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Chambers and Surrealism

A unidentified man enters a yard carrying a cardboard box and a plant with its roots wrapped in burlap; he puts them down on the ground before a large metal pail and, kneeling, turns to open the box. But before he finishes, there occurs a brief flash of some other shot (which most viewers don't identify but which is an historical photograph of a crowd by a river watching a boat). The effect of the brief, interpolated shot is one of momentary disorientation – a very brief *dépaysement*. When we return to the man, he has picked up the plant (perhaps a rose plant). He shears off the ends of two shoots and then puts it in the pail, which a close-up shows to be full of water. There occurs another flash of a different image of the crowd by a river (this time its content is a little more identifiable) and then a shot of the man, whom we now surmise is a horticulturist, digging a large, but shallow, hole in the ground; after a few seconds that shot is disrupted by another still image that, too, is disorienting in its brevity and in the (*prima facie*) inscrutability of its relation to the depiction of the man. After the brief disruption, the image of the man digging a hole returns. He takes the bush out of the pail, puts it in the ground, piles up some soil around it and damps the soil down; the sequence of shots depicting these actions are intercut with still photographs of aeroplanes that have just released bombs, whose appearances becomes more frequent and their content more clear.

So begins Jack Chambers' 1967 film *Hybrid*. The tone of the passage, and indeed of the entire film, is unusual: there is something strange and mysterious about this cutting between the plant and the bomber-planes. Of course, there is no disputing that the feeling of "strangeness" the film elicits is contained, and that we can interpret the social meaning of such juxtapositions: the plant represents life and the bomber-planes represent death – or should we say (as Peter Mellen insisted about Chambers' work, and as is suggested by the time-lapse photography of blossoming plants) "the life-force" and the "death-force." Indeed, the idea that the juxtaposition articulates was more or less stock-in-trade from the time: Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall" uses a similar juxtaposition to express a similar idea. Even so, discerning the semantic meaning of the associations does little to dispel the sense of strangeness the passage elicits.

Gradually we recognize the source of the strangeness: Chambers connects objects due to their external, formal similarity. The film is rife with examples: a shot of the horticulturist's shovel is made to rhyme with a film still of bomber's fuselage; a shot of stakes used to prop up plants are juxtaposed with a disconcertingly brief and enigmatic still image of Vietnamese soldiers with spears raised diagonally towards the sky; a shot of the buried branches of a young tree being drawn out of the ground is set beside one of roots and branches of trees on the ground in Vietnam; a rope joining a tree to stakes for support is juxtaposed to a procession of Vietnamese (prisoners?) with their arms linked; a tilt up an elderly Vietnamese man's beard precedes a tilt, of similar speed, up the trussed tree; a shot of hose that runs diagonally across the screen (from lower left to upper right) is linked to one of family in the river, boy separated from his family (or so one would be disposed to read the image) by a band of water that traces out the same diagonal; the shot of the horticulturist spraying the plant he just put in the ground with a fine spray of water is set beside a still image of a soldier wearing a gas-mask, presumably spraying poison (an defoliant, perhaps, possibly even Agent Orange); a still image of the outside of a house in Vietnam, is followed by a shot a man (not the horticulturist) walking into a green-house – the frame of the door he enters forms vertical lines that match the verticals in the Vietnamese house; the body of a dead Vietnamese matched exactly to the position of the

inner parts of a rose-flower, whose stamen are about to be harvested for pollen (the film depicts the process by which different strains are crossed). There are many more: indeed, we could say that juxtapositions on form to some degree or another (and the degree does vary) is a fundamental principle of the film's composition.

A little reflection on Chambers' use of juxtapositions brings to mind a group of painters and writers who used a similar technique. Michael Riffaterre, in *La Production du texte*, discusses the way that "the conjunctive" serves Surrealists as a substitute for the synonym, and brings together terms that have no semantic similarity. Indeed, in Surrealist texts, semantic ungrammaticalities – terms that don't seem to fit together meaningfully – are compensated for at the level of structure (we might consider the juxtaposition of rhyming forms as one example). As concerns the semantic ungrammaticality of these sequences, note that several of the examples I gave do very little to suggest the opposition of the life force and the death force. What is more, many prolonged images of developing branches and flowers convey a sense of something wondrous – something so deeply interfused in nature that one can respond to it only with a sense of awe at its marvellousness. One recalls André Breton's remark in the first Surrealist Manifesto (1924): "Let us not mince words: the marvellous is always beautiful, anything marvellous is beautiful, in fact, only the marvellous is beautiful."

The Surrealist conventions in Chambers' fourth(????) film *R34* are, at one level, rather obvious. That film is a tribute to the Neo-Dada artist, Greg Curnoe and makes use of the same collage principles that its subject, Curnoe, employed in the art he was making at the time. One of the most intriguing features of the film is that Chambers extends the principle of fragmenting the themes of the film and recombining them in a new, startling order onto the sound track. This is done largely through breaking apart Curnoe's recorded remarks on his work, but perhaps most impressively in the Surrealist verbal collages that we hear Curnoe performing:

Owen steps on Mickey Mouse

Because
Seven ginger-snaps
and one arrowroot
On a white plate . . .
She has left the singers
Mickey Mouse squeaks
The jivas cluck
Because
The lemon-yellow canary
Walks on the floor.

The film's first two passages indicate the importance that collage will have in the work: the first passage presents a number of Curnoe's collage pieces, and the second shows the artist assembling a collage work. In being founded on collage principles, the film takes on Neo-Dada attributes: it comes to resemble the work of such collage artists as Kurt Schwitters and Francis Picabia, whose works straddle the line between Dada and Surrealist art. At another level, the Surrealist affinities are far more complex and less obvious. The film is structured by a series of motifs that repeat time and again: Curnoe carrying a metal garbage pail out the door and up some stairs, a close-up of a light-switch being turned on and off, a cloth with a stylized infinity sign turning in the wind, an awning with shadows on it (that we eventually realize are shadows from the cloth with the infinity sign on it – a conjecture that makes us further surmise that the awning hangs below the window where the sign is hung), fingers, in close-up, turning a knob, hair being combed, Curnoe, in an overcoat, walking towards, then out of, a door (and,

sometimes, into blackness), a close-up of a woman (Curnoe's wife, Sheila) smiling, Curnoe walking down an alley-way, Curnoe approaching manikins silhouetted in a window (to the left of what appears to be an elaborate, ornate frame for a dressing-mirror), a triangular form (representing a woman's pubis), images from Greg and Sheila Curnoe's wedding, a block of wood on a large metal bolt that has been drilled into a wall, being spun by being hit with a stick, a close-up of the plug on an electrical cord being repaired, a painted form that resembles a nipple, a leg of a figure that Curnoe has constructed whirling about, and a painted form that resembles a backside with the work "bum" painted on it.

The film shows how the mind assembles reality by forming congeries of particular elements. The film depicts the manner in which the "external" world and the mind collaborate to produce reality (and this as Breton and Dalí's interest in the double image makes obvious, was a key Surrealist theme). Chambers emphasizes this collaboration by stressing the topical character of Curnoe's collages. Collages pieces in the film include images of: the Manitoba Métis leader Louis Riel, a former Canadian Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie-King, the Toronto painter and erstwhile member of Painters Eleven, Harold Town, photographs of the breakaway Doukhobor group that call themselves The Sons of Freedom ("svobodniki"), the Beatles and The Rolling Stones, the renowned London (Ont.) psychiatrist and student of the psychology of mystical experience, Dr. Richard Bucke, the Toronto boxer George Chavalo, shown both in newspaper photographs and in a painted transformation of that newspaper photograph, and Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali), shown, as though to emphasize the reality of the images, in televised footage and in painted transformation. This passage is accompanied by a ritual reading of the names of many boxers, including the remarkable Dada writer and boxer, Arthur Cravan. There are also familiar brand identifiers (for example the Quaker from Quaker brand of cereals) and tickets to local events at the London Hotel and other such "real-world" items. Chambers even includes a remark Curnoe made that, he deals "to quite an extent with actual things" and "I am like an outdoor painter in that nearly everything that I paint has been seen outside or read in the news media or seen in a magazine and I bring it back here and work on it." One recognizes, in the course of watching the film, that the unity of the finished collage works serves as a model for the unity that the mind forges from *sensa*, while the elements that the collage comprises stand for the noumenal objects which excite those *sensa* that the mind draws together to form the impression of an external world – Curnoe even remarks at one point, "I'm trying to put the whole thing together."

One suspects, finally, that what drew Chambers to Curnoe's work, and impelled him to produce the film, is that, for Chambers, Curnoe's work provided an example of the way that mind forges the reality it perceives by synthesizing discrete bits of perceptual information, of how experience gets put together like painting, in pieces. A feature of Curnoe's work that raised this question in an especially interesting way is the use of words: Chambers intercuts between the word "hair," drawn from a collage, and an extreme close-up of the painter's wife, Sheila combing her hair, filmed so that the activity is impressively estranged, made to seem quite fascinating, quite wondrous. The juxtaposition of the word hair with the impressive close-up images of hair suggests the difference between routinized apprehension (or, more accurately, construction) of consensus reality and a more creative, more original construction of a new and different reality.

The images and their juxtapositions in *Mosaic*, as in *Hybrid*, have a discursive quality: we can interpret an image of an old man looking at a woman holding a baby as old age confronting the marvellous vitality and mysterious procreative capacities of young people and the innocence of the infant and (imbricated upon that interpretation) the male confronting the mysteries of the female. However, as fitting as this interpretation is to the film's theme, this

propositional content does not dispel their mysterious quality: the exaggerated spatial features of the image (*inter alia*) ensure that the shot of the old man looking at the woman with her infant becomes no less mysterious when it is interpreted.

Mosaic begins with a panel of white, a wall and a door. The door opens and young woman comes through. The woman walks across the room, picks up an issue of *Life* magazine, and sits, with a noticeable sigh, beside others in a row of chairs in what we take to be a doctor's waiting room. The film cuts to a close-up of hands flipping through the magazine, stopping at an essay/photo-illustration piece entitled "The Sea." Another cut: a close-up of feet, in white nurse's shoes, walking across the room and past another pair of legs, those of a seated woman, in black stockings and black shoes. The close-up does not lead to an establishing shot, and so remains enigmatic, at least in some measure. Its enigmatic quality is increased with the next cut: an outdoors shot, very low angle, of the shoulder and head of a woman with long hair (the composition of the shot rhymes with that of the image on the cover of *Life*), clad in a striking white dress, with one hand, clutching daisies to her breast and with the other, picking petals from the daisy (we do not actually see the flower, but the gesture she performs is familiar from the "She loves me, she loves me not" game) and tossing them to the wind (in an action that rhymes with the sigh of the woman in the waiting room), to help them on their way. The next image increases the estrangement we feel, for it is of a baby, lying on the ground, very close to the picture plane and occupying almost the entire lower portion of the screen, from its left boundary to its right, the head angled slightly away from the camera and the feet a bit closer. It is a deep-space image, like those familiar from Chambers' painting of the early and middle 1960s; about two-thirds of the way up the screen is a row of trees, that mixture of deciduous and evergreen trees that Canadians know so well, while a woman in white, made tiny by an exaggerated perspectival effect runs directly towards the picture plane. The next shot develops the theme of running, for it shows first a gravel path, then the feet of a man, in running shoes, jogging along a path. Then, a low-angle shot of a white statue of an angel that rhymes with the shot of the woman clutching flowers. There follows a shot of a racoon, belly up, with flies buzzing over the corpse (even the face on the statue and the racoon's face rhyme with each other). The film cuts to a close-up of clapboard siding, with petals (from the blossoms?) falling in front it – a completely flat image, in contrast to the deep-space image with the woman in white running toward the picture plane. Then, another shot of a woman reading a magazine – a different woman than the one we saw entering the doctor's waiting room, followed by a shot of a woman, alone in the centre of a field, stooped over and picking flowers (this shot has more than a little resemblance to Chambers' paintings from 1963, *Olga Near Arva* and *Olga Along the Thames* and his 1965 painting, *Summer Behind the House*). Then, after a "soft cut", so the position of the figure matches that of the woman in the preceding shot, another shot of the runner, this time more distant, so we see him clad in a sports jersey, running shorts and athletic shoes, then another of the deep-space image of the woman running towards the baby lying at the lower foreground of the screen. Then a shot of woman in a street-car.

The connections among the images seem enigmatic. And even when one begins to discern the connections among images whose relationships that *prima facie* are inscrutable – when, in the course of watching the remainder of the film, one connects images of a woman on the streetcar and in the doctor's office, of gifts stacked up on a table, and of the woman in the passenger's seat of a Volkswagen beetle, clutching the driver's shoulder as though she is in pain, women having tea and cookies at some gathering into the story of a woman's pregnancy – the fact that these shots are separated by many that do not advance that story, and the fact that few of these shots have visual links to one another preserves much of the mystery these shots evoke. If I stressed the formal links and oppositions and rhymes amongst the shots in the opening section, it was to re-enforce Michael Riffaterre's point about a sort of composition,

pioneered by the Surrealists, in which “the conjunctive” serves as a substitute for the synonym to create a textual system in which each element is equivalent to every other. The seeming isolation of the shots also creates the sense that the completed experience (the story) gets put together from parts

The question of the relation of Chambers’ films to Surrealism carries us to the heart of his painting, and so it is worth exploring. Chambers left London, Ontario, in 1953, for Europe with hopes of becoming a painter. After a brief time in Rome, he settled in Madrid and studied at the Escuela Central de De Bellas Artes de San Fernando. The school’s teaching method was based on a traditional approach to drawing. Students spent the first two years drawing from statues, the next three drawing from life – a pedagogical method that was disappearing elsewhere in Europe. In his book of autobiographical reflections, Chambers remarks that what he wanted from this training was “some visible standard that was not made distinctive by personal vision and accomplishment. I wanted a realistic standard of ability which was craft and not art.” While living in Spain, Chambers also learned Spanish and read the writings of the wondrous mystic St. Teresa of Avila. This was his introduction to the serious study of faith, and that led him, in 1957, to be baptized as a Roman Catholic..

Chambers chose Spain as the place where he would learn to be an artist, and the training he received there leaned towards the precision of realism. That is not to say that it alone accounts for the realism of Chambers’ *oeuvre*. The Canadian realist tradition also influenced him. One especially important Canadian predecessor is Paul Peel (1860-1892), a conventional Victorian painter and native of London, Ontario, whose paintings display the sentimentality characteristic of that era. He is best known for *After the Bath* (1890), which shows two nude children warming themselves in front of a fireplace and *The Modest Model* (1889), which shows a young boy posing as Cupid for an artist. Still, one can note similarities between Peel’s paintings and Chambers’: both deal with domestic life, family, children, and mother love, and show a real sensitivity for personal (transitional) space.

Moreover, the art scene in his home town encouraged Chambers’ bent towards realism. London artists were truly committed to the idea of local reality: The painter and novelist Selwyn Dewdney (who taught Chambers in 1944 and 1945 and became a life-long friend) formed the nucleus of the group, which later attracted poet and playwright James Reaney, and painters Greg Curnoe and Jack Chambers, among others. Reaney had gone West, to Winnipeg in the 1950s, and returned confirmed in his ideas about bodily presence and its relation to an intimate personal space and continuity in time. His *Twelve Letters to a Small Town* (1962), like his earlier poetry and his later plays, celebrates small, contained spaces: pond, field, playbox, farm, coffin. It presents London as a series of sacred spaces that are overlaid by the civic web of roads and railways, schoolyards and libraries and hockey rinks. These would become themes of Chambers’ art as well.

Yet, as Canadian as his works are, Chambers’ experiences in Spain had a profound and lasting effect on his art. The influence of his training in life drawing and his conversion to Catholicism are matters that many commentators have noted. The Surrealist influence and its connection to his films has received less attention (though Ross Woodman has raised the topic).

Surrealism seems to have been congenial to the character of Spanish artists. In the 1920s and 1930s Spain was the home of many Surrealists: the Generation of 27 (writers who introduced the idea of pure poetry into the Spanish lyric tradition); the playwright Federico Garcia Lorca; poet and painter Rafael Alberti; the film director Luis Buñuel; the painter Salvador Dalí and (for a while) the painter Maruja Mallo, Alberti’s lover. The Spaniard Pablo Picasso also made a number of Surrealist works that, as one would expect of that genius, were of the highest quality. If Spanish artists are disproportionately represented in Surrealism, in

comparison to other European artistic movements of the twentieth century, the reason is not difficult to discern: Surrealism, in its search for the marvellous, represents a continuation of both the metaphysics and the ethics of Roman Catholicism. Buñuel himself acknowledged that his aggressively atheistic stance was really a mirror image of the Catholic faith, and his films are deeply concerned with religion (and clericism); Lorca's New York poetry adopted a prophetic tone; and Alberti's poetry offers transcendental themes and even a derivative of mysticism (before being overtaken by political concerns during the Spanish Civil War).

The range of works that Spanish Surrealists produced is so broad – and that makes it possible to cite counterexamples for any generalization about the movement one might offer. Still, I will hazard such a generalization and say that Spanish Surrealism leans towards what one might call Veristic Surrealist, to distinguish it from the more Automatist Surrealism. The theory and practice of Surrealist Automatism grew out of a peculiar conjunction of interests on the part of the movement's founder, André Breton: first, in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, and second, in Allen Kardec's *Spiritisme*. Breton maintained that rational thinking covers only a small portion of the spectrum of experience, which the rational mind mistakes for the whole of reality. Psychoanalysis and *Spiritisme* encouraged alternative forms of experience – forms that a too rational civilization had dismissed.

The product of the two interests was a set of techniques whose goal was to alter the subject's relation to the thinking process itself. It does so by inducing states of mind that involved the surrender of rationality, what Arthur Rimbaud, the great precursor of Surrealism, alluded to in his famous "Lettre du Voyant," when he wrote, "Je' est un autre." The form of Surrealistic expression, that developed directly out of Breton's concerns (and Breton's practices) is known as "Automatist" or "Absolute Surrealism." Its primary feature was the use of creative practices that treat the canvas or the blank page as a writing tablet on which messages from the unconscious are materialized in non-representational signs. This type of work is exemplified by the work of Joan Miro, Andre Masson and Jean Arp.

The Veristic Surrealists, on the other hand, were interested primarily in the mind's activity of forming the world which we inhabit. As Dalí's paranoia-critical method expounds, the Veristic Surrealists believed that Freud had established that the world that we experience is a psychic construct, shaped by desires, and that each of us inhabits an individual – a *personal* – reality. They strived to enlarge the space of freedom allowed the activity of fashioning the world we live in – to break out of the habit of forming the world we live in on the model of conventional reality (what Chambers, in reiterating similar ideas, called consensus reality). Their creative practices provide a model for the free construction of reality. Hence creating a hyperreal image became a key goal of their art, as it was of Chambers'. Their work presented the strange and wondrous images of dreams and hallucinations with photographic-like realism. This method is exemplified by the work of Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, René Magritte, Paul Delvaux, Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington and Yves Tanguy. Because its practitioners often employ such academic conventions as Renaissance perspective, this version of Surrealism was less welcome among the modernists than Automatist Surrealism.

Chambers could not have stayed around the Spanish art scene for eight years without being exposed to Surrealist art, including some in the Verist mode. Some of the canvases that he painted not too long after returning to London – *Sunday Morning No 1* (1963), *Olga at the South Pole* (1963), *Olga Near Arva* (1963), *Olga Along the Thames* (1963), *All Things Fall* (1963), *Olga Visiting Graham* (1964), *Summer Behind the House* (1965) and *Antonio and Miguel in the U.S.A.* (1965) – resemble paintings that belong to the Verist tendency in Surrealism. They have the same magical "frozen moment" character that paintings by Magritte have. Furthermore, like many Verist works, their representations of space have a hauntingly paradoxical quality: Clearly, as representations, they allude to deep space; yet the painting

surface remains resolutely flat. What is even more important still, these paintings juxtapose elements in striking and incongruous ways. *Olga at the South Pole* can serve as an example: we see an image of Olga Chambers (the artist's wife) sitting on a snow bank in Antarctica, as seals and a lemur (?) play on the snow bank to her right and two polar bears and snowy owl appear on her left side. The disposition of the figures – especially Olga's stiffness and the strange, mysterious inertness of the animals, who seem as a result so indifferent to one another even though they exist in close proximity – lend a wondrously unreal quality to the total image. Balancing that unreality is the astonishing, meticulous detail of the rendering of the various figures (and of the overall scene) that makes the unrealistic space of the painting seem so concrete. This unreal reality (or realistic unreality) illustrated exactly the point that Dalí insisted on in his statements about paranoia criticism: that the artistic process rehearses the activity that produces what we know as reality – that the mind (imagination and perception working together) produces, by its extraordinary – its *marvellous* – attention to detail, the reality within which we have our being.

Chambers frequently pointed out that “a painting gets put together in pieces.” The idea seems to have been with him from his first years as an artist. An early series of illustrations, done in 1961, for a book of poems by James Reaney called *The Dance of Dance*, were done in a divisionist style, a style based on the optical fusion of numerous points of colours to give a luminous impression of form. This later developed into another kind of “splatter” form, in which the objects gradually took shape within the globules of the surface effects. These works were the result of his first exposure (as late as 1961) to the work of de Kooning, Pollock, Klee and Kandinsky.

Chambers paintings from this time include *Unravished Bride* (1961), *The Artist's First Bride*, *Slaughter of the Lamb* (1961), *McGilvray County* (1962), *Messengers Juggling Seed* (1962), *Five Shepherds* (1961-2), and *Onlookers Over Winnipeg* (1962). Chambers comments on the evolution of these molecules of memory images:

The molecular spheres in *Unravished Bride*, which had evolved their forms into heads and objects in *Messengers* and *McGilvray* now appeared as partial or fractured figures, though they still retained the properties of levitation from the days when they were merely globes and hung in space. Now they hung in space as almost completed people-things: *Olga and Mary Visiting* [1964-5] and *Olga Visiting Mrs V.* [1964], as well as *Olga and John at Otterburn Heights* [1964] and *Daffs* [1964-5].

It is important to realize that there is structural homology between these molecular spheres and the shots in films like *Mosaic* (1966), *Hybrid* (1967), *Circle* (1968-9) and *The Hart of London* (1968-70) – the little molecules coalesced into larger clusters that represent “almost completed people-things,” just as the individual frames accumulate to form individual shots and individual shots accumulate to form “completed movements” and “completed scenes.” Chambers realized as much:

Drawing is only useful when it produces a *thing*. I never held drawing valuable in itself. Nor painting either. Photographs and their derivative techniques eliminated then, as they do now, the effort and messiness of drawing on painted surfaces in order to produce the desired *thing*. I was no longer finding things in the surface space of a painting, as in *Messengers*. I now had possession of things, usually in the photo, and I created a space for them within the painted surface. Instead of a chaotic world from which I helped *things* emerge, I now prepared a space of

order and assigned the *thing* to its particular place.

The composition of partial or fractured figures that retained properties of levitation, and, later, of “almost completed people things” led Chambers to a new understanding of a painting’s space, for he came to think of it not as a chaotic splattered surface from which he helped objects emerge, but as a space of order within which the object could be assigned its particular place. He described his interest in space to Ross Woodman during an interview in 1966.

Space is a ‘felt’ environment and it is the one real condition an observer needs for a fuller-than-visual experience. Painting realistically is creating space, not subject matter. Again, I don’t mean it is done through perspective or descriptive shading, but space as colour frontiers where each colour is a dimension.

Woodman spotted the connection of this with Surrealism, and questioned Chambers on the topic. However, Chambers tried to distance himself from that artistic movement, by identifying the features that he believed distinguished his work from Surrealism or Magic Realism.

Surrealism, magic realism, dreamy, fantastic and so on, those labels are meaningless to me. Spatial experience is one thing I consider real in painting. This is rendered through tensions in different colours: some colours act as spring-boards, others as magnets. The importance of colour showed up more clearly in earlier works. Because I put objects into that space and didn’t resolve it as a purely abstract problem seemed to confuse people. I created the dynamics – patches of colour – then shaped the figures within them. Once I’d got an atmosphere creating itself the figures amalgamated with it. When the colour set-up became an experience, that is, when I ‘felt’ a spherical density in the painting that allowed me to go around the work as well as through it, the painting was alive on its own.

The conception of space as synthetic is a paradigmatically cinematic conception of space as is the fragmentation of the human figure that occurs in these paintings. Consider several appearances of Olga’s hand in *Olga and Mary Visiting* – it presents several moments from the process of her lifting the cup to her mouth – or the ghostly figure in *Stuart Mixing Reds and Greens* (1965). Chambers commented on this fragmentation:

Using only some portion of the figure (because the shape is ‘right’) should be a clue to the observer that there is more here than meets the eye. If the painting is a creative experience, you are moved to hear it, touch it, in a word to ‘feel.’ Sensory combinations have made it alive.

Surrealist features persist in Chamber’s paintings through the 1960s, including the plexiglass paintings (e.g., *Music Box*, 1968 and *Madrid Window No. 2*, 1968-9). The plexiglass paintings are graphite drawings coloured with oil paint glazes, and then covered with successive layers of acrylic. The plexiglass sheet gives the drawing a blurry, out-of-focus appearance. Thus, the bird in *Madrid Window No. 2* disappears and reappears with the slightest movement on the spectator’s part. The title reveals the painter’s intent: this is a remembered scene – the blurry, out-of-focus appearance alludes to the fading of memory and the disappearance and reappearance of the bird alludes to the transience of objects – in memory and in time itself. Openings cut in the acrylic layers create different colours, and give the impression of memories

that are tinged with moods. These are memory images – subjective images. However, the subjective imagery in these works is rendered with the utmost of “photographic” fidelity. But the allusion to the Spanish city the title offers is not only to Chambers’ time in Madrid, but also to the history of Spanish painting – and *momento mori* were common in the painting of Spain’s Golden Age.

Music Box No. 2 is based on Evaristo Baschenis’ *Musical Instruments* at the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo and *Madrid Window No. 2* is based both on a work of the great religious painter of Spain’s Golden Age, Francisco de Zubarán’s *Lemons, Oranges and Rose* (1633) and on François Garnier’s *Gooseberries and Cherries* (1644) from the Musée du Louvre. Zubarán’s painting was especially important to Chambers – he probably found the dynamism of the Baroque painter’s devotional pictures fascinating, but it was likely the way that the austerity of Zubarán’s still-lives transformed ordinary objects into revelations of the ultimate reality that especially impressed Chambers

Avis Lang Rosenberg noticed that most of the still-lives that Chambers uses are reproduced in Charles Sterling’s *Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Present Day* – he used the book in fact rather like the library of “found footage” he drew on for the films *Hybrid* and *The Hart of London*. Rosenberg also noted that Chambers generally favoured reproductions “that are somewhat archaic, frontal, symmetrical, motionless, sometimes unsophisticated, sometimes ingenuous, usually delicately and carefully finished.” (The Baschenis, she notes, is “somewhat different in character but shares certain similarities of immobility and finish.”) These historical images contribute to creating the sense, so important for the film *Hybrid* (which includes still images), that reality can be experienced as succession of moments: of stilled frames, or photographs, or still lifes. Furthermore, an elegiac quality results from the use of these historical images, which Chambers recognized as characteristic of painting itself.

The plexiglass paintings thus suggest the fusion of memory and perception. Or, to put the point in an fashion, they suggest the convergence of the inner world and outer world, of self and object. André Breton’s classic statement of the goal of Surrealism reveals how central a similar aspiration was to the Surrealist movement.

I believe in the future transmutation of those two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, of surreality, so to speak. I am looking forward to its consummation, certain that I shall never share in it, but death would matter little to me could I but taste the joy it will yield ultimately.

Breton later expanded on this: there exists, he said, a certain “mental vantage-point (*point de l’esprit*) from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, communicable and incommunicable, high and low, will no longer be perceived as contradictories.”

Chambers’ work often seems to evoke a peculiar fusion of opposites – and especially that amalgam of the ordinary and the extraordinary, that so interested the Surrealists. *Sunday Morning No. 1* (1963), *Olga Visiting Graham* (1964), *Summer Behind the House* (1965) and *Sunday Morning No. 2* (1968-70) are evidently amalgams of the ordinary and extraordinary. But the plexiglass paintings, too, with their multiple images (which encourage the viewer to synthesize the various images, engendering a flash of insight the reveals something unrepresentable) are also amalgams of the subjective and the objective, the real and super-real.

Comments Chambers made about the depiction of ordinary reality in his paintings could apply as well to such films as *Hybrid*, *Mosaic*, *Circle*, and *The Hart of London*:

The *simply-being* of the world is perhaps best encountered in those things most familiar: the things around us. The unfamiliar and the strange demand our

scrutiny and attention because the service they afford us is to offer themselves as signs and means by which we can navigate in the world. While the familiar habitually conceals its own *presence*, one can sometimes, by a thing always being there, discover it nameless for a moment on its own. And that is the threshold of *perception*. It is also the moment of miracle: the “hallowing” of the everyday.

The ideal that Chambers expresses here is not far from the Surrealists’ goal of finding the marvellous in ordinary reality. Furthermore, like the Surrealists, Chambers argued that the marvellous manifests itself only when rational thought is quieted and wilfulness in thinking abandoned (as it is in free association). In a published excerpt from *Red and Green*, Chambers remarked:

Perceptual experience . . . brings the artist . . . back to the hidden place, at the single root of the powers of the soul, where the entire subjectivity is, as it were, gathered in a state of expectation and vital creativity. Into this place he enters, not by any effort of voluntary concentration, but by a recollection, fleeting as it may be, of all the senses – a primordial gift – to which he has to consent, and which he can cultivate, first of all by removing obstacles and silencing concepts.

A fascination with the phenomenology of the photographic image played a key role in the evolution of Chamber’s manner of handling of space (and of fitting an object into space). Chambers described the source of his fascination with the photograph’s seemingly magic capacity to bind time to eternity. He conceived that fascination during a trip from Spain back to Canada – hearing that his mother was gravely ill, Chambers returned to Canada for what he thought would be a brief visit.

It was while riding a city bus uptown that its slow smooth ride spoke to me of opportunity and comforts I could not expect in Spain. It was feel for the place that produced my intention to stay on in London. It was also my home town, and there were spaces here along the river and in the landscape that had become mine years ago and continued to be so. The memory of such places multiplied the longer I remained so near them, and the images wedded to their presence surfaced in me like the faces of long lost friends. At this time I also discovered my own past, that of my parents, and of their parents in the likenesses preserved by photographic magic. I dug up all the photos I could find from both the McIntryre and Chambers sides of the families. I was to use these photos soon in my paintings.

We see that Chambers associated the photograph with memory.

Chambers ideas about the photograph are similar to those of Salvador Dalí. Even before he joined the Surrealist movement, Salvador Dalí was taken with the potential of the cinema – Photography and film represented for him a mechanical means of ensuring a connection between the poetic (i.e. lyrical or subjective) image and the world of brute, external (objective) fact – so strong was this conviction that he used Le Corbusier’s assertion that “the strongest of all is the poetry of facts” as an epigram to his “Poetry of Standardized Utility.”

In 1927, a year earlier, Dalí had written “La fotografía, pura creació de l’esperit” (September 1927). I suspect that photography is the last art which most people would

consider the pure creation of the spirit; but the basis of Dalí's conviction is that reality, what the camera can convey, is created through subjective interpretation – that was the belief that lay behind his use of double images, and that was the kernel of his notion of paranoiac-criticism.

In that piece Dalí also related the virtues of the photographic lens to its ability to make us see objects anew: "Knowing how to look at an object, an animal, in a spiritual manner, is seeing it in its greatest objective reality. But people see only stereotyped images of things . . . and they find vulgar and normal all that they are in the habit of seeing on a daily basis, however miraculous and marvellous it might be." NOT DONE NOT DONE NOT DONE Dalí did not mean by this the commonplace idea that works of art encourage us to adopt a new experiential relation to objects, from which vantage-point we can see them in a fresh way. For he contrasted stereotyped seeing not with seeing objects afresh, but with seeing them as "miraculous and marvellous" – and one who experiences an object as marvellous, he proclaimed, understands the role that one's dispositions and obsessions play in constituting the object that one sees: "Knowing how to look is a new system of spiritual surveillance. *Knowing how to look is a means of inventing.* And no invention has ever been as pure as that created by the anesthetic look of the naked eye, without eyelashes, of Zeiss . . ."

Dalí emphasized the ability of photography and film to reveal the marvels that inhabit ordinary reality – to show that surreality is not distinguishable from reality nor reality from surreality. At this point, Dalí maintained that photography reveals the marvellous principally by changing of the scale of the objects depicted. Changes in scale, Dalí states, "provokes strange resemblances, unimaginable (though existing) analogies." Dalí waxed poetic on the capacity of enlargement to reveal the marvels that co-habit our world of everyday reality.

The clear image of an orchid, lyrically unites with the photograph of the interior of the mouth of a tiger, in which the sun forms a thousand shadows with the architecture of the larynx. . . . In the large and limpid eye of a cow, a small white post-mechanical landscape is spherically deformed, but remains precise as far as the sky in which float small and luminous clouds.

Dalí also was quite taken with the fact that not only could the photograph apprehend surreality (the marvellous) but that it can do so without imagination playing any role. The analogies that photographs reveal, even though they actually exist, are, he asserted, unimaginable. Fantasy in photography, he claimed, is "born of . . . simple objective transcription." The idea the photography gains an advantage by bypassing the imagination is also implicit in his claim that scale itself can render an object marvellous: it is enough that the lens capture a cube of sugar at a scale that bears comparison to the most gigantic structure, for it can then be experienced as marvellous.

But Dalí soon came to doubt that a change of scale was enough to transmute a photographic transcription of reality into a revelation of the marvellous. Photography's role became subsumed in a more general effort to gain "knowledge of reality" ("conocimiento de la realidad"). In an article "Reality and Surreality," Dalí offered a revised understanding of the potential of photography – there he asserted that reality is a product of spirit and that, as intellectual processes had usurped the role of the spirit in creating aesthetic systems, moderns had let reality slip away. Works of art created through intellectual processes are unable to move us poetically, he claimed, because lyricism requires the givens ("*datos*") of reality be perceived through our consciousness (our mentality). These *datos* give evidence of a surreality inherent in reality, a surreality that can be probed through free association and through other means of investigating the subconscious. Dalí saw that there were patterns of meaning in the objective world that unite phenomena that, absent the apprehension of these patterns, appear utterly

diverse. He sought for a means to assist us in seeing that diverse phenomena belong together in one coherent system – that is, for acquiring knowledge of the ontological truths that make ontic truths possible – and believed that he had discovered this means in documentary, which he understood essentially as an inventory. Dalí concluded that photography is the best means for creating this documentary inventory; in “La dada fotogràfica,” he stated, “Photography is able to realize the most complete, scrupulous and stirring catalogue ever imagined. From the fine detail of aquariums to the quickest and most fugitive gestures of wild beasts, photography offers us a thousand fragmentary images resulting in a dramatized cognitive totalization.”

Dalí even proposed that his paintings could be viewed as photographs. He defined painting as “Hand-done colour ‘photography’ of ‘concrete irrationality’ and of the imaginative world in general” and insisted that these images are systematically elaborated – to which fact the precision of his images testifies. He proposed that just as the systematic elaboration of hallucinatory paranoid images constitutes reality (as we know it), so the systematic elaboration of hand-done colour images results in a picture of reality – that is, they have the essential character of a photograph.

The idea is not so different from that which motivated Chambers to adopt his method of producing his “perceptual realist” paintings, which involved approaching the object by rendering it in greater and greater detail. Chambers described the method:

The usable foto is divided in 1/4 or 1/2’ squares. The support (prepared wood or canvas) receives an uni-colour-tone surface of oil painting approximating the colour-tone of the largest generalized colour area: the sky in *401* [i.e., *401 Towards London* (1968-9)]. It is also divided into squares corresponding to those in the foto . . . As the painting develops the squares have to be drawn in again and again. Subsequent masses of lighter value subdivide the two large generalized masses and derive their own colour-tone orientation from them. In this way the structuring process gradually evolves into more minute divisions until . . . dimensional contrasts begin to emerge as defined objects. When this point is reached and realized the description has been intentionally analyzed and integrated with the experience.

The product of the method was a painting that could well be described as hand-done colour photography.

While Dalí celebrated the photograph as a means for bypassing the formulation of a subjective image, Chambers celebrated the impersonality of the photography and perceptualist painting (which is based on the photograph). The schooling that Chambers received in Spain enabled him to understand the value of not imposing a personal style on one’s experience – of opening oneself up to what is given in experience. He came to understand the value of the photograph in similar terms:

Before the camera was invented painters developed a painting style to compensate for the lack of visual information available to them. A constantly changing scene with no way of freezing the instant offered the painter little alternative but to find some intentional means of expressing the unity he felt for the thing he was painting. Style filled the gap as it were, where the artist had no more specific references to go on. The personality of the artist conceived stylistic innovations that became his hallmark; where style deteriorated into mannerism painting derived from the lyrical ego and the mind aesthetic rather than embodying the primary impact.

Chambers offers two assertions here. First, he states that the photography has to do with memory. Second, he contends that the exactitude of the photograph allows painters to dispense with style, which conveys a wilful imposition on reality. His is a theological conception of the photograph: for him the photograph can transcend time, and render the time-bound timeless, and so can afford knowledge of something that is beyond the self and higher than the self. The conception of the photograph that the young Salvador Dalí propounded was similar.

The various methods that over the years Chambers employed for incorporating the realism of photographs in his paintings are means for revealing the marvels that inhabit reality. Further, just as Dalí was quite taken with the fact that not only could the photography allow us to apprehend surreality but that it can do so without imagination playing any role, so Chambers was fascinated with the way the styleless painting, based on the objectivity of the photograph and bypassing the lyrical ego, could evoke the mysterious. Dalí understood that there were patterns of meaning in the objective world that unite phenomena that, seem utterly diverse when they are not viewed through these patterns. Chambers created paintings that embody a similar notion, for they combined historical and contemporary images in a whole that escaped descriptive meaning and thereby lead to a higher insight that holds the seemingly diverse images in a resonant unity. Just as Dalí understood that the documental character of photography and film could be pressed into serving Surrealist interests, so Chambers, too, used “the thousand fragmentary images” that his collection of photographs offered to create forms that suggest “a dramatized cognitive totalization.”

Finally, in “Reality and Surreality,” Dalí proposed that intellectual processes had usurped the role of the spirit in creating aesthetic systems, causing moderns to let reality slip away – and to counteract this Dalí stressed the objectivity of the photograph, which (through an extraordinary linking of ideas) he saw as the product of a species of automatism. Chambers offered a similar view:

The gray, dull scene may have impressed the sensibilities with an equivalent impact to the sunlit, contrasty one, but the short-circuit occurs where the mind interprets the impact as something it doesn't like or even something it does like *because* *Because* is the mental process of aesthetics, at whatever level of sophistication, where kinds of appearances trigger conditioned aesthetic responses to fade out an otherwise potential perceptual impact. The impact on the perceiver looking through the visible to a general vision-awareness of the whole will register impartially an experience because it is not intercepted by the mind. The aesthetic concern converts and manipulates its *own* energy according to its particular needs. The spontaneous [nota bene!] and primary nature of perception cannot speculate in values.

In tying Chamber's ideas so closely to those of the Surrealists, I run the risk of making it seem that Chambers derived his ideas about painting from the Surrealists. I do not believe that he did: mediocre artists copy, while major artists assimilate a world-view, a spirit, and a philosophy. Chambers was a major artist, and so it was the philosophy of Surrealism that he assimilated. The superficial appearance of Chambers' works do not resemble that of any Surrealist paintings (either of the Automatist or the Veristic variety), but they do embody a conception of reality very close to that of the Surrealists.

Chambers' perceptualism strived to present “the object” in its splendour – or, as the Surrealists might have said, as a marvellous entity. Like the Surrealists, Chambers treated “the object” not as external, independently existing being, but as a being which fuses objective and

subjective attributes. What accounts for this similarity between the two conceptions of the object? The answer lies in the shared understanding of a quality of presence, and of its effects. The Surrealist object, the marvellous object, is apprehended as an irreducible particularity that surpasses representation as a general being. Its being escapes language and reason – indeed, it escapes sense and sensibility.

However, its presence is equivocal. The object is a spatial object, yet its presence, because it exceeds all concepts, is nowhere. It is both an object in space and an object whose being exceeds spatial location. In its latter aspect, its being resembles that of a representation: like a representation, its being is deferred – in order to apprehend it, a subject must refer the object to a concept or to a sign. This deferral dislodges the object from its spatial immediacy and relocates it in another place, in a scene of ‘absence.’

Thus Surrealist text is characterized both by meaning (presence) and the lack of meaning (the key to the text is hidden away, absent) – that accounts for its enigmatic character. The relations amongst the molecules in the early molecular paintings (e.g. *Unravished Bride*, *Five Shepherds*, *McGilvary County*), amongst the figures in several of Chambers earlier works (*Olga Visiting Graham*, *All Things Fall*, *Olga at the South Pole*, *Sunday Morning No. 1*) in which Chambers was concerned with inserted the figure in space, and amongst the images in the multiple-image works (*Moving Side and Forward*, *Tulip with Colour Options*, *3 Pages in Time*, *The Hart of London*, *Madrid Window No. 2*) are similarly inscrutable. A similar inscrutability, I have suggested, characterizes *Mosaic*, *Hybrid*, and *R34*. Like the Surrealist text, their presence is haunted by an absence, for it is a representation that substitutes for the ‘unrepresentable’ lost object

This dual existence has something of the character of the uncanny inasmuch as it resembles the dual existence of those enigmatic productions, conscious mental images, whose ‘other scene’ is the Unconscious. The representation embodied in a Surrealist object (like representations in consciousness) are generated in much the same way as hallucinations or daydreams are, in a place and by an agency that is quite unknown (except through its effects).

The muteness of the Surrealist object – the silence and inertness it suggests – endows it with traces of the unrepresentable *Unheimlich*. Paul Delvaux’s Venus pictures (*The Public Voice*, 1948, *The Night Train*, 1947, *Venus Asleep*, 1944, *Les Belles de Nuit*, 1936) are paradigmatic instances of this: they present inert figures who seem materialize out of a palpable absence. Atget’s photographs, which the Surrealists discovered and loved, also provoke the impression of absence.

The Surrealists were not alone in their interest in the paradoxical absent presence (and present absence) of objects that are invested with the lure of the *Unheimlich*. The distance that separates representations (and knowledge) from origins was an important theme of late nineteenth and early twentieth century thought. One piece of evidence for this: the Freudian Unconscious is an hypothesized absent Other, which can never be made present. The practices of psychoanalysis (free association, dream analysis, the experience of transference) are practices that try to discover evidences of the operations of the Unconscious in the traces that the unconscious leaves in conscious thought. A second piece of evidence: Freud’s account of the formation of the Ego (*das Ich*) also depicts the Ego as an absent presence, for Freud claimed that Ego constitutes itself by distinguishing itself, as a unique and particular object different from other Egos. Thus, the Self constitutes itself as and through *difference*, and so its very being relies on absence – the lost object or the impossible ‘real’ – as its foundation and support. A final piece of evidence: Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1922-31) concerns the process by which memory converts immediate experience into alienated form characterized by absence. That activity of that novel’s hero, of recalling his past, turns ‘absence’ into a represented – and re-presented – presence. The agency that represents – and re-

presents – this new ‘presence’ is the virtual reality of *logos*, of language and of ‘writing.’

Language is central to the means by which the Surrealists produced the effect of an unreal reality (and a realistic unreality), of an absent presence (and a present absence). But there is a parallel in to this in Chambers work. Language has a forming role in Chambers paintings. For if Chambers’ ideas of perceptualism concern transcending consensus reality to experience reality in the “splendour of its essential namelessness,” then we must equally recognize the converse of this idea: his paintings, because they must depict the objects of consensus reality (even while they strive to provoke the experience of a higher realm), must render nameable objects – indeed objects whose nameability is part of our experience of them. Chambers’ paintings confirm this conjecture, for they make the force of language apparent: we see the deer in the painting *The Hart of London* as a deer, a hart, and even as a symbol of innocence; we see the policeman with rope as a symbol of an authority figure. We experience the individual images that compose the work as symbols belong to a language for which no Rosetta stone has been identified. Surrealist art is likewise an art of an extremely literal character.

The Surrealist object had filiations to the unconscious – that is what gave it its power. But the realistic image in Chambers art has similar filiations, and is equally troubling. Like the image in the works of Veristic Surrealism, the realistic image in Chambers work often concerns the familiar, the domestic, the homely, but nevertheless is invested with power of the *Unheimlich*. More than the “merely given,” it occupies our inner recesses, and testifies to something we cannot know. Its temporal condition disturbs us with the power of the *Unheimlich*: like a phantom pain, it testifies to the past – indeed can seem preternatural – even as it has a mysterious effectivity in the present.

Chambers’ Spanish training provided him with skills enough to make an accurate likeness of reality – but a simulacrum was not what he was after. He realized, as he put he it, that he wanted something that would give him a sense of participating in a “fellowship with essence.” Ross Woodman, during an interview, asked Chambers if he considered himself to be a realistic painter. He replied

Yes, but I don’t paint an exclusively visual reality. The visual is only one aspect of an experience. Each sensory organ records reality in its own way; a smell, a sound, temperature, texture, a landscape can reawaken their own image of an experience. The merely visual is enriched through associations. If a painting is too imitative of visual reality, like ‘fool-the-eye’ paintings, the viewer is short-changed. The rendered objects are so optically overpowering that the visual by itself monopolizes the sensory experience.

The statement alludes to synaesthesia – a phenomenon that interested the Surrealists as well as Chambers. But ideas about synaesthesia are diverse, and we would do well to seek further precisions on Chambers’ conception of synaesthesia for they will help explain the constructive notion of perception he relies on, and how the ‘foto’ illustrates the constructive character of perception. Chambers’ treated perception as a form of *poesis*.

The idea that sensation is an active, radically synthetic process had enormous ramifications through Chambers’ perceptualist theories and practices. He remarked:

A painting gets put together just like an experience – in particles. *Mary and Olga Visiting* [1964-5] isn’t the description of a visual moment; it’s the accumulation of experienced interiors brought into focus. . . . You are in a room, then in another room where you see an object being held this way, then you see it in motion, a

week later a cup is tilting, the next day a finger curves in the air against a background, you hear a little clink, you swallow a cheese sandwich, something fragile, a cup touches its saucer, you see white . . . a woman rests one leg over the other, pink . . . the thick rug is buff-orange. Sense combinations complement one another to enrich perception.

The idea that the mind combines real, but discrete, elements to create an experience of wholeness that lifts one out of the quotidian world exemplifies the Surrealist epistemology – we have already remarked upon its importance to Dalí. It also describes the principle through which film operates. Chambers comments on *Olga and Mary Visiting* can be read as a statement of the homology between film form and perception. Chambers saw significance even in the fact that film is composed particles – of frames – that get put together to produce an encompassing experience of something that belongs to a higher realm. Chambers concerns with light, memory and the synthetic character all fed his interest in photography. But beyond painting and photography, the cinema offered an advantage that neither of them could convey so thoroughly, of showing that a perception gets put together in parts – that perception synthesizes immediate *qualia* with information that derives from memory and imagination.

The idea of juxtaposing elements in such a way that these elements would resonate with one another to engender a higher experience was the basis for the form of Chamber's journal, *Red and Green*. About that work he stated:

Red and Green follows a plan and develops a vision in much the same way [as] film footage, that is, single frames or sections of frames are selected and juxtaposed with one another to bring to light an inspiration in a series of visual images. One quote or note follows another for a reason: to contribute to the total vision.

The structure of *Circle* reflects a similar idea, in which single frames accumulated to produce the impression of flux, and of what holds what fluxes into a whole, just as the days accumulate into the pattern of a year.

Much of the art that Chambers produced from the time he returned home to London was imbued with Surrealist attributes. Still, his film *The Hart of London* raised these Surrealist concerns to a new level. It exploits the capacity of photography that Dalí had recognized: "Photography is able to realize the most complete, scrupulous and stirring catalogue ever imagined. From the fine detail of aquariums to the quickest and most fugitive gestures of wild beasts, photography offers us a thousand fragmentary images resulting in a dramatized cognitive totalization." Chambers' original idea for the film was as a Daliesque compendium of "a thousand fragmentary images." To this end, he solicited home movies and snapshots from all Londoners.

The procession of spectral human forms that make up the extended sequence near the beginning of *The Hart of London* evokes another sense. They seem to be ghostly forms, and one may well feel incline to exclaim about them what a poet, observing the commuters in another London, remarked

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, And

each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

This image, of a procession of Londoners, all undone by death is virtually repeated in Chambers' *The Hart of London*. Chambers' London, too, especially that depicted in the first third of the film, is too an Unreal City, whose citizens are haunted by death. Altogether, Eliot's lines convey the awe, the dread, which Eliot's fellow Londoners inspired in the poet, as though he knew that all were not just doomed, but, to all intents and purposes, were the living dead. This is how the residents of Chambers London seem to him, too.

Eliot's lines, among the most famous in twentieth century, offer an allusion to the Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* 55-60.

E dietro le venìa sì lunga tratta
di gente, ch'i' non averi creduto
che mort tanta n'avessa defatta.

Poscia ch'io v'ebbi alcun riconosciuto,
vidi e conobbi l'ombra di colui
che fece per viltade il fran rifiuto.

As well as too Baudelaire's

Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves,
Où le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant

For Baudelaire, the city is a place of dreams, a spectral place. Dante's Overture to the *Commedia* can easily seem to have an oneiric dimension – even though it is presented with tremendous precision. In this sense, both were precursors, however distant, of Surrealism. But the “overture” to Chambers' London also seems like an unreal city, whose inhabitants are all undone by death.

There are other Surrealist aspects of the film . However, we can get at them only through considering further Chambers' ideas on perception and what he called “perceptualism.” The excerpts from *Red and Green* that Chambers selected for his autobiography begins:

Perception in process is like watching a movie. Suddenly the spectacle freezes and loses focus. The sound dissolves. The defocusing spreads, brightens in a flash and becomes white light in the mind. All in an instant: Act one.

This mute, imageless, invisible phenomenon then almost immediately is accompanied by a shadow, an emotion, a vital awakening whose intrusion heralds the shift from this creative centre to the process of conceptual knowing: Act two.

Here the focus returns, the sound resumes and the film is moving normally again. The moment of “white light” is the moment of *perception*. Experience is the shadow or the emotion pointing outward. It is the frame returning to focus.

The text outlines the structure of *The Hart of London*: It begins with the moment of “white light,” proceeds to ghostly images – shadows that evoke an emotion, a “vital awakening” and

proceeds to the perceptual experience (which in the same text Chambers describes as “the flow into the ‘simple’ senses and into consciousness of *perceptual* nourishment.”). The film describes the way the past – memory, the interior realm, the subjective – gives way to present, to sensation of the objective realm. In *Red and Green* Chambers goes on to say that perception “is the gestalt “sense” of the simple senses themselves – the ‘spiritual unity’ of these simple senses.”

But Surrealism also derived from the Symbolists an enthusiasm for synaesthesia – which, in following the Symbolist view, they considered a mode of sensation that disclosed a higher reality, “a kind of absolute reality, a surreality.” Chambers too believed that what is disclosed through perception (which he clearly understood as a form of synaesthesia) is a higher reality. What is more, the Surrealists drew their idea of this “surreality” partly from the heterodox tradition, and especially from spiritualism (in its French version, *Spiritisme*). André Breton revealed to André Parinaud, an interviewer for RDF, this about the Surrealists’ early experiments with induced hypnotic slumbers.

Although I’d once been a student of Joseph Babinsky – the main detractor of the theses of Charcot and the so-called “Nancy school” – at the time I retained a keen interest, albeit a skeptical one, in some of the psychological literature that was centred on or related to that teaching [that is to say, in the use of hypnosis to treat psychological ailments]. I’m thinking in particular of F. W. H. Myers’s beautiful work, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*; or Théodore Flournoy’s exciting accounts of the medium Hélène Smith in *From India to the Planet Mars* and elsewhere; or even certain chapters of the *Traité de méapsychique* [*Treatise on Metapsychics*] by Charles Richet. All of this managed to fit together, to combine with my other ways of seeing, thanks to my enthusiastic admiration from Freud, which has never left me.

Despite these remarks Parinaud, after introducing the idea that the marvellous is the only source of all beauty, remarked : “I have trouble imagining you lapsing into spiritualism, for example.” Breton’s answer is telling.

Of course not, far from it. We were deeply suspicious of everything that came under the heading of spiritualism, which since the nineteenth century had claimed a large portion of the marvellous for itself. More specifically, we flatly denied the tenets of spiritualism (no possible communication between the living and the dead), all the while maintaining a keen interest in some the phenomena it helped bring to light. Despite its absurd and erroneous point of departure, it had detected certain powers of mind, of singular character and no small importance. To give an idea of our qualified attitude . . . Surrealism . . . highligh[ed] what remained of mediumistic communication once we had freed it from the insane metaphysical implications it otherwise entailed.

But Chambers, too, drew his ideas about this higher reality at least partly from the occult tradition. He stated that “[f]rom the time that I began to think *perceptualism*, I accumulated notes both of my writing and writings from other disciplines such as aesthetics, science, politics, the occult, philosophy and religion.” He also indicated that he understood that ideas from all these fields overlapped with his own ideas on perceptualism by going on to state that “[t]hese disciplines speak in their own manner about intuition, which I consider to be the core of *perceptualism* as well.”

The influence of the occult tradition on his formulation of perceptualism is evident in *Red and Green's* offering an emanationist view of reality, according to which material reality descends from light:

The ancient sages, ascending to the unknowable, made their starting-point from the first manifestation of the unseen, the unavoidable, and from a strict logical reasoning, the absolutely necessary creative Being, the Demiurgos of the universe. Evolution began with them from pure spirit, which descending lower and lower down, assumed at last a visible and comprehensible form, and became matter.

As the heterodox do, Chambers believed that evolution can reverse this descent:

A stone becomes a plant, a plant an animal, an animal a man, a man a spirit, a spirit a god.

These evolutionary ideas are evident in *Hybrid*. *Hybrid* opposes movement and arrest, as dynamic images are juxtaposed with still photographs. It is a hybrid of two media, motion pictures and photography – and that hybrid suggests another, the reconciliation of life and death. It represents “a mental vantage-point from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, communicable and incommunicable, high and low, will no longer be perceived as contradictories.” Furthermore, the dynamic concerns the hybridization of a rose and the growth of the hybrid through the changing season. Life evolves through the cross-pollination of different forms, and ultimately, through the reconciliation of life to death.

Chambers conceived of the higher reality to be flux, movement, dynamism, just as the heterodox do.

The photo broadens the field of memorable events and isolates that moment of our emotion's response to that *something*, which, from among the chaos of the shifting lights and shapes, persistently escapes our concentration. It does away with memory and sketches. . . . For the artist, the photo participates in the present only by virtue of its ability to remember the look of the emotion that was quickened in him by something outside himself.

“The chaos of the shifting lights and shapes” – that pretty much describes the content of *The Hart of London*.

In *Red and Green*, Chambers cited C. G. Jung's ideas; laid out the psychological basis of extra-sensory sensory perception; proposed that humans are telepathic by nature, for nerve impulses travel outward from body, along external nerve pathways, in much the same way that travel inside the body; (at several points) quoted comments about the astral body and causal body; suggested that some Asians have sensory faculties that are developed far beyond what Europeans and their descendants possess (sensory faculties that enabled them to perceive hundreds of colours that others cannot distinguish); included a reference to the fourth dimension; described a seance during a fragment of Marcus Tullius Cicero's house was placed on her forehead of one, Mrs. Denton who, without the slightest intimation as to that object's nature, not only described the Roman orator's living arrangements, but also talked about the house's previous owner, Cornelius Sulla Felix (Felix the Dictator); speculated on the possibility that souls could exist without bodies; and opined that along with the expansion of their physical vision, humans have experienced through their evolution outcrops of profound insight, extra-

sensory perception, direct apprehension of a supra-animal reality through a supra-physical, supra-temporal awareness. Chambers even cited the deeply Gnostic idea that the fundamental cosmic reality is a creative principle that has been called variously “astral light,” “aether,” “fire-mist,” or the “principle of life,” and that this creative principle formed the sun, the stars and satellites, determining their emplacement by the immutable law of harmony, and populated them with the various life forms. He also quotes at length a passage in which Malevich expounds on his Gurdjievan ideas.

This tradition was hardly an incidental influence on Chambers’ creative method. Ideas from this tradition are right at the heart of Chambers’ thought, and at the heart of his art-making. Chambers believed that the central core of reality and experience is an unknowable, unrepresentable energy, and that its periphery is inhabited by more concrete, definite forms. Thought, too, for Chambers is energy, luminous at its core and more indefinite and spectral at its peripheries. The application of the metaphor of centre and periphery to both experience and reality suggests the identity of the two. Here are a pair of passages from *Red and Green* that testify to the central place these ideas had in Chambers’ thought and practice:

The painter, whatever he is, while is painting practices a magical theory of vision. He is obliged to admit that the objects before him pass into him or else that, . . . the mind goes out through the eyes to wander among objects; for the painter never ceases adjusting his clairvoyance to them. . . . He must affirm . . . that the same thing is both out there in the world and here in the heart of vision – the same or, if one prefers, a similar thing, but according to an efficacious similarity which is the parent, the genesis, the metamorphosis of Being in his vision. It is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter; it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze. What exactly does he ask of it? To unveil the means, visible and not otherwise, by which it makes itself a mountain before our eyes. . . . The painter’s gaze asks them [light, shadows, reflections, colour] what they do to suddenly cause something to be and to be this thing, what they do to compose this worldly talisman and to make us see the visible.

And more remarkably yet:

In a very real manner, events or objects are actually focal points where highly charged psychic impulses are transformed into something that can be physically perceived: a breakthrough into matter. When such highly charged impulses intersect or coincide, matter is formed. The reality behind such an explosion into matter is independent of the matter itself. An identical or nearly identical pattern may re-emerge “at any time” again and again, if the proper coordinates exist for activation.

Many spectators have been quite baffled by the mode of experience that Chambers’ work provokes – and especially that of his masterwork, *Hart of London*. What the superimpositions in the film allude to precisely, is that the objects we see are only a shadow of what is disclosed in true perception, as experience loses truth its object becomes more material. The experience that Chambers’ referred to as “perception” is a rare and profound mode of experience. This is a truth the Surrealists, too, knew.

But I do not want to leave the impression that the occult tradition alone was the source of Chambers’ metaphysical, religious and aesthetic ideas – I referred earlier to the role that

Catholicism played in Surrealism. Catholicism played an important role in Chambers' art. The major difference between the Surrealists and Chambers on that matter is that Chambers did not feel it was necessary to reformulate his spiritual and metaphysical beliefs to suit a modern, secular age – like the Catholicism of the time he lived in Spain, Chambers' beliefs were essentially traditional.

On November 15, 1971, Chambers wrote a letter to Father Ambrose McInnes, a childhood acquaintance of Chambers who had become a member of the Order of Preachers (a Dominican) and, late in the artists' life, Jack Chambers' spiritual advisor. He described a light experience he had in 1969, in London's Victoria Hospital, just after he learned he had leukemia, an experience that occurred during the making of the film *Hart of London*.

The following night was Sunday, and I lay back about nine p.m. to prepare myself for another night. It was darkening fast and the trees had already become black shapes. I looked to the wall at the foot of my bed and felt myself begin to sink to the dread reality of dying. My consciousness which before had been flying desperately against the bars of its mind no longer struggled to get out. It was stilled by the approach of its imminent annihilation and braced itself as we sank. My only grasp at life was to repeat over and over: love Jesus, love . . . love Jesus, love. These were the last words of a dying man who nevertheless did not want the life he had known or the death to which his life had brought him. Suddenly but altogether gently there appeared in front of me "on the wall" a round glow of light that grew instantly to the size of a volleyball. The circumference was frayed and luminous and not sharply defined. At the bottom left of the glow were the capital letters LIFE and at the bottom right were the capital letters DEATH. When the glow increased the peripheral brightness obliterated both words. Its presence brought me upright in bed in a bolt of instant and all-pervading joy. It was fused with love. In fact there was no "I", only love. The awareness of love in that degree gave me the power to heal others; also to know not through the mind but directly from the heart the meaning of Christ's parables. Everyone of the parables *depended* on that love. It was also made clear that the way to Christ was through my wife, my children and others. I had no fear. There was no I; I had been annihilated in the light of love along with LIFE and DEATH. Caught up and infused with that love I knew that this was *life* that never died; that I was now alive in a way that would never die. So much for death. It no longer matter whether I died or not. Death was only a mental concept; it was the matter-side of the door to eternal life. In that love there was no ending, no beginning. Life was temporary dream from which I had been suddenly and gently awakened into Reality. There was only love: Love sustaining and binding the universe. The light itself remained for a few seconds but the impact wore off gradually over half an hour or so. It had been simply and totally a gift of love, undeserved and unconditional. So the dying words that sank with me into darkness were also the first of birth, of new life: love Jesus, love . . .

The sense of the loss of, or estrangement of, the self – the sense that "le 'je' est un autre" – and the belief in a higher reality that reconciles the opposites of life and death, in a marvellous realm that perdures are fundamental to Surrealist theory and practice, as they were to Chambers' theory and practice.

The vision of the fusion of life and death on a higher plane – this mental vantage-point from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, communicable and

incommunicable, high and low, are no longer be perceived as contradictories”– is a very Spanish view. It is connected to the idea of sacrifice, of a death that guarantees life. Chambers deliberated on the idea of sacrifice, and the role it played in transforming darkness into light, using a colour photograph that he had shot while visiting a slaughterhouse in Chincon, Spain. It is very much like that image of the slaughtered lamb that appears in the film *Hart of London*. The lamb lies on a table (we can think of it iconographically as an altar), blood flowing from a wound in the neck – considered iconographically, it represents the Lamb of God whose blood washes away the sins of the world. Thus the final words Chambers wrote in a letter to Father MacInnes were:

Perhaps even with the sickening failure of my life, and as I see how I fail each day, these failings in faith may become the seeds of humility disposing me more to God’s love. I ask God through Jesus Christ to crush my will and mill it into the brightness of His love.

The Surrealists would probably not have been too sympathetic to Chambers’ working out his salvation within the Roman church; but they surely would have recognized the desire to experience the abnegation of the will, so that brightness of a love from beyond might fill one’s inner recesses.