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a good muse needs no head - headless women in surrealist art

● Max Ernst titled his first collage book from 1929 *La femme 100 têtes*, which phonetically translates into either *La femme cent têtes* (*Woman with 100 Heads*) or *La femme sans tête* (*Woman with No Head*). Both interpretations fit the Surrealist vision of women as unknowable beings - *femmes fatales* as dangerous as Hydras with a hundred heads - or possessed mediums who hear voices imperceptible to men, mad-women who have lost their senses, women without heads.

The first generation of Surrealists, born at the end of the 19th century, inherited from their ancestors a tradition of presenting women in the erotic and decadent disguises of vamps, sirens, and Salomés, predators in men's lives. To this old-fashioned model the Surrealists opposed a new ideal of a creature full of no longer rapacious but passive sex, tempting with her accessibility and existing only to be looked at. In Surrealist paintings, photographs, collages, and novels - literally or metaphorically - women are devoid of faces or even deprived of heads.

Faceless dolls can easily become the object of idealistic and egocentric amour fou. Nusch Eluard was the most perfect incarnation of a Surrealist muse: the indulgent wife of a poet, a *femme-enfant*, and a lover for whom Paul Eluard wrote love poems; an eager participant in Surrealist games (from *Exquisite Corpse* to experiments involving exchanging partners); an artist who, while remaining in the shadow of famous men, made her own collages; a

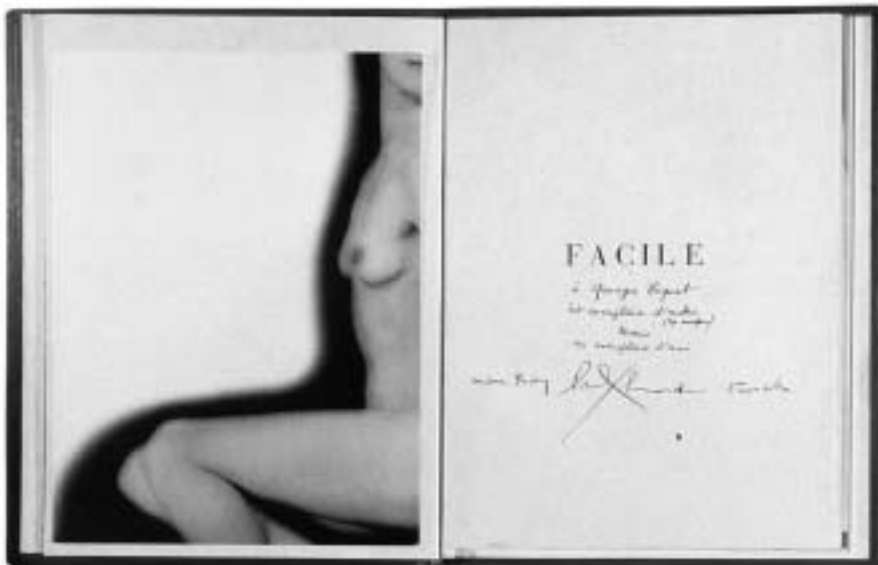
patient model of Man Ray and Picasso. When a young Nusch arrived in Paris from Berlin, she earned her life as a walk-on in a Guignol theatre, roving the streets with a black mask on her face. That was how Eluard saw her for the first time: a passerby with a covered face, met by chance on a street. A Surrealist master of ceremony could not have created a more perfect beginning.

Eluard wrote about Nusch in *La vie immédiate* (1932) and dedicated to her two collections of love poems: *Facile* from 1935 and *Les yeux fertiles* from 1936. *Facile* was illustrated with eleven solarized portraits of Nusch made by Man Ray. Each photograph shows her lithe body in a new perspective, as if flowing in an unreal space whose unreality is heightened by a soft background, dark outlines and contrasts between shadow and light. Nusch's body becomes an abstract form that brings to mind a geometric figure or a gigantic letter. None of the photographs shows her figure in its entirety - all are headless, with the exception of one where the head is turned away from the viewer. Soaring into the Surrealist abyss, Nusch points the way to the Wonderland of poetry at the price of impersonating an enigmatic fairy with a forgotten face.

In Max Ernst's early painting *Celebes the Elephant* (1921), the strange form of a mythical elephant (possessing a surprising resemblance to the corn silos of South Sudan) is shown in the background of a small feminine figure painted at the bottom of the canvas. Neither a dummy nor a plaster cast nor the skin removed from a living woman, the silhouette is shown pointing at the elephant or beckoning it to follow her. The Dadaists and Surrealists found in anatomical atlases their beloved mixture of the grotesque and scientific precision. Ernst heightens the morbid effect of his pseudo-scientific image by depriving the figure of its head. René Magritte in several paintings - among them *The Light of Coincidences* from 1933 - performs a similar skinning and decapitation.

Women painted, sculpted, or photographed by the Surrealists might find their disembodied head trapped under a bell jar, its eyes blindfolded (as in Man Ray's photograph *Homage to Marquis de Sade*), or locked in a cage, its mouth plugged with a flower (like André Masson's female mannequin created for the

1. Man Ray, *Solarized Portrait of Nusch Eluard*, Illustration for Paul Eluard's *Facile*, 1935



International Surrealist Exhibition in 1938.) Perhaps it is no coincidence that the most often quoted still from *An Andalusian Dog* shows a scene of aggression performed on a female face: her eye being cut with a razor.

The Surrealists often reduced female bodies to their elements. In the collage titled *The Immaculate Conception the Third Time Failed* from *La femme 100 têtes*, two scientists perform an experiment on gigantic female legs locked in a glass-case. Hans Bellmer experimented on the “essential core” deprived of limbs and head, changing the body of a doll - or of Unika Zürn - into a piece of meat girded with string. He reduced a body to its elements and reassembled them in a different order. In his *Notes and Fragments About* he wrote that the body can be compared to a sentence which invites play, whose hidden meaning is uncovered through its restructuring into infinite series of anagrams.

In *L'Anatomie de l' image* Bellmer fantasized about clothes made of flesh. In *Philosophy in the Boudoir* from 1947 and *In Memoriam Mack Sennett* from 1936, Magritte painted nightgowns with realistic breasts and wooden hangers instead of heads. Magritte's figures with cloth-covered heads probably have their origin in the suicide of his mother, whose body was fished out of a river, her head wrapped in a nightgown. These images, however, also belong to the typical repertoire of topics of the Surrealists.

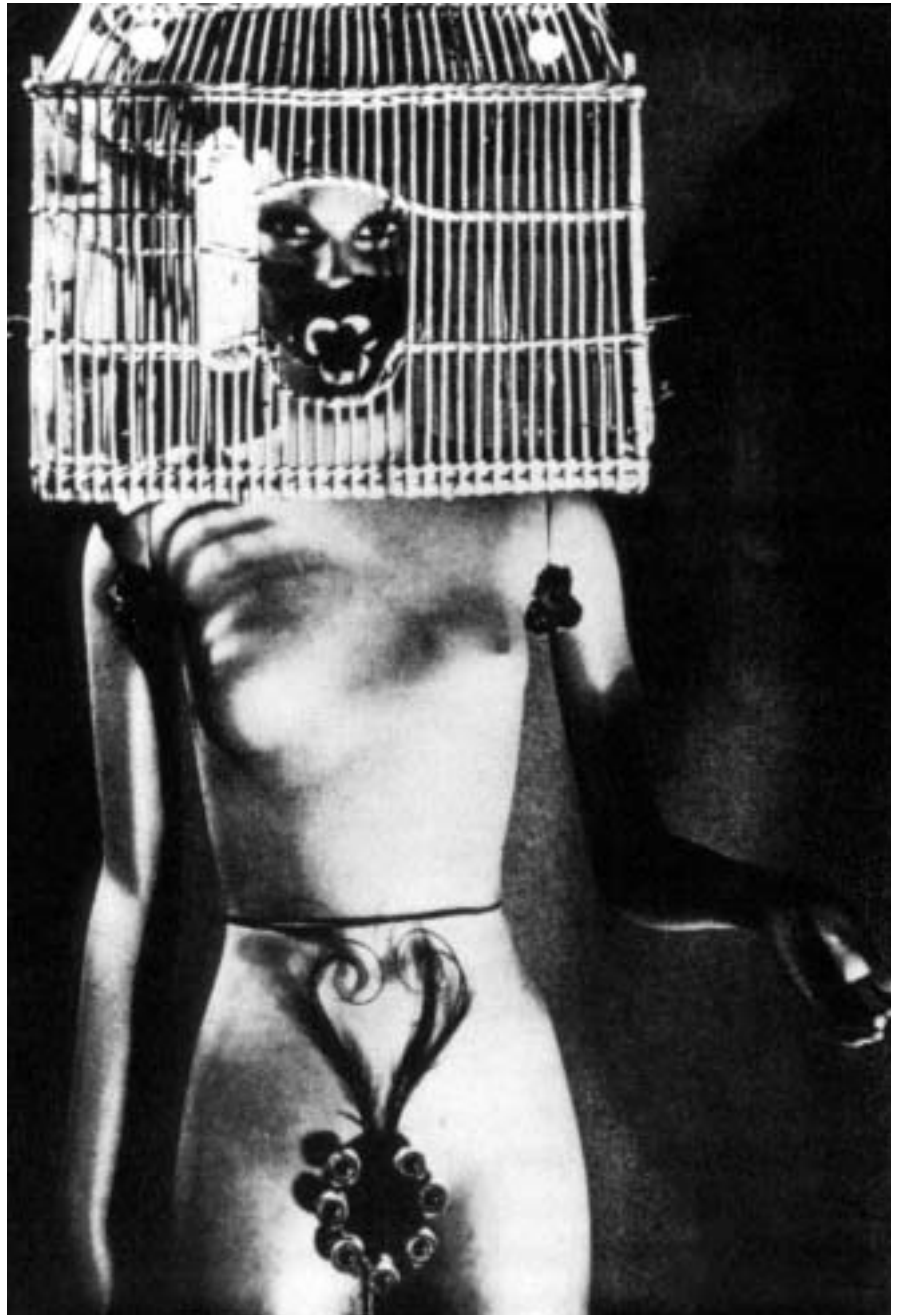
In *The Surrealist Look. An Erotics of Encounter*, Mary Ann Caws notices that Man Ray's photograph of Lee Miller's *Neck* from 1929 looks more like a penis than a female body part.¹ Man Ray's models, often deprived of heads, arms and legs, lose their identity in favor of a sex appeal devoid of a gaze. In his film *Le retour è la raison* from 1923, Kiki's torso is cut across by a series of vertical lines, shadows cast by a curtain which vibrate and resemble ripples on the water. Human skin imitates an abstract pattern or the fur of a wild animal (as in the painting by René Magritte where a naked woman is surprised to notice the tiger stripes which cover her body.) The presence of a face might disturb this ambiguous effect.

In a photograph from 1929, a headless body covered with shiny, tight cloth tempts through its availability. It exists to be looked at. In another photograph from

1931 shadows cast by Venetian blinds “tattoo” Lee Miller's torso shown frontally, and consciously exposing itself to the camera. The silver print *Electricity* gives a different impression: zigzagging stripes of light cross the duplicated, overlapping torsos of the model. The posture of Venus de Milo - who much as Nike of Samothrace lacks a head - suggests submission to the eroticism of electricity. *Restored Venus* from 1936, a silver print of a plaster cast wound in string, plays with classical tradition and presages

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¹ Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look. An Erotics of Encounter*, Cambridge-London: The MIT Press, 1999, p. 14.

2. André Masson, *Mannequin* created for the International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris in 1938





3. Man Ray, *Untitled*, 1929

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² Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, London: William Heinemann-New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1907, p. 286.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

Christo. The Louvre and what it contained was a constant stimulant to the imagination of the Surrealists.

At the beginning of the new century, as a result of expanding emancipation and the panic it provoked, Otto Weininger wrote in *Sex and Character*: "Women have no existence and no essence; they are not, they are nothing."² And further: "[...] it well may be asked if women are really to be considered human beings at all [...]?"³; "Is she then human, or an animal, or a plant?"⁴

According to Weininger, women are mindless and faceless. "[...] the female is soulless and possesses neither ego nor individuality, personality nor freedom, character nor will."⁵ Not only does she lack an

identity of her own, she dreams of becoming a sexual object shaped and used by man: "Woman is nothing but man's expression and projection of his own sexuality";⁶ "The relation of man to woman is simply that of subject to object. Woman seeks her consummation as the object";⁷ "Man is form, woman is matter";⁸ "Woman's deepest desire is to be formed by man, and so to receive her being."⁹

Like other thinkers of his time, Weininger saw in women essentially sexual creatures and credited them with possessing enormous sexual appetites: "[...] man possesses sexual organs; woman is possessed by hers."¹⁰ He suspects that every part of a woman's body engages in continuous copulation with the people and objects around it. "I have shown that woman is engrossed exclusively by sexuality, not intermittently, but throughout her life; that her whole being, bodily and mentally, is nothing but sexuality itself. I add, moreover, that woman is so constituted that her whole body and being remains continually in sexual congress with her environment, and that just as the sexual organs are the center of woman physically, so the sexual idea is at the center of her mental nature. [...] Coupling is the supreme good for the woman; she seeks to effect it always and everywhere."¹¹

Half a century later, in his painting *Rape*, René Magritte illustrated Weininger's theory describing a female identity subordinated to eroticism. Magritte transferred the geography of the female body to a woman's face and reduced the features of the victim to erogenous zones as seen in her by an aggressor. *Rape* - shown for the first time in 1934 at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in a separate room with other "pornographic works" - was reproduced for the cover of Breton's *What is Surrealism? (Qu'est-ce que le Surréalisme?)* published the same year. A year later, the cover of *Bulletin International du Surréalisme*, no. 3, was adorned with another of Magritte's paintings in which he plays with anatomical transpositions. This time the image was equally ambiguous, showing a naked female torso with a skull instead of head.

The Surrealists were not the first to dream up such erotic hybrids. In 1899, Remy de Gourmont described in *Le Songe d'une femme, roman familier* a macabre vision built of female torsos, breasts instead of eyes, and a womb in place of the mouth.

In the manual *Nos Filles - qu'en ferons-nous?*, published in 1898, Hugues Le Roux discussed the crisis of the institution of marriage caused by the new type of emancipated woman for whom head means more than body. In the chapter *L'Attrait physique*, devoted to how to choose a wife, he criticized young women who attract attention not because of their figure, which serves as a sign of their preparation for motherhood, but rather because of the intelligence evident in their face. He imagined an ideal partner as a reincarnation of Nike of Samothrace:

“We have completely forgotten a lesson taught us by ancient culture which did not subordinate the body to the head, and to prove its indifference towards the head handed us down the headless Nike which does not provoke a longing for the gaze in any lover of beauty!”¹²

Villiers de L'Isle Adam - author of *L'Eve future* (1886), a novel, valued by Apollinaire, about an android modeled after the figure of a real woman but having a much more perfect character - in *Contes cruels* described a husband who desired his wife only when imagining her decapitated.

In a story titled *Kochanka Szamoty* (*Szamota's Lover*) by Polish writer Stefan Grabinski, written at a time when Surrealism was maturing in Paris, the narrator has a love affair with the phantom of a dead beauty. Hypnotized by the gaze of a Medusa's head hanging on the wall, he does not notice the ghostly nature of his lover though sometimes he sees her “as if she was dancing the dance of seven veils or she belonged to a Cubist painting. Often she looks like an unfinished statue [...]”.¹³ He is worried only by her tendency to cover her face: “Jadwiga likes exceedingly to shroud her face with a sort of Greek veil made of dazzlingly white, thick cloth. I hate this mask! If at least she used it to cover only her hair and the back of her head, but she cloaks behind it her alabaster forehead, jealously hides from me a part of her face, conceals her lips, her eyes [...]”.¹⁴ Parallel to the woman imagined by Weininger, Jadwiga consists only of her sex: “In vain I searched for her lips, I tried to enfold her in my arms - to no avail. I started to run my shaking hands over the pillow, to slide them along her body. I found only shawls, cloths... It is as if she has locked herself in the center of her sex, depriving me of everything else [...]”.¹⁵ In a dramatic finale the



4. Hans Bellmer, *Doll*, 1938

terrified lover finds in his bed - in place of his mysterious beauty - a Hans Bellmer Doll or a victim of Jack the Ripper: “In front of me, in a turmoil of lace and satin, lay a female trunk shamelessly open and naked to the line of the belly, a trunk devoid of breasts, arms, head [...]”.¹⁶ This could just as well be a description of the photograph, reproduced in the periodical “*Minotaure*” published by Bataille, of the body of a prostitute murdered by Jack the Ripper.

The Surrealists were the ones to discover the photographer Eugène Atget, master of finding the poetic in the everyday urban scenery of Paris of the end of the 19th and the first quarter of the 20th century. Atget documented Paris at such early hours that in his photographs the city is deserted. Passers-by are rarely visible, statues and shop window mannequins taking over their role. Atget's most famous and most often reproduced work shows a row of corsets in a shop window. This photograph acted upon the Surrealist imagination for several reasons: it brought to mind the fashion of Victorian era, an era of which the

¹² Hugues Le Roux, *Nos Filles - Qu'en ferons-nous?*, Calmann-Lévy, 1898, after: Mireille Dottin-Orsini, *Cette femme qu'ils disent fatale. Textes et images de la misogynie fin-de-siècle*, Grasset, 1993, p. 163.

¹³ Stefan Grabinski, *Kochanka Szamoty*, in: Stefan Grabinski, *Kartki ze znalezionego pamietnika*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1980, p. 404.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 401-402.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 406.



5. Jacques André-Boiffard, *Untitled*, c. 1930

¹⁷ Philippe Soupault, *Last Nights of Paris*, translated by William Carlos Williams, Cambridge: Exact Change, 1992, p. 23.

¹⁸ Michel Leiris, 'Le "Caput Mortuum" ou la femme de l'alchimiste', *Documents*, ser. 2, no.8, 1930, p. 25, in: Ted Gott, *Lips of Coral. Sex and Violence in Surrealism*, in: *Surrealism. Revolution by Night*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1993, p. 136.

Surrealists believed themselves to be rebellious children; like other photographs by Atget, it showed objects detached from their function and thus surrounded by an aura of mystery; it documented urban life through association with the important daily activity of window shopping; it presented the essence of femininity exhibited to the gazes of passers-by. In addition to all of this, it announced the dreams of the Surrealists about cutting and decapitating painted and photographed female bodies.

In a drawing from 1923 Max Ernst showed a decapitated female body. A collage entitled *Open your bag, my good man* from *La femme 100 têtes*, shows a man à

la Fantomas fleeing the scene of a crime he has committed, taking with him a part of his victim's body. In his novel *Last Nights of Paris* written in 1928, Philippe Soupault wrote: "[...] it so happened that at this time the discovery of bags full of limbs, carefully sawed off and chopped up, was an almost daily occurrence; they were found in various spots - in the Saint-Martin canal, in the portals of churches, or in ordinary entryways. What seemed especially remarkable was that, when the body fragments were inventoried, the heads or hands of the victims were found regularly to be missing."¹⁷ The Surrealists' search for the erotic dimension of crimes, liberating the imagination from everyday limitations, their fascination with de Sade, Jack the Ripper, and the Papin sisters - who murdered their mistresses in a particularly cruel way - had to influence their art.

In the last issue of the magazine *Documents*, edited by Bataille and published in the years 1929-1930 following the collapse of *La Révolution surréaliste*, Michel Leiris published an essay about eroticism and sadism titled *Le "caput mortuum" ou la femme de l'alchimiste*. It was illustrated with the photographs of Jacques-André Boiffard, whose works were often reproduced in this publication, of a female head in a leather mask (the photograph with metal collar is sometimes attributed to the American writer and anthropologist William S. Seabrook, who offered them to Michel Leiris). About these photographs Leiris wrote:

"It is not a question of a particular person, but of Woman *in general*, who can easily stand for the whole of nature, the whole external world that we are able to dominate. Over and above the fact that she suffers beneath the leather mask, that she is harassed and mortified (which must satisfy our desires for power and our fundamental cruelty), her head - the sign of her individuality and her intelligence - is thus affronted and denied. Before her, the male partner is no longer in the presence of 'God's creature,' whose face, from the summit of her shoulders, seems made to contemplate the stars or some other symbol of elevation and purity; rather, he finds himself in a position to make use of (and with what sacrilegious pleasure!) a simple and universal erotic mechanism."¹⁸

Jacques-André Boiffard made two similar photographs in 1930, both of them

similarly sadistic in nature: in one the instrument of torture is a tight leather mask and a chain tied around the neck of the female model; in the other, the source of suffering is the mask and handcuffs on the hands of the model, who wears long gloves. It is interesting to compare Boiffard's works with a photograph made twenty years earlier by a British fashion photographer, the Baron Adolph de Meyer, who, with his stylish compositions of elegant models, during the first fifteen years of our century took the lead among photographers for magazines like *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* and *Harper's Bazaar*. *Dance Study* from 1912, presenting a female figure wearing a mask, is his only known nude.

The dancer's mask resembles the masks worn by gang members in Louis Feuillade's films from 1913-1916, *Fantomas* and *Vampires*, which were adored by the Surrealists. But in contrast to the bandits' masks, this one not only covers the face but caricatures it as well: the wide-spread eyes, aggressively painted lips, exaggeratedly large nose constitute an unexpected contrast to the uncovered body and "tame" its nudity. The photograph also lacks the sadism of Surrealist works.

Max Ernst's collage entitled *Rome*, from his book *La femme 100 têtes*, shows the church officials walking under a headless and naked female figure, which floats in the air above the head of the pope. The pose of a drunken man in the foreground - his bottle aimed in the direction of the flying nude - introduces an erotic tone. Robert Belton in *The Beribboned Bomb. The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist Art*¹⁹ interprets this collage in line with Ernst's anticlericalism: the nude replaces the altar and the drunkard plays the role of a Dionysian celebrant. A photograph by Man Ray shows the Surrealist group in their Parisian Surrealist Headquarters, gathered under a headless female dummy that is suspended from the ceiling in a position similar to that of the nude in Ernst's collage. If a love for such images were not inherent in Surrealist aesthetics, one could suppose that Ernst was inspired to represent the Surrealist pope and his court consisting of Vatican personalities as he did because of this frequently encountered dummy.

In a collage entitled *Paris - swamp of dreams* from the same book, Belton sees allusions to 1789 and to the guillotine.²⁰

The Surrealists liked to compare the French Revolution to their own revolt. The gaze of a woman tied to a wooden structure, arguments Belton, is turned to the Conciergerie that, during the Revolution, served as a prison for the condemned who waited there for their execution. In the vicinity there is a street called Le Regrattier, named after "les regrattiers" - sellers of salt, spices, coal, and the like, but readily associated with Le Regrattier, a treasurer of public funds executed by public hanging after the Revolution. The statue of Saint Nicolas which stands in a niche on the corner of quai Bourbon (the name of the royal family could be another allusion to the guillotine), like many other statues, was decapitated during the Revolution. But what is most interesting, and documented in Atget's photograph, is that Le Regrattier street had a nickname - *La femme sans tête* - originating from a sign depicting a woman with a glass in her hand.

According to Belton another clue to the meaning of the collage can be found in the book read by a bird (an allusion to Ernst's nickname - "The Bird Superior"?) entitled *Dictionary Véron*, which phonetically also translates into *vairon*: "eyes of different colours". Ernst repeatedly proved his love for language games. The eye symbolizes the vagina and, as Belton concludes, it explains the caption below the collage in which the headless woman is called an "eye without eyes". This analysis, although controversial, shows the interpretative potential of these images replete with Victorian aesthetics.

The paintings of René Magritte, the photographs of Man Ray, the collages of Max Ernst, the dolls of Hans Bellmer, are all products of a fascination with an impersonal female beauty and refer to - among other sources - late 19th century decadent novels and early 20th century postcards in which masked *femme fatales* play with male puppets. (The Surrealists, and Eluard especially, often gave evidence of their interest for old postcards.) In both art and literature at the turn of the century, as well as in Surrealist art, a man is a head, the nest of thought; a woman, on the other hand, is a body, the nest of the senses. This body sometimes dances appearing slowly from behind the seven veils, and sometimes hides its face behind the carnival masks celebrated by Sacher-Masoch.

In the 1898 novel *Woman and Puppet* by Pierre Louÿs, the beauty about whom

¹⁹ Robert Belton, *The Beribboned Bomb. The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist Art*, Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995, pp. 172-174.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 175-177.

the narrator is crazy consists of elements which do not make a whole. She even enumerates the pieces that make up her "I": "You have my breasts, you have my lips, you have my shapely legs, you have my pleasantly odorous hair, you have my body in your embrace and my tongue in my kisses. Isn't all this enough yet? Then it is not me whom you love, but only that which I refuse you?"²¹

Like in the paintings by Magritte, separate anatomical parts express more than a face of secondary importance. The legs and breasts steal mimicry and function from the head and live an independent, intense life: "Her lithe body was all expression. One felt that even when covering her face with a veil, one could guess her thoughts and she laughed with her legs as she spoke with her torso."²²

"Breasts are living things which have their infancy and their decline."²³

For the unfortunate admirer the face of the beloved is not only unimportant but also useless since it disturbs the pleasure of delighting in the rest. Like in *Le Songe d'une femme* by Gourmont, the body is provided with a gaze and filled with mimicry:

"Alas! my dear Sir, I have never seen her so beautiful! It wasn't her eyes and fingers only: her entire body was expressive like a face, more than a face, and her head, enveloped by her luxurious hair, rested on her shoulder, like a useless thing. There was a smile in the fold of her haunch, a flushing of cheeks, when she moved her abdomen; her breasts seemed to look straight ahead through two fixed, dark eyes. Never have I seen her so beautiful: the false folds of a garment alter the expression of a dancer and deviate in a counter-sense the line of exterior grace; but there, by a revelation, I saw the gestures, the shivering, the movements of the arms, of the feet, of the lithe body, of her muscular loins, moved voluptuously by a visible force: the very chief attraction of the dance, her agile little belly."²⁴

It is interesting that the decadent novel by Louÿs, who did not anticipate Surrealism, inspired two masterpieces of Surrealist cinema: the last visionary film made by Josef von Sternberg with Marlena Dietrich - *Devil is a Woman* from 1935, and the last film of Luis Buñuel - *That Obscure Object of Desire* from 1977.

In *Devil is a Woman* Dietrich's face, subjected to constant metamorphoses, is

surrounded and covered with masks, ribbons, veils, fans, combs and umbrellas. Each scene brings a different make up, hairstyle, and costume. Ephemeral and impossible to grasp, Conchita-Dietrich appears and disappears, never remaining in one place long enough to allow her mystery be fathomed.

In *That Obscure Object of Desire* Conchita's two faces successfully mislead the viewer. Does the casting of two actresses in one role suggest that Matthieu, tormented by his passion, sees his only object of desire in that which is well hidden under a chastity belt tied with a thousand knots? The viewer - at an advantage over the aging lover blind with obsession - soon notices an obvious difference between the cool, proud, blond and French Carole Bouquet, and the sensual, dark-haired and Spanish Angela Molina.

The title of the film refers to the sentence in the novel in which the hero admits, "I have always ignored these pale objects of desire"²⁵ (meaning that he prefers dark-haired mistresses). In Louÿs' novel, Concha - as befits an Andalusian - is dark-haired. Her double nature is expressed in the mystery that surrounds her and in the radical shift of her tastes from sadistic to masochistic. Before the eyes of her horrified conqueror, Venus in fur from the beginning of the book transforms into Nana who likes to get a good spanking from her lover.

It is the duality of the chief heroine that is the source of her power over the possessed puppet. The French and Spanish women - who recurrently appear and disappear unexpectedly in the life of the increasingly tired devotee - express the elusiveness of the obscure object of desire, its faceless non-definition, more effectively than one actress ever could. By doubling Conchita's character Buñuel not only expresses Matthieu's bewilderment but also ridicules the mythology of Pierre Louÿs' epoch: the myths of the *femme fatale* and of the female dichotomy between virgins and whores. The latter stereotype is visualized through the physical types of the two actresses and through the juxtaposition of the misogynistic statements of the butler (who compares women to sacks of waste) and Matthieu's belief in Conchita's virginity, which he is ready to take from her.

Caught dancing naked before a group of Japanese tourists, Concha rejects Matthieu's love in the name of preserving

²¹ Pierre Louÿs, *Woman and Puppet*, Chicago: Argus Books, 1930, p. 93.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

the integrity of her person because, as she says angrily, "I am I". It's an absurd statement - "she is not she" since she does not even know if she is a blond or a brunette. (In the novel Concha proclaims: "I am my own and I keep to myself. I have nothing more precious than myself, Mateo. Nobody is rich enough to buy me from myself."²⁶)

Buñuel used to say that *That Obscure Object of Desire* tells the story of how it is impossible to ever possess a woman's body. Conchita's face and body remain a mystery till the end: peeped at through a bedroom window, through the glass door of a dancing hall, through iron bars in Seville, they escape definition. Matthieu is stuck forever in his role of *voyeur* and the public never knows if this Janus' femme fatale is not a projection of his imagination.

In the visual arts, the image of the spectral woman has often been conveyed through transformation of her anatomy. Literature achieved a similar effect by bestowing on its heroines the characteristics of unreal creatures similar to shadows or hints rather than persons of flesh and blood. In her book *Surréalisme et sexualité*²⁷ Xavière Gauthier states that whereas Surrealist painters used to show women in the roles of victims or, less often, vampires, Surrealist poets and novelists idealized them by giving them the characteristics of muses, fairies, and ephemeral creatures who awake a silent admiration in men.

These faceless objects of desire, obscure since we don't know their features, were not only symbols of a passive carnality devoid of a reciprocal gaze, but also sources of mystery. Surrealist poets described enigmatic muses characterized above all by their elusiveness and lack of identity. André Breton's *Nadja* and Philippe Soupault's *Georgette* - compared to a shadow or a trace - incessantly escape definition by their authors.

The prostitute *Georgette*, heroine of Soupault's novel *Last Nights of Paris*, is a strange and fantastic character. The night and the eroticism of the city depend on her for their existence; and both the night and Paris change with her. Among many unfathomable characters, *Georgette* is the most ambiguous: a banal whore and a priestess of mysteries, *spiritus movens* of all events. In *Nadja*, Breton compared the Place Dauphine to the sexual organs of the city. Soupault identified Paris with *Georgette* and gave her an absolute power

over the maniacs of street roaming. From the first to the last page of the book, she is so impenetrable that the narrator doubts her existence:

"She seemed to be sleeping with open eyes. The precision of her queries and of her gestures at the moment of undressing made me doubt her existence. She folded her garments and placed them on the chair with the disconcerting rapidity of a juggler.

In all the exchanges which followed, she showed the same detached virtuosity.

Then she went on her way and left me at once astonished and reassured. I had almost the desire to applaud.

Reentering the cold streets I understood that the trap I had set for this woman had been most naïve. All too easy had it been for her to escape it. While I was clasping her in my arms, when I held my lips pressed against hers and bent my look to her eyes, she was living elsewhere, perhaps in another room, and only her shadow responded to my questions and my appeals.

I was not in despair but I realized with regret that the experiment attempted under such conditions had been useless. Impossible, assuredly, to drive off this shadow or to destroy it."²⁸

Georgette personifies a mystery: she resembles a shadow. And a shadow is devoid of a face.

"But what gave her person a charm that could be described as special was her resemblance to a shadow. One might well be astonished, and I never failed to be so, by her strange ability to escape judgment. She resembled at times gleams of light, at times their sisters the shadows. Before memory and words she was evasive as a fish. She withdrew, even while she remained present, or even when she became burdensome and immense.

I could not better picture her to myself than by the words: the smile of a shadow."²⁹

Georgette's face hides behind a mask or rather two masks: that of a tired prostitute, worn in daytime, and a nighttime mask of a queen who pulls the strings of all the intrigues governing Paris. This duality fascinates the men around her who know that every attempt to penetrate *Georgette's* secret is doomed to fail.

The enigmatic heroine of another Soupault novel, *Le coeur d'or* (*Golden Heart*), *Françoise*, shares with *Georgette* an

²⁶ Ibid., p. 119.

²⁷ Xavière Gauthier, *Surréalisme et sexualité*, Paris: Gallimard, 1971.

²⁸ Philippe Soupault, *Last Nights...*, pp. 76-77.

²⁹ Philippe Soupault, op. cit., p. 49.

elusiveness typical for surrealist muses: "People spoke about Françoise as if she existed only in a dream or in a novel. Then she would become HER. Famous and piteous at the same time, impossible to grasp, someone who disappears immediately when others talk with excessive respect or precision."³⁰

It is this very evasiveness that makes Françoise so attractive, but the narrator, like the narrator of *Last Nights of Paris*, dreams of penetrating her secret: "I imagine the shape of her breasts, the curve of her hips, her feet. With the utmost precision I try to qualify her skin. [...] I notice that I don't remember any more the sound of her voice and that I have forgotten the color of her hair."³¹

"I would like so much to be precise and to remember her smile [...]"³²

Like a creator of androids, he would like to create a woman without secrets: "This woman must exist, I have to create for her a face, a body. I must invent her."³³

In *Le mythe de la passante de Baudelaire à Mandiargues*,³⁴ Claude Leroy proves that Georgette's prototype was the same person who inspired Breton's Nadja - Léona - Camille - Ghislaine D., whom Soupault had probably met before Breton did.

About Nadja we know as little as we do about Georgette or Françoise. Like the heroine of Max Ernst's collage novel, Nadja is a headless woman in two senses: as a madwoman who has lost her head and thanks to her madness knows things which are incomprehensible to others, and as a phantom so intangible that there is no way to describe her. She is a state of mind rather than a person. Katharine Conley interprets her unexpected question about who has killed Medusa as an invitation to Breton to see himself as an inverted Perseus who would save Nadja from losing her head.³⁵

Breton is persuaded that Nadja lives only in his presence and - like the narrator of *Last Nights of Paris* - he is not sure how real she is. Surrealist muses are subject to strange laws: the existence of Paris depends on Georgette, Nadja depends on existence upon Breton. She herself confirms this in words given to her by her lord: "You are my master. I am only an atom respiring at the corner of your lips or expiring."³⁶

Soupault compared Georgette to a shadow, Nadja appears to Breton as a

trace: "If you desired it, for you I would be nothing, or merely a footprint"³⁷, she says. A trace, like a shadow, is neither blonde nor brunette.

The favorite mythical figure of Nadja - and simultaneously of many Surrealists - is Melusina:

"Nadja has also represented herself many times with the features of Melusina, who of all mythological personalities is the one she seems to have felt was closest to herself. I have even seen her try to transfer this resemblance to real life, insisting that her hairdresser spare no efforts to arrange her hair in five distinct strands in order to leave a star over her forehead."³⁸

Breton mentions that Max Ernst refused to paint Nadja's portrait because Madame Sacco had predicted that he would meet a woman named Nadja or Natasha who would harm him or his lover. The only existing effigies of Nadja are her symbolic self-portraits, which she began creating after she met Breton. Included in the book is their allegorical portrait as executed by Nadja. In it she shows herself as a siren (another allusion to Melusina) who, her back turned to the reader, holds a mysterious scroll in her hand and is ready to swim off the page, perhaps escaping an imperious monster who dominates the common space: "The drawing, dated November 18, 1926, consists of a symbolic portrait of the two of us: the siren, which is how she saw herself always, from behind and from an angle, holds a scroll in her hand, the monster with gleaming eyes has the front of its body caught in a kind of eagle-head vase, filled with feathers representing ideas."³⁹

The monster, shown *en face*, throws thunderbolts from his eyes. It is the strangest image of the Pope of the Surrealists.

A siren appears again in another drawing, this time with its face shown from the side but covered with something like huge parenthesis, a tiara or gigantic horns. She lays parenthesized or separated from the world, with horns which block out her face.

Breton wrote, "Worthy of note is the presence of the two animal horns toward the upper right edge, a presence which Nadja herself was not able to explain, for they always appeared this way to her, as if what they were attached to necessarily and obstinately masked the siren's face (this is particularly noticeable in the drawing on

³⁰ Philippe Soupault, *Le coeur d'or*, Paris: Grasset, 1927, p. 93.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 164.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

³⁴ Claude Leroy, *Le mythe de la passante de Baudelaire à Mandiargues*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999.

³⁵ Katharine Conley, *Automatic Woman. The Representation of Woman in Surrealism*, Lincoln-London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

³⁶ André Breton, *Nadja*, translated by Richard Howard, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1960, p. 116.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

the back of the postcard)" .⁴⁰

Nadja, a madwoman, a siren without a face, resembles the "unrecognized sphinxes" that people French cities, the "faceless monsters" Louis Aragon wrote about in *Paris Peasant*.⁴¹

The objectification of the female body in art and the mythologizing of the profession of prostitution in literature yield a similar result: the model becomes dehumanized, the literary character becomes unreal. Changed from a person into an object, locked into the role of *femme-enfant*, a madwoman, a medium - a Surrealist muse, if her face is visible for a moment, it is shown with clairvoyant eyes but closed mouth. Some female artists tried to break with this stereotype, others repeated it automatically and unconsciously. The *Inquiry About Love* conducted in 1929 (in which women's satisfaction was treated as something of little importance) shows how deeply ingrained were the misogynistic attitudes of the members of this men's club.

Among so many self-portraits of Frida Kahlo, Breton's favorite was the only one in which she is deprived of a face, showing instead her feet standing in a bathtub. Missing a face or having too many of them, Surrealist muses do not have any identity. In order to conserve an aura of mystery and to arouse the erotic fantasies of viewers and readers, they exist as incomplete beings.

P.S. In the 1920s the Surrealists were not the only ones to dream about faceless lovers. A story about machine-people without faces played an important role in the novel *Metropolis* by Thea von Harbou from 1927. It talks about two creatures of the future: mechanical workers who, because they lack a face, cannot look at the industrialists with their hungry gazes, and a mechanical woman, an android absolutely ideal since deprived of any pretensions towards independence.

The idealistic Freder gives advice to his father, the Master over Metropolis: "[...] see to it that the machine-man has no head or, at any rate, no face [...]"⁴²

False Maria, a female robot whose sole function is to deceive, receives a bunch of meaningful names even before it is completed. When the mad and brilliant inventor Rotwang first shows his android to the brain of Metropolis, he explains its nature and gender as follows: "Who is it? [...] Futura... Parody... whatever you like to call it. Also: delusion... In short: it is woman...

Every man-creator makes himself a woman."⁴³

As long as Parodia has no face it is easy to command her: "The eyes stared at him from the mass-head of the being, eyes as though painted on closed lids, with the expression of calm madness."⁴⁴

The lack of a face is a condition of obedience. Her creator knows about this and worries that once given a face his masterpiece will escape him. Parodia also realizes that a face will transform her from object to subject. "Give me a face soon, Joh Fredersen!",⁴⁵ she begs.

We know what will happen when a face replaces the mass-head: false Maria will unleash an apocalypse in Metropolis, she will cause the underground city to flood and bring about the destruction of the machines; she will throw a madness on the workers who will even forget about their own children. It would have been better for everybody if she had stayed forever a perfect, obedient mechanism without a face. ●

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⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 122.

⁴¹ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, translated by Simon Watson Taylor, Cambridge: Exact Change, 1994, p. 13.

⁴² Thea von Harbou, *Metropolis*, London: The Readers Library, 1927, p. 36.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 62.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 69.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 69