

*Paper read to the International Association for Philosophy and Literature, May 2010.
Unpublished*

Photography and the Numinous

R. Bruce Elder

The purpose of this paper is to sketch a line of thought that emerged in the late mid 1800s and concerning photography and the numinous—a line of thought that persisted well into the twentieth century, and could be found in the work of Minor White and indeed traces of it can still be discerned today. In fact this sketch, regrettably, for reasons of temporal economy, will be of the sort that suggests the contours of the subject in a few strokes, and not the sort that offers an detailed rendering. The first of these strokes is from Take, for example, this passage from an early text on cinema, “The Birth of the Sixth Art,” published in 1911 by Ricciotto Canudo (1879–1923), a scholar, literary entrepreneur, and a friend of Guillaume Apollinaire, Gabriele d’Annunzio, Abel Gance and Blaise Cendrars who is often considered to be the first film theorist.

In fact, the cinematographic theatre *is the first new theatre*, the first authentic and fundamental theatre of our time. When it becomes truly aesthetic, complemented by a worthy musical score played by a good orchestra, even if only representing life, real life, momentarily fixed by the photographic lens, we shall be able to feel then our first *sacred* emotion, we shall have a glimpse of the spirits, moving towards a vision of the temple, where Theatre and Museum will once more be restored for a new religious communion of the spectacle and Aesthetics. The cinematograph as it is today will evoke for the historians of the future the image of the first extremely rudimentary wooden theatres, where goats have their throats slashed and the primitive “goat song” and “tragedy” were danced, before the stone apotheosis consecrated by Lycurgus, even before Aeschylus’ birth, to the Dionysian theatre . . .

We could trace this revelation of the numinous, in photograph through vicissitudes of the discourse that presents photography as theophany, that is through the generally genially toned discussion of photography as the manifestation of the creator *natura naturans* that film students a most generally aware of through the writings of the Personaliste theorist, André Bazin. But I would like to consider a darker view of the numinous that photography reveals, one that takes this marvelous element not as a charitable force, but as a something elemental, cruel, strange, and, indeed, grotesque.

So here is another broken line in sketch: And he celebrated frenzied activity.

One begins to acquire a disposition for higher temperatures, the icy geometry of light, and the white glare of superheated metals. The environment becomes more constructive and more dangerous, colder and more luminous; there disappear from it the last remains of *Gemütlichkeit* . . . One avoids secondary goals such as taste; one elevates the formulation of technical questions to the decisive position; and one does well thereby, since more than the technological is concealed behind these questions.

In the essay “Über den Schmerz” (“On Pain”), written and published in 1934, Jünger rejected the liberal values of liberty, security, ease and comfort, and seeks instead the measure of man in the capacity to withstand pain and sacrifice. In this work, Jünger presented photography as the optimal art for new social order. Photography fits the new social order because photography is a technical method, and so fitted to the era of technology. Moreover, its temporality is in keeping with the ecstatic temporality of the technological era. The photograph “holds fast the bird in flight just as much [as it does] the man in the moment-of-truth [*Augenblick*]

in which he gets torn apart by an explosion. That is . . . the mode of seeing is peculiar to us; and photography is nothing other than a tool for this our peculiarity.

Photography also makes it possible to objectify pain, which is associated with all discipline, including the discipline of the new, hard man, for discipline is nothing more than the form under which humans maintain contact with pain.

We could test this conjecture concerning the noetic potential of pain—or more general, the encounter with a dark and sinister elemental—by examining that work that so many scholars have turned to in recent years, extraordinary photographs from Salpetriere or of a number of photographers specializing in outer extremes of esoteric phenomena. Or we could show how the arts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries evinced a desire to mount grotesque (sometimes to show the costs of artists' wrestling with the loathsome). Late 19th and early 20th century photographs shared in this interest in presenting reality's dark elements—common subjects of nineteenth-century photography and of early twentieth-century cinematography include the physiognomy of criminal elements, hysterical or epileptic, insects and of germs, trauma and autopsy, deformity, infirmity, anatomic anomalies, and, especially, of tumors and the terrible and terrifying ravages of disease. I could that photography's and cinematography's affinity for the grotesque, for the malformed, and the loathsome, to show that they highlight a "mode of seeing is peculiar to us—and that photography is nothing other than a tool for this our peculiarity," a way of seeing that is associated with the ecstatic temporality of the technological era. The photograph "holds fast the bird in flight just as much [as it does] the man in the moment-of-truth [*Augenblick*] in which he gets torn apart by an explosion."

But for reasons of clarity of focus, I have preferred to examine this affinity of the photographic arts with the numinous by considering one of its exemplary instances that I take to be generally misunderstood, even in its broadest outlines, and is the Surrealist practice of photography, for which an idea that lies adjacent to the idea of numinous, viz, the notion of the "le merveilleux" was absolutely central. As a precursor to that topic, we have to say a few words about an aspect of DADA that is generally overlooked (in fact, I would say that it has been universally overlooked), even though it became absolutely central to Surrealism.

In his very well-known DADA Manifesto, the Romanian Tristan Tzara wrote of "DADAIST DISGUST" (a phenomenon closely enough associated with what is loathsome or grotesque).

Every product of disgust that is capable of becoming a negation of the family is *dada*; protest with the fists of one's whole being in destructive action: *DADA*; acquaintance with all the means hitherto rejected by the sexual prudishness of easy compromise and good manners: *DADA*; abolition of logic, dance of those who are incapable of creation: *DADA*; . . . abolition of memory: *DADA*; the abolition of archaeology: *DADA* the abolition of prophets: *DADA*; the abolition of the future: *DADA*; the absolute and indisputable belief in every god that is an immediate product of spontaneity: *DADA*; the elegant and unprejudiced leap from one harmony to another sphere; the trajectory of a word, a cry, thrown into the air like an acoustic disc; to respect all individualities in their folly of the moment, whether serious, fearful, timid, ardent, vigorous, decided or enthusiastic; to strip one's church of every useless and unwieldy accessory; to spew out like a luminous cascade any offensive or loving thought, or to cherish it—with the lively satisfaction that it's all precisely the same thing—with the same intensity in the bush, which is free of insects for the blue-blooded, and gilded with the bodies of archangels, with one's soul. Liberty: *DADA DADA DADA*;— the roar of contorted pains, the interweaving of contraries and of all contradictions, freaks and irrelevancies: LIFE

The thrust of the passage might seem negative through and through. However, it is not. It is framed on a basic opposition, between all that affirms the sense of life and all that denies it.

Life depends on a sense of the vital, so the passage also extols all forms of immediacy and renounces life-denying concern with an elsewhere (whether that elsewhere be in time, in space, or in consciousness). Prudishness, the family, logic and every form of hierarchy are rejected as life-denying; also jettisoned are memory and archaeology (both of which are directed toward the past), and only the prophets (directed toward the future) are celebrated.

Tzara thought poetry to be a product of energy unleashed through the interaction of opposites. This energy can force open the closed system of reason. It derives from the body: that is why it is individual; that is why spontaneity releases it; and that is why Dadaists will “spew out like a luminous cascade any offensive or loving thought.” The idea that all that is good (“every god”) is the immediate product of spontaneity—that spontaneity is redemptive, for by healing the wounds that reason has inflicted on the soul, it returns humans to their natural, good state—figures among the most influential of Dadaist ideas. It would later influence the Surrealists, the American abstract expressionists, and the French *tachiste* painters of the 1950s.

Tzara’s comments reflect what the Dada artists stood for, and that is “LIFE.” DADA was against reason, because reason builds systems that limit life. Just as bad, reason escapes from life: much as Kierkegaard had accused Hegel and the Hegelian system of forgetting existence, DADA accused reason of overlooking life and the vitality of the life force. DADA emerged at the time when *Lebensphilosophie*, life-philosophy, had become the dominant current in German intellectual life outside the universities. “Life” was a central category of the new discourse. “Life,” in *Lebensphilosophie*, stood for the contrary of the view that we understand the world through reason or through traditional, hand-me-down values. It stood for the contrary of materialism, for life is the quest of the spirit towards higher states of being. “Life” stood for spirit, dynamism and creativity. “Life” stood for the view that reality is transformative, plural, protean, an endless variety of shapes and forms, a treasury of invention, boundless possibility. “Life” stood for all that is elemental and pulsional, for energy was thought to be the sum of all that is productive and creative. It stood for nature’s attempt to know itself through its very restlessness, for the recognition that reality cannot be contained in any system, since life is richer than any theory. These were the deepest meanings of the word “life” in the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey, Henri Bergson and Max Scheler, who all contributed to the form of *Lebensphilosophie* that would come to dominate Germany’s non-academic intellectual life. The urgency that Dada art suggested, the violence it represented, its *informel* quality were all to convey the dynamics of the vital principle. DADA’s dissemination through manifestos, fugitive magazines, performances in clubs, and all other sorts of ephemera, its reliance on literary forms that involve chance and simultaneity, and its enthusiasm for the technologies of mechanical reproduction (which furnished the basis for the phenomenon of the multiple)—for photomontage and assemblage, for photography and Rayography, and above all, for film—all suggest the life force’s mutable and plural qualities.

Art had become associated with ideas, and ideas were the product of reason—and it was reason, in its manifestation as technique, that had sent young men to wait in horrific trenches for horrible deaths. If art was associated with lifeless, life-denying reason, then DADA, the successor to art, would be dynamic; a Dada work would constitute itself through gesture, and would be nothing but gesture. The instincts had long been disenfranchised by a culture that had valorized reason, but now they would reveal themselves again, even if their expression might be crippled by their long neglect. Hugo Ball (certainly the most speculative and intense of all the original DADAISTEN) wrote, “As the bankruptcy of ideas has stripped the human image down to its innermost layers, instincts and backgrounds are emerging in a pathological way. As no art, politics, or knowledge seems able to hold back this flood, the only thing left is the joke and the bloody pose.” Art, religion, politics might once have served to restrain the pathological expression of corrupted instincts, but they had become impotent. A successor, DADA, must emerge that could achieve what those antecedent institutions had failed to achieve.

It is that “bloody pose” that is the Hugo Ball’s alternative to maniacal laughter that is of interest to me. So what I should do here is to make point out the relation between this and an all but forgotten art movement that shaped DADA (though its role has seldom been acknowledged). The art movement I refer to is the Comic Grotesque. . Until almost the middle of the nineteenth Century, German thinkers and artists generally treated comic forms as being aesthetically suspect and as having an uneasy relationship to the arts. That this view was changing became apparent when Friedrich Theodor Vischer and Karl Rosenkranz proposed arguments that the comic mode was potentially of equal aesthetic value to the tragic and the sublime. Vischer’s *Über das Erhabene und Komischer und andere Texte zur Ästhetik* (Concerning the Sublime and the Comic and Other Texts on Aesthetic, 1837) argued that humour possesses a poetic quality. In this work, he describes the grotesque in terms familiar to those in which Kristeva describes the abject: “. . . Animal and human forms mix, as do organic and inorganic, technical objects seem to become limbs of the human body.” Rosenkranz’s ideas were closer to Heinrich Wöfflin’s: in his *Ästhetik des Hässlichen* (The Aesthetic of Ugliness, 1853), the grotesque was a subspecies of the lowly mode (*die Niedrigen*), anchored in “that which changes (*Wechselnde*) and remains unstable (*Haltlose*), the accidental (*Zufällige*) and arbitrary (*Willkürliche*)

Too, comic Grotesque artists were prompted to found the theatre by a bill then before the Reichstag, the “*Lex Heinze*,” a bill that would have bolstered the already stringent censorship measures that artists laboured under, and these performances anticipated those of the DADAISTEN and the Surrealists. The *Elf Scharfrichter*’s performances took place in the back room of a restaurant that held around one hundred people. In the middle of the room was a pillory, topped by a skull with a wig and cloven in half by an axe. Posted on the pillory were handbills lampooning the political insanities of the time. At the start of the performances (called “executions” by the artists) the eleven members of the company marched on stage dressed in red robes and carrying enormous axes. They sang a Grotesque song about death. The Executioners’ theatre was innovative and corrosive, as Dada cabaret was.

I should develop that connection, too, simply because of the relevance to our theme of a major late nineteenth-century artist whose work was frequently discussed as exemplifying the grotesque was the Swiss Symbolist Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), an artist whose works had significant influence on Dada artists (and later, largely through De Chirico, on the Surrealists.) His work has been understood as having an affinity with photography and film, a fact testified to by Normal McLaren’s wonderful, *Fantasy on a Theme from a Nineteenth Century Painting*. From about 1870 Böcklin’s paintings epitomize a visual culture (and not just that of what is generally considered to be art) that is full of images of monsters. Overtly, much of his art seems, at first sight, to be of a mythological cast, and yet ironic: he treated respected classic mythological themes with iconoclastic humour, transforming sirens into feathered harpies with chicken legs and clawed feet and picturing a centaur being shod by a village blacksmith. It is true that his is an art of dislocation—dislocation that is the outcome of the cohabitation of different natures—and that the disturbing value of Böcklin’s art is the result of our “dissatisfaction with civilization.” A similar cohabitation is to be found in the shaman, the human who reaches the divine through animals. A risk-filled topic that borders on sickness, the topic of the impossible but real relation between human and animal (in their origin as in their form) is Böcklin’s central topic. This theme is traumatic because that relation is both terrifying and nauseating. Yet that relation is at the centre of the primitive world, and civilization is, in part, a means for separating ourselves from that relation, relegating our animal being to a lost part. The novelist and art theorist Carl Einstein (1885–1940) wrote that the grotesque is the result an “optical fantasy” in which a visual ideality overwhelms the subject; “[t]he grotesque,” he wrote “is the result of a struggle between the way the artist sees something and the characteristics of the motif.” Einstein went on to characterize the grotesque as the mode of art in which discordant

relations obtain. (When he wrote this, Einstein was not writing specifically about Arnold Böcklin's art, but he might as well have been.) In a similar vein, the critic Franz Servaes argued that Böcklin's greatness was the result of his bringing together "realism and idealism, naturalism and the fantastic," . . . "tragedy and humour."

This understanding of the grotesque (the *Groteske*) as a style that brings together incongruous elements so as to draw the resulting form into the realm of the spiritual (this purpose is what differentiates the grotesque from caricature) was widespread in Germany in these years. The 1895 edition of the *Meyers-Konversations Lexikon* offered this gloss on the term.

Grotesque (Ital. grottesco). Description of a type of minor comic style in literature, music and the visual arts. The grotesque is above all the foolishly strange, the product of a humour that unreservedly combines the most disparate elements. Indifferent to particulars, it plays with its own extraordinariness by seizing anything from everywhere that can underscore its high-spiritedness and life-embracing pluckiness.

Böcklin created imaginary hybrid forms whose motifs comprised vegetal and animal, human and mechanical elements—and these hybrid forms would be compounded by ambiguities and categorical uncertainties, liminal forms that exist at the boundaries between the real and the imaginary realms, between the domains of the sacred and the base, the profound and the superficial. The unfathomability of these liminal forms, which imparted to them some of the effects of the sublime, was multiplied by the use of chance whose result was to make the forms seem all the more shocking, because unexpected.

I should develop that connection, too, as the Comic Grotesque fed into the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement, whose relation to photography is clear. But it will not develop that them, but simply leave it as a suggestive line in a sketch. Instead I shall pass on directly to the Surrealist's interest in photography and then to a Surrealist artist whose interest in grotesqueries will be familiar to all, but whose interest in, and thoughts about, photography are less familiar. I refer to the Spanish artist, Salvador Dalí.

On the former matter, the Surrealist interest in photography, here is André Breton. The Cinema, Photography and 'the Marvellous' The Cinema, Photography and The Marvellous

As that great paeon to chance, *Nadja* makes obvious, the Surrealists' methods of seizing on chance were many and various. Sometimes they were as simple as that involved in their customary manner of viewing movies: Surrealists made a practice of dropping in at a movie theatre, ignorant of what was being shown or when the feature began, watching the movie until they became bored, then walking to another, nearby movie theatre (they practised this form of movie-going first in Nantes, at the time a relatively small town, then in Paris's Quartier Latin, where movie theatres were close to one another), watching whatever happened to be on offer there, at the particular moment that they walked in on it, staying until they were bored, leaving, going to another theatre, repeating the behaviour. In this way they used chance to construct a movie out of fragments of various films that happened to be showing at the theatres they dropped into. André Breton described the practice and outlined its consequences:

I have never deplored the incontestable baseness of cinematographic production except on an altogether secondary, subordinate level. When I was 'at the cinema age' (it should be recognised that this age exists in life—and that it passes) I never began by consulting the amusement pages to find out what film might chance to be the best, nor did I find out the time the film was playing. I agreed wholeheartedly with Jacques Vaché in appreciating nothing so much as dropping into the cinema when whatever was playing was playing, at any point in the

show, and leaving at the first hint of boredom—of surfeit—to rush off to another cinema where we behaved in the same way, and so on (obviously this practice would be too much of a luxury today). I have never known anything more *magnetising*: it goes without saying that more often than not we left our seats without even knowing the title of the film which was of no importance to us anyway. On a Sunday several hours sufficed to exhaust all that Nantes could offer us: the important thing is that one came out ‘charged’ for a few days; as there had been nothing deliberated about our actions qualitative judgments were forbidden.

. . . .
We saw in the cinema then, such as it was, a lyrical substance simply begging to be hauled in *en masse*, with the aid of chance. I think that what we valued most in it, to the point of taking no interest in anything else, was its *power to disorient*.

Disorientation is a state of mind receptive to *le merveilleux*. Breton argued that the cinema’s power to disorient made the cinema an apparatus that could create the conditions that open one towards the marvellous; hence the cinema auditorium is virtually a sacred space, in which a mystery unfolds itself. It makes the cinema the top art (“I have never known anything more *magnetising*” and “what we valued most in [the cinema], *to the point of taking no interest in anything else*, was its power to disorient [emphasis mine]”). The cinema auditorium is a place dedicated to a modern mystery.

The *marvel*, beside which the merits of a given film count for little, resides in the devolved faculty of the first-comer to abstract himself from his own life when he feels like it, at least in big cities, as soon as he passes through one of the muffled doors that give on to the blackness. From the instant he takes his seat to the moment he slips into the fiction evolving before his eyes, he passes through a critical point as captivating and imperceptible as that uniting waking and sleeping (the book and even the play are incomparably slower in producing this release). . . . What radiation, what waves, perhaps not resisting attempts to map them out, permit this unison? . . . It is a way of going to the cinema the way others go to church and I think that, from a certain angle, quite independently of what is playing, it is there that the only *absolutely modern* mystery is celebrated.

Further, Breton notes, the cinema possesses a unique ability to reveal and make concrete the working of desire.

As to this mystery there is no doubt that the principal contributions made to it are love and desire. . . . What is most specific of all the means of the camera is obviously the power to make concrete the forces of love which, despite everything, remain deficient in books, simply because nothing in them can render the seduction or distress of a glance or certain feelings of priceless giddiness. The radical powerlessness of the plastic arts in this domain goes without saying (one imagines that it has not been given to the painter to show us the radiant image of a kiss). The cinema is alone in extending its empire there, and this alone would be enough for its consecration.

The last two sentences, of course, amount to a celebration of the cinema as the *ottima arte*, the top art.

The cinema is disposed to chance—indeed of all the arts, it is the art that seems most readily—and unavoidably—open to influences from beyond the artist’s intention. Epstein’s earliest work was an essay he published in 1921, at the age of twenty-four, *La Poésie aujourd’hui, un nouvel état d’intelligence*, an essay on modern literature (that tellingly included a chapter titled “The Cinema and Literature Today”). His next small book-pamphlet incorporated

placards, photomontages and texts was titled *Bonjour Cinéma*. A major theme of the book is the relation between chance (overcoming intention) and the marvellous. Epstein presciently saw this as the future of art (André Breton and the Surrealists would soon take it up). He also realized the cinema's nature brought non-intention and the marvellous into an intimate intercourse.

The artist is reduced to pressing a button. And his intentions come to grief on the hazards. . .

The true poet—Apollinaire has said it well—is not assassinated [by this]. I do not understand why some turn aside when they are stretched towards this new splendour. They complain of impurities. But is the cutting of diamonds so new a thing? I redouble my love. A sense of expectancy grows. Sources of vitality spring up in corners one thought exhausted and sterile. The epidermis reveals a tender luminosity. The cadence of crowd scenes is a song. Take a look. A man walking, any man, a passer-by: today's reality preserved for an eternity by art. A movable embalming. . .

But the supernatural. The cinema is essentially supernatural. Everything is transformed through the four *photogénies*. Raymond Lulle [the alchemist!] never knew a finer powder for projection and emotion. All volumes are displaced and reach flashpoint. Life recruits atoms, Brownian motion as sensual as the hips of a woman or young man. The hills harden like muscles. The universe is on edge. The philosopher's light. The atmosphere is full of love.

This sounds much like the Breton of the period of *hasard objectif*, when Hegelian ideas rose to ascendance in the Surrealist movement. It is also a celebration of the cinema as the top art: "The cinema is essentially supernatural." The other arts should be so reconfigured that they take on attributes of the cinema. That is what the Surrealist programme amounted to.

Even before he joined the Surrealist movement, Salvador Dalí was taken with the potential of the cinema: moving to Paris and associating with Surrealists only increased that interest. Photography and film represented to him a mechanical means of ensuring a connection between the poetic image and the world of brute, external fact—he used Le Corbusier's assertion that "the strongest of all is the poetry of facts" as an epigraph to his "Poetry of Standardized Utility." A year earlier he wrote "La fotografía, pura creació de l'esperit" ("Photography: Pure creation of the spirit," September 1927). I suspect that photography is the last art that most people would consider the pure creation of the spirit; but the basis of Dalí's assertion is that reality (i.e., what the camera can convey) is created through subjective interpretation—that belief lay behind Dalí's use of double images and was the kernel of his paranoiac-critical method. Dalí's writings in this period stressed an anti-art animus and he viewed photography and film as creative media that were not tainted by traditional norms. Dalí published a sort of manifesto in the October 1927 issue of *Ciutat*, titled "Film-Arte Fil Antiartístico" (Art Films, Anti-Artistic Thread [or Anti-Artistic Spook in *Oui*]), and illustrated with a Dalí painting from that year, *La miel es más dulce que la sangre* (Honey Is Sweeter Than Blood).

Beware! Many birds are going to fly away.

Like the bird of photography, you don't have to go hunting far afield for the bird of film; it is everywhere, anywhere in the most unsuspected places. The bird of film, however, is of such a subtle and perfect mimeticism that it remains invisible in its flights across naked objectivity. For this reason, discovering it is a matter of high poetic inspiration.

There is not a single hunt more spiritual than the one for this bird whose presence we cannot perceive. No hunt less bloody and more sanguinary; at the same time it is almost a game: the bird is caught, trapped in the dark room and once again liberated by the crystal lens,

free of anilines and with chloroformed wings.

If we listen, we will hear the black and white music of these birds' different velocities as they exit through the electric Milky Way of the projector. Then it will be sweet to see how the most dizzying flights are a succession of calms and most inspired beating of wings, a series of anaesthetized lulls; each new light, a new anaesthesia.

The light of cinema is both very spiritual and very physical. Cinema seizes unusual objects and beings that are more invisible and ethereal than the apparitions of spiritualist chiffons. Every cinema image is the capture of an unquestionable spirituality.

The tree, the street, the rugby match are transsubstantiated in a disturbing way in film; a vertigo at once gentle and measured leads us to specific sensual transformations.

The passage starts out comparing photography and film, praising film as the superior art. What makes film superior is that it is invisible—we can't see film at work because it shows us the object so accurately (it is "of such a subtle and perfect mimeticism that it remains invisible"). From there, the language becomes one of celebration of the cinema, presenting it as the *ottima arte*, the top art. What is more, the passage celebrates the cinema, this great new art, for its power to convert base matter into spiritual forms—into spiritual gold: "The tree, the street, the rugby match are transsubstantiated in a disturbing way in film."

Dalí's statement is replete with alchemical images. The image of the bird is common in alchemy, for it represents the soul: the soul aspires to fly upwards, free of the restraints of the earthbound body and of the earthbound senses. It seeks the heavenly light, but in the end must return to the earthly body. Focused on the mechanics of the alchemical operations, the soul enters a meditative state: it reaches the near limits of the spiritual world (but rarely beyond), then brings what it has experienced back to the physical world. The bird mediates between the physical and the spiritual worlds (just as Dalí's text has it). He writes of cinema's flickering light as a *coincidentia oppositorum*—it is sweet to see how the most dizzying flights are a succession of calms and most inspired beating of wings.

Dalí's text speaks of trapping the bird in a dark room, until it is liberated by the crystal lens. Alchemy teaches the need to bury the *materia prima*, after it has been separated into philosophical mercury and philosophical sulphur, in a dark chamber, to allow putrefaction to occur. In the process, the male and female principles of that *materia prima* are, alchemists said, killed. Though the process is described as killing, what it culminates in is the appearance of the philosopher's stone, the first step towards a liberated being. In this text, Dalí wrote of the birds being kept in a dark room, only to emerge liberated by crystal lenses—of course, these lenses are not made of glass, but of crystal: this only makes sense, given their role in the alchemical process.

Dalí maintained a deep interest in alchemy. One of his most famous paintings is called *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937). The painting shows Narcissus sitting in a pool, gazing down. To the left is a decaying stone figure that corresponds closely to him but is perceived quite differently; as a hand holding up a bulb or egg from which a narcissus flower is growing. In the background, at the middle of the painting, between the two hands, a group of naked figures can be seen, while a third Narcissus-like figure appears on the horizon. The egg is so common an alchemical image that there is a name for it, the "ovum philosophicum," or philosophical egg. In alchemical iconography, it symbolizes the alchemical vessel, which in turn symbolized the self, as a vessel into which one must search. During the alchemical process, the subject, hermetically sealed in the philosophical egg, would go through a symbolic death and rebirth. When the philosophical egg was cracked, a new mystical substance emerged, an elixir that acted as a catalyst to improve any substance with which it came into contact. This substance was sometimes called the philosopher's stone, which could change lead into gold (the alchemical transformation stands for the transformation by which an ordinary person is

transformed into an enlightened master, a transformation that is the result of the journey within the self).

Dalí's references to alchemy in his writings include mention of the alchemical master Raymond Lully, who, he noted, was, like himself, a native of Catalonia: "The Catalan philosopher Raymond Lully, an alchemist . . . inspires me. Like him, I believe in the transmutation of bodies." Milly Heyd, in her commentary on *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, made the acute proposal that

Dalí sees himself as having been born in the shadow of his brother's death from meningitis at the age of seven. Named "Salvador" after his brother, Dalí had to live with his brother's shadow, and felt as if he were his double. The first chapter of the *Unspeakable Confessions* is called "How to Live with Death" and opens with the depiction of Dalí's own death. The various shadows, the hidden face, and the reflection in the water [in *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus*] are but shadows of the dead brother haunting Dalí wherever he goes, trying to capture and pull him down to the kingdom of Hades.

She goes on to point out the more general truth to which the painting opens us.

In 1936 the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who was closely related to Dalí, developed his ideas about paranoia and shadows reflected in the mirror. In what he calls "the stage of mirror" the child looks at himself in the mirror without realizing that it is he. But this image allows him to develop the sense of bodily unity (countering the fantasies of the dismembered body). Yet, this relation between the subject and his mirror-image means death, since the subject identifies with someone who is not his own self. Narcissus' fascination with his reflection in the water hints at his death. Dalí's picture also captures the above mentioned tension between the unified personality and the dismembered or disjointed figure.

The alchemical process, as we shall have reason to note again, has deep similarities with the process of analysis.

Dalí believed that photography and film are, when handled well, anti-art forms, because they are direct and immediate—these attributes of the two media were important to him, since he hankered to create the impression that he painted in a direct and natural manner. He expounded his belief that his painting is a instantaneous photography, done by hand, and presenting an imaginary and irrational reality for decades; in the 1960s, he told an interviewer:

My sole pictorial ambition is to materialize by means of the most imperialist rage of precision the images of concrete irrationality. The world of imagination and the world of concrete irrationality may be as objectively evident, consistent, durable, as persuasively, cognoscitively [sic], and communicably thick as the exterior world of phenomenal reality. The important thing, however, is that which one wishes to communicate: the irrational concrete subject. The pictorial means of expression are concentrated on the subject. The illusionism of the most abjectly arriviste and irresistible mimetic art, the clever tricks of a paralyzing foreshortening, the most analytically narrative and discredited academicism, can become sublime hierarchies of thought when combined with new exactness of concrete irrationality as 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. Instantaneous photography, in color and done by hand, of superfine, extravagant, extra-plastic, extra-pictorial, unexplored, deceiving, hypernormal, feeble images of concrete irrationality—images momentarily unexplainable and irreducible either by systems of logical intuition or by rational mechanisms.

Dalí, in sum, maintained the primacy of vision, because what is present to vision (especially vision engendered by the detailed image) is presented to it with an immediacy that compels assent—and in this Dalí was simply extending the Surrealist conception of the poetic image.

Finally, he considered film and photography as media that could accommodate a “documentary” approach, for which he conceived a great interest, as he hoped that such an approach might serve him as a means of working himself out of the impasse into which, by the latter half of 1928, his painting had led him. In “La fotografía, pura creació de l’esperit,” he celebrated the ability of the lens to reveal the (unconscious) poetry of manufactured goods. The lens, he said, “can caress the cold delicacy of white toilets; follow the languid slowness of aquaria; analyse the most subtle articulations of electrical apparatuses with all the unreal precision of its own magic.” Dalí related the virtues of the photographic lens to its ability to make us see objects anew: “We trust in the new types of imagination, born from simple objective transpositions. But the things we are capable of dreaming lack originality. The miracle is produced with the same exactitude that is required of banking and commercial operations. . . . Photographic imagination, your brain waves are faster and more agile than the murky processes of the subconscious!”

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 forming the object that one sees (and that bridges between the subjective and objective realms). This is the gist of comment, in the same essay, that it only requires a small pressure from the fingertip to “bring forth from the pure crystalline objectivity a spiritual bird of thirty-six shades of grey.” He reiterated the point: “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 anaesthetic look of the naked eye, without eyelashes, of Zeiss”

Dalí stressed the ability of photography and film to reveal the marvellous—that is, to apprehend surreality. Film and photography show that surreality is not distinguishable from reality nor reality from surreality. This happens largely through the change of scale that is such a common means by which photography transforms reality, for such changes “provokes strange resemblances, unimaginable (though existing) analogies.” He waxed poetic on the ability of enlargement to reveal the marvellous that inhabits 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.

In “La fotografía, pura creació de l’esperit,” Dalí also stressed that the photograph is “quicker and more agile in ‘finds’ than the confused processes in the unconscious.” He was quite taken not only with the photograph’s ability to apprehend surreality but also with its ability to 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.” This was a direct attack on Charles Baudelaire’s artistic theory that had won such widespread allegiance. The Renaissance understood the work of art as an illusory form; later the work of art was understood as the factual description of objective reality; with Baudelaire, the work of art shifted, to occupy a new, third realm that

mediated between the outer world of phenomena and the inner world of the spirit. Through the magical operation of the imagination, in Baudelaire's view, artists became creators who could stir new responses in the beholder. No longer were artists merely skilful delineators of the visible world, they were now the creators of, and guides to, a completely new realm. The imagination was paramount.

Then again, Baudelaire was sceptical of photography's claims to the status of an art. Dalí's idea that photography gains an advantage through 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.

In bypassing the imagination, the lens's transforming power resembles that of another, more renowned Surrealist method, *viz.*, automatism. Automatism moves immediately to the phase of objectification, without the subjective representation being fully elaborated (if at all). The making of *cadavres exquis* provides another example of a creative method that bypasses imagination, for in that process there is no subjective precursor for the resultant image or poem (except insofar as it is reasonable to speak of an objectively ideal composite image, which each of the participants apprehended partially and realized partially). The unimaginative lens transforms the object, revealing its marvels, through a miraculous process that constitutes an exact analogy to other Surrealist practices, Dalí realized.

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, however. With this change, photography's role became subsumed in a more general effort to gain "knowledge of reality" (*conocimiento de la realidad*): in an article "Realidad y Sobrerrealidad" (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 automatism and through other means of investigating the subconscious. This philosophy of immanence, to which the paranoiac-critical years saw him increasingly committed, led Dalí to understand 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 a means to assist us in seeing that diverse phenomena belong together in one coherent system, 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 of some domain). Dalí concluded that photography is the best means for creating this documentary inventory; in "La data fotográfica" ("Photographic data"), 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.