable representations. Dali's declared aim, using the instruments of the psychologist, or of the philosopher, as well as the instruments of the realist painter, is to give his dreams, visions, and hypnological images the force of tangible reality. The aspect of paranoia that attracts him most is the capacity of the mind to perceive realtions among things, which are not otherwise connected. In Dalí's words, from "The Conquest of the Irrational" (1935), perhaps the most detailed exposition of the method he had discovered some years earlier:

> Paranoia: delirium of interpretative association involving a systematic structure—paranoid-critical activity: spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the interpretative-critical association of delirium phenomena. The presence of active and systematic elements peculiar to paranoia warrant the evolutive and productive character proper to paranoid-critical activity. The presence of active and systematic elements does not presuppose the idea of voluntarily directed thinking or of any intellectual compromise whatsoever; for, as we all know, in paranoia, the active and systematic structure is consubstantial with the delirium phenomenon itself—any delirium phenomenon with a paranoid character, even an instantaneous and sudden one, already involves the systematic structure "in full" and merely objectifies itself a posteriori by means of critical intervention. Critical activity intervenes uniquely as a liquid revealer of systematic images, associations, coherences, subtleties such as are earnest and already in existence at the moment in which delirious instantaneity occurs and which, for the moment to that degree of tangible reality, paranoid-critical activity permits to return to objective light. Paranoid-critical activity is an organizing and productive force of objective chance. Paranoid-critical activity does not consider surrealist images and phenomena in isolation, but in a whole coherent context of systematic and significant relationships. Contrary to the passive, impartial, contemplative, and aesthetic attitude of irrational phenomena, the active, systematic, organizing, cognoscitive attitude of these same phenomena are regarded as associative, partial, and significant events, in the authentic domain of our immediate and practical life-experience. (1998: 256-257)

Salvador Dalí's approach is not only, as he himself declares, an attempt to draw attention to the weaknesses of man's ordinary perception and understanding: the pure psychic automatism, the dreams, the experimental oneirism, the ideography of instincts, the phenomenal and hypnagogic irritation, etc., "now occur per se as non-evolutive processes" (*Idem*: 254). Behind them, there is a strenuous effort to order "irrational thinking", by means

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of a system of symbols, which should mediate between one's immediate experience and complete abstraction. The artist's desire is to develop an approach to the investigation of reality that would do justice to the "irrational" factor, independent of what is usually taken for "rational". The main function of the method is to generate new, surprising, authentic images, yet "unknown" through their nature. These are not simple hallucinations, because the "paranoiac mind" cannot but discover alternative meanings and interpretations of real objects:

> Paranoid-critical activity organizes and objectifies exclusivistically the unlimited and unknown possibilities of the systematic association of subjective and objective phenomena presenting themselves to us as irrational concerns, to the exclusive advantage of the obsessive idea. Paranoid-critical activity thus reveals new and objective "meanings" of the irrational; it tangibly makes the very world of delirium pass to the level of reality. (*Idem*: 257)

The ambition of the Catalan painter is that the world of imagination and the world of concrete irrationality "may be" as he puts it, "as objectively evident, consistent, durable, as persuasively, cognoscitively, and communicably thick as the exterior world of phenomenal reality. […], that the images of concrete irrationality "approach the phenomenal Real, the corresponding means of expression approach those of great realist painting — Velasquez and Vermeer de Delft — to paint realistically in accordance with irrational thinking and the unknown imagination" (*Idem*: 253-254). This way, Dalí gives more precise contour to his method, in its most characteristic features: spontaneous capturing of an image, which however continues to remain latent, the interpretative character of perception and the priority accorded to visual perception, underlying at the same time, the new, crucial function fulfilled by reason in this process.

One of the most significant illustrations of the "paranoid-critical method", beyond the space of painting, is his book *Le Mythe tragique de l'*Angélus *de Millet*,[7] a text written between 1932 and 1933, which however remained unknown for forty-seven years and was published in 1963: it aims at unveiling the great "mythical theme" that in-forms the painting of the nineteenth century French painter[8], namely the death of the son followed by the sexual aggression of the mother-mantis. Stimulated by the psychoanalytical interpretation Léonard de Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, in *Leonardo da Vinci and A Memory of His Childhood* (1910), where the Freud identified the representation of an eagle as sexual symbol, Dalí, too, surprisingly discovers that *L'Angélus* was, in fact, a "tragic myth":

> In addition to the well-known symbolic eroticism of mystical ecstasies to which the posture of the woman in *L'Angelus* corresponds, you will agree wit hem that the position of the ands brought up together under the chin and leaving exposed especially the legs and the belly, is a common posture, stereotyped even in the hysterical poses of sculptures and, in particular, „art objects" sold in bazaars. The nostalgia they express is in keeping with the crepuscular feelings abundantly illustrated by post-cards in which nudes in the same posture stand out absent the sunset. The posture entails in my opinion very distinct exhibitionistic, expectant, and aggressive factors. In fact, we are dealing

[7] In the first number of *Le minotaure* (I, 1933), he wrote an article „Interprétation paranoïaque-critique de l'image obsédante l'Angélus de Millet": „Comment l'image, sublime d'hypocrisie symbolique de l'Angélus, obsession des foules, aurait-elle pu se soustraire à une si flagrante furie érotique inconsciente?

[8] Jean François Millet (1814-1875), realist French painter, a representative of de la Barbizon School, is mainly known for his partings representing farmers and scenes of rural life. His composition are marked by a deep nostalgia for the lost golden age, they are classical from the composition viewpoint, yet saturated with realistic details.

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with a typical posture of expectation. It is an immobility that is a prelude to imminent violence. It is also a classical springing posture of animals, and it is one that is common to kangaroos and boxers, and above all, it is the one dramatically illustrated by the praying mantis (spectral posture). (1998: 291)

Convinced that Jean François Millet's painting hides a deeper truth, and presupposing that the two peasants—the man and the woman –are not praying to God, as it was generally believed, but to Death, Dali demanded that the canvass be X-rayed. The radiography evidenced the existence of a geometric form, a parallelepiped, placed down, between the two characters. Invisible to the open eye, because it had been covered by successive layers of paint, this presence would reveal, according to Dalí, the image of a child's coffin, i.e., whose death the two central characters seem to be are musing over.

However Dali reaches this occlusion not by any traditional psychological method, but by means of an entirely new approach, through a process in which the interpretative disorder of paranoia is simulated in order to produce alternative forms of knowledge, otherwise inaccessible. The irrational, confuse reaction of Dali when faced with Millet's painting—attraction and repulsion, at the same time—leads him to the understanding of the sexuality and the profound morbidity that structures the work and gives it (symbolic) meaning.

In the former part of the study, Dalí explores and analyses a vivid experience which he went through in June, 1932, when all of a sudden, without any recent recollection nor any conscious association that leads itself to immediate explanation", Millet's painting[9] came into his mind, nonetheless „completely modified and charged with such latent intentionality" (1998: 283), that the *Angélus* became for him "the pictorial work that is the most disturbing, the most enigmatic, the most dense, and the richest in unconscious thoughts ever to have existed". This initial "delirious phenomenon", clearly contained in itself an interpretation and this was sufficient in itself to indicate, and even to make appear a completely new "delirious drama" (*Idem*). The structural scheme of the phantasm inscribed in the painting was psychic in nature, and, once recognized by the subject unconsciously, it manifested itself in secondary delirious phenomena. Some of these were the product of voluntary phantasies and reveries—such as, the two pebbles, with their unusual configuration –the former much larger / bigger than the other and slightly bend towards the latter --, with which he used to play on the beach, brought to his mind the two figures of the *Angelus* (*Idem:* 284). In another imaginative exercise, the characters from Millet's work are associated to the two rocks up Cap de Creus, near Port Lligat, the native place of the Catalan painter:

In a brief fantasy to which I yielded during an excursion to Cap Creus, where the mineral landscape (in northeaster Catalonia) is a real geological delirium, I imagined seeing sculptures of the two characters of Millet's *L'Angelus* carved in the highest rocks. Their placement in space was identical; tot hat in the painting, but they were wholly covered with fissures. Several; details of the two figures had been effaced by erosion, and this contributed to my seeing their origins pushed back to a very remote era, contemporary with the very origins of the rocks. The man's figure was one deformed most by the mechanical action of time, almost nothing remained of it except

[9] In its simple piety, *L'Angelus*, fascinated Dalí as a child, but he attempted to analyse his obsession with it only in the early '30s. Under the setting sun, in the middle of a recently harvested field of wheat, a man and a woman, are uttering their prayers, as the church bells from the nearby village calls for vespers. The two seem to have been toiling all day in the field, and their tool, the pitchfork and the wheelbarrow lie on the ground. The woman has uncovered her head and meditates. Painted in 1858, *L'Angélus* brought glory to Millet. Its main motif, vulgarized by means of photos and postal cards, circulated through France.

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> for the formless block vaguely evoking the silhouette, which thus rendered it terribly and particularly agonizing. (*Idem:* 285)

Dalí then passes on to a detailed analysis of these phenomena, which are not, he insist on this, "of a visual order, but simply a psychic one" (*Idem*: 288). He identifies a series of connections among these phenomena, and progressively unveils the organizational scheme of the phantasm inscribed in them. It does not involve a change of the image from the morphological viewpoint, rather, of the subject's perspective on the "drama" seemingly unfolding under his eyes, so „that it is possible (as with the „paranoiac face") to objectify a complete transformation and make it communicate it" (*Ibidem*). The effort to reveal it consists in pointing out the structural scheme that is common to all "secondary delusional phenomena".

The third section introduces us methodically to the results of the analysis. Dalí first compares the *Angelus* of Millet with Watteau's *The Embarkation for Cythera*, since both "tackle the fundamental question of instantaneous images and representations that are "arrested" according to the "temporal-argumentative becoming". In the *Angelus*, the confrontation of memory with "the argumentative time" is solved oneirically, in terms of „psychic time", while in *The Embarkation for Cythera* the solution is "more relative", and founds on a "system of instantaneous references" meant to establish irrational, comparative notions of time", in other words, concrete view of time. The solutions suggested in both cases are equally dialectical—"malaise", and the "incomprehensible violent obviousness", which characterize the two paintings are essentially of the same kind. What distinguishes one from the other is the distinct manner in which either of them produces a "mechanical" or, in a sense, "spatial" verification of the argumentative question. The painter turned critic identifies in the phenomena of "condensation", "substitution", and "displacement" the existence of a "vast subject" in the painted scene, with distinct successive phases contained in an instantaneous image, of exceptional simplicity (*Idem:*293-294).

The organizational scheme of the "phantasm" that lies hidden in L'Angélus, corresponds to a Freudian narrative, including three important and successive moments. First of all, is the waiting, in the crepuscular atmosphere, which announces the sexual abuse of the mantis-female, and which is figured, in the painting, by the posture of the characters:

> **First phase:** Standing out against the light of the crepuscular atmosphere determining atavistic feelings, the tow disturbing obsessive simulacra embodied by the couple of *L'Angelus* face one another. We are dealing with a moment of waiting and immobility that heralds the imminent sexual aggression. The feminine figure—the mother—assumes the expectant pose which we have identified with the spectral pose of the praying mantis, a classical posture used as a preliminary to the cruel mating. The male—the son—is captivated and as if deprived of life by the irresistible erotic influence; he remains „nailed" tot eh ground, hypnotized by the „spectral exhibitionism" of his mother that annihilates him. The position of the hat, whose symbolism is one of the best known and least refutable ones in the language of dreams, betrays the state of sexual excitation of the son and illustrates the very act of coitus: it also serves to define a posture of shame vis-a-vis virility. …. (*Idem:* 294)

A violent sexual act follows symbolized in the patting by the fork thrust into the ground, accompanied by the death of the son (no pictorial element evokes it, yet Dalí trusts his own "lyric impressions"):

> **Second phase:** the son carries out with his mother a coitus from the rear, holding the woman' legs in his hands at the height of his loans. We are dealing with a pose that

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> reveals the highest degree of animality and atavism. This presentation is provided for us in the painting by one of the accessory objects, the wheel-barrow, whose erotic personality is among the most unquestionable ones. Besides the extremely complex and the extremely rich anthropomorphic metaphors it governs, the wheelbarrow is yet charged with a very concrete and special intentionality. Indeed, in the series of phantasms that are typical of erection, such as flight, skating, speeding locomotives, etc., we know animal traction—the painful traction so common in the obsessions of painters and designers (a horse pulling a heavy cart with paroxystic effort to the top of a hill)—to symbolize complexes of impotence and sexual deficiency, this by dint of the excessive effort attributed to the realization of the sexual act. The wheelbarrow takes its place among the latter representations; it is more direct than these, including as they do substitutive elements provided by the element of *animal* traction. This circumstance, we say, confers on the act of coitus a character of extreme and insurmountable physical effort, wholly savage and excessive, which is illustrated again by the element of the „pitchfork planted in the ploughed land". (*Idem:* 295-296)

The last phase of the argumentative development of the myth—the sexual aggression of the woman—is summarized as follows:

> **Third phase:** As in the love of the mantis, the female devours then male after mating […] I therefore acknowledge, with extreme clearness of fact that the masculine character appeared to me, from the beginning of the first scene of expectancy, in the light of disruption and anxiety. I saw him „as if being latently dead," „as if dying in advance". This impression can only be linked to my identification with the said character, which has already been sufficiently clarified. I would, in conclusion, be loath to appear to under estimate much the lyrical, or purely sensitive, initiation of the reader by returning with meticulous detail to the factors of „extinction", „monumental funerary feeling", the woman's active „immobility", the man's passive and annihilated one, and other circumstance and factors of „argumental balance", whose prodigious resolution in the painting, however oneirical, does not contribute with lesser power to the extraction, out of the insipid and stereotyped image of Millet's *Angelus*, of the maternal variant of the immense and horrifying myth of Saturn, of Abraham, of the Eternal Father with Jesus-Christ and of William Tell himself, all devouring their own sons. (*Idem:* 296-297)

This way, Dalí distances himself from "the passive automatism" of surrealist thinking and from his mentor, André Breton, by bringing to light the active and concrete nature of unconscious thinking, capable of manifesting itself as such, in the external reality, a reality that, because of this, bears the enigmatic mark of the artist's inner world. The eye is not only a mirror turned to the world, it is the very process, by means of which the intellect give sensible form to the "phantasms" of the unconscious, producing images, or narratives. The point of view adopted pushes him to show interest in the interpretative automatism of sight primarily. It also incites him to assign reason a new and unexpected function: far from being a mere correlative of the paranoiac vision, reason both discloses and legitimizes it.

Dalí's analysis directly and immediately links to psychoanalysis and, while rejecting simplistic visual parallels, it uses psychoanalytical theory and its techniques to explain the *deja vu* phenomenon, and to interpret the symbols as well. Nevertheless, Dali insists on detaching himself from Freud, underlying that his interpretative system of "spontaneous irrational cognition" does not admit any logical reduction; it only proposes a reading of Millet's work, based on subjective-obsessive "delirious" associations. This way, paradoxically, the interpreter

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becomes, in fact, the very subject of his own analysis, as Ades rightly notes (1995: 143-144). By appealing to the „instinctive (in)sight", fertilized by the Surrealist "automatic thinking", Dalí succeeds in producing entirely new images of the world. Although the aesthetics adopted after this moment would change, the painter remained faithful to the "paranoiac-critical method" throughout his life, for the simple reason that it was a useful means of asserting his own conceptual position, which seems to have „evolved directly from his painting experience", rather than from theoretical readings (cf. Radford, 1997, p. 139).

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