

Savage Strategies: Parisian Avant-garde and 'Savage' Brittany in the Definition of Paul Gauguin

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A number of adjectives are used consistently in the representation of peasants in Paris during the nineteenth century. Continuously repeated and reinforced in such diverse disciplines as novels,¹ paintings,² school manuals,³ ethnographic studies,⁴ Folklorist popular tales,⁵ political speeches,⁶ and art criticism,⁷ they had the acceptance of objective facts. This list – which is by no means exhaustive – shows the pervasiveness and consistency of a certain internally coherent description of the peasant in French society. This description formed an undebated foundation for an extreme variety of cultural productions and was an important argument in some of the most significant debates in nineteenth century France.⁸

Historically, 'Savage' is the earliest description of the rural peasant during the first half of the nineteenth century in Paris. Prevalent before 1857, this use of the word fell into relative disuse after that period.⁹ This coincided with a new valorisation of the peasantry under Napoleon III, who saw in them and in the church allies for the preservation of his power.¹⁰ The first inquiries into French rural folklore were executed during the period of his reign when the first folklore societies were born.¹¹ The image of the peasant as a politically and religiously conservative individual was reinforced and definitively cemented during the Second Empire¹² despite the fact that in 1849 a large section of the peasantry voted for the socialists, and despite the enormous headway the socialists made in gaining their support.¹³

Theodore Zeldin pointed out that both the right and the left were in agreement on an underlying description of the peasant as innately conservative and resigned to his lot, as hostile to innovation, conformist, traditional and constantly seeking economic self-sufficiency with the intellectual independence from the outside world

1. Ronald Hubscher counts 473 novels about the peasantry between 1860 and 1916. See 'Modèle et Anti-Modèle Paysan', in *Histoire des Français, XIXe-XXe siècle*, ed. Yves Lequin, Paris, 1983, p 122.
2. The academic genre of 'paysannerie' increased in popularity during the second half of the nineteenth century. See Neil McWilliam, 'Le Paysan au Salon', in Collective, *La Critique d'Art en France, 1850-1900*, Saint-Etienne, 1989, p 81. This can be seen in the sharp increase of official submissions to the Salon of paintings with subject-matter depicting the life of the peasantry after 1855 (Hubscher, op. cit., p 135).
3. Ibid, p 138.
4. Ethnographic studies about the rural regions of France are developed around 1850-60 (McWilliam, op. cit. p 81).

5. The initial impulse was given in 1855 under the administration of the Second Empire, which considered the novel to be subversive and tried to counter its influence by encouraging the publication of popular tales (Hubscher, op. cit. p 135).
6. Ibid, p 145–6.
7. McWilliam, op. cit., p 82.
8. Ibid, p 81.
9. Eugene Weber, *La Fin des Terroires, La Modernisation de la France Rurale 1870–1914*, Paris, 1983, pp 17–19. The author points towards uses of the word 'savage' as late as 1880 (ibid, p 19).
10. McWilliam, op. cit., p 83.
11. Théodore Zeldin, *France 1848–1945, Ambition, Love And Politics*, Oxford, 1973, p 133.
12. Hubscher, op. cit., pp 122–51. However, the reality of the peasants' support of Napoleon III is much more complex than this image can lead us to believe; many peasants did not vote for Napoleon III during the elections of December 1848; see Zeldin, op. cit., p 512.
13. Primarily in the regions of the centre and the south-east (Zeldin, op. cit., pp 491–2).
14. Ibid, pp 134–5. Zeldin interprets these generalizations in the context of French history, pointing to the immense changes rural France was going through, and to the conflictual nature of these changes.
15. Ibid, p 133.
16. Hubscher, op. cit., p 141.
17. McWilliam, op. cit., pp 88–9.
18. Hubscher, op. cit., p 135.
19. Ibid, p 123.
20. Ibid, p 146.

that this implies.¹⁴ The two sides differed in their attitude towards this conservatism: the left saw the conservatism of the peasantry as the obstacle to the spread of political enlightenment while the Catholic revivalists saw in them the repertory of unsullied virtues.¹⁵ Both saw them as a factor in the preservation of the political and social status quo.

Ronald Hubscher shows how in the rustic novels, such as those of George Sand, in the official imagery of both the Second Empire and the Third Republic, in the school manuals that reflect them, as well as in the discourse of the Church, the peasant is presented as being outside history, representing an eternal natural order.¹⁶ Neil McWilliam found the same thing in pseudo-scientific studies about agriculture and in books describing voyages in the country, as well as in the art criticism of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ If in the discourse of the Catholic Church the peasant was perceived as the warrantor of stability in social roles¹⁸ and on the left he was attacked for his docility towards the powers in place,¹⁹ the 'peasant' as an image tended towards mythological stability through the detachment of his representation from the empirical historical realities of the provinces. His image took its meaning, in the context of French history, from its opposition to the image of the urban worker.²⁰

The continuous industrialisation of French society caused an important increase in the population of urban industrial workers. These urban workers, who for the most part were migrating peasants or of peasant origin,²¹ were perceived by government and by the Church as a continuous threat to the stability of the Second Empire and, after 1872, as a threat to the Third Republic.²² Their concentration in the cities allowed them to be organised into trade unions. Their actions through strikes and through the demand for new legislation for the improvement of their working conditions and wages²³ were constantly contesting the relation of power between them and their employers. This meant that during the nineteenth century in Paris a stable social order with rigid differentiations in social roles could not be maintained because the relation between those occupying these roles was constantly being questioned through trade unionism, and more globally through the challenge of republicanism, which presented itself as a credible alternative to monarchism,²⁴ and socialism which attacked the very notion of differentiations in the social order. Anthropologically, what we see is that conservative societies tend to see in the stability of social roles a defence against anarchism and generalised violence.

We would like to suggest that the simplest most fundamental explanation for the social instability in the nineteenth century is provided by the anthropological mimetic theory of cultural formation. In his book *La Violence et le Sacré (Violence and the Sacred, 1973)* René Girard proposed a theory explaining how societies are formed and stabilise themselves against their own violence. This theory explained among other things the emergence of the religious, of ritual and mythology, of prohibitions and other human institutions in a simple and elegant manner. It also proposed an explanation for the occurrences of collective violence such as wars, revolutions, lynchings and genocides.

The cornerstone of the theory is the following proposition: Human desire is mimetic, meaning that, beyond a certain instinctual level, we desire what others desire. Given this nature of desire, there is a propensity within humans to fight for those objects that they indicate to each other as being desirable.²⁵ Let us hypothetically say there are several people desiring the same object because they have mutually indicated it to each other as desirable; they will simultaneously try to appropriate it. Thus, they will be mutually placing an obstacle to its possession. This mutual resistance will increase the value of the object for each of them, increasing at the same time the violence of the gestures of appropriation and mutual blockage. This in turn will re-increase the value of the object, which in turn will increase the violence of the appropriative gestures and mutual blockage and so on and so forth. Thus, mimesis of desire leading to a mimesis of appropriation will lead to a mimesis of violence, which in turn will increase desire. At a certain stage of this circular process the object will be forgotten and the combatants will become fascinated with each other – locked in a feedback loop of violence and counter-violence. This mechanism transcends their individuality, becoming the acting subject that controls their actions. By the mutual menace they represent, individuals become locked within the mechanism, becoming simple components of its evolution. The individuals are mirror images of each other,²⁶ imitating each other's gestures of appropriation and mutual violence. All differences disappear as the mechanism destroys the difference among them and renders them essentially similar. This mechanism succeeds even more in undifferentiating them as they desperately try to violently reaffirm their difference through increases in mutual violence.

If this process were infinite, Girard says, humanity would not have survived. Luckily, it is this same mimesis that provides a resolution to the process. In their mimesis of violence two of the combatants imitate each other in fighting a third instead of fighting each other; in turn others will start imitating these two in fighting that same third person. Eventually *all will be fighting the same individual*. This is more than likely to happen because as violence increases so does the propensity towards mimesis. Thus, the combatants will imitate each other in choosing a common enemy.²⁷ This will create a situation of *all against one* instead of the anterior situation of *all against all*. The one attacked will be lynched or expelled.

The passage from a situation of *all against all* to a situation of *all against one* will re-establish peace by establishing a group consensus *against* the lynched or expelled individual and will preserve that peace under the threat of the terror inspired by the mimetic crisis. This fear is expressed in an avoidance of mimetic gestures of appropriation. The avoidance of such gestures in turns defines what each can and cannot desire. This definition creates a prohibition on mimetic desire, mimetic gestures of appropriation and mimetic violence. This leads to what we call morality, which establishes the condition for the continuation of a space where each individual is differentiated from the other by a series of prohibitions indicating what each can and cannot desire. This space of inter-individual peace is society.

In primitive societies, such events established the religious: within a group, the victim will be retroactively perceived as a formidable figure,

21. Urban industrial workers were a minority compared with the peasantry during the middle of the nineteenth century: 52% of the active population were still working in agriculture. See Ronald Hubscher, 'L'Identité de l'Homme et de la Terre', in *Histoire des Français, XIXe-XXe siècle*, ed. Yves Lequin, Paris, 1983, p 10.
22. Ronald Hubscher, 'Modèle et Antimodèle Paysan', in *Histoire des Français. XIXe-XIXe Siècle*, ed. Yves Lequin, Paris, 1983, p 145. This is also evident in the amount of police control a worker was subject to, including having to carry a *livret* that indicated who he was, his description and where he was working. Without it he was subject to imprisonment as a vagabond; Zeldin described the condition of penniless workers as 'almost that of an outlaw'. This situation lasted well into the Third Republic, and was only abolished in 1890 (Zeldin, op. cit., pp 198-9).
23. For a history of the trade unions and the strikes they organized, see Zeldin, op. cit., pp 198-282.
24. Zeldin, op. cit., p 467.
25. René Girard, *Des Choses Cachées Depuis la Fondation du Monde*, Grasset, Paris, 1978, p 401.
26. Ibid, p 437.
27. René Girard, 'Mythology', in *Order and Disorder. Proceedings of the Stanford International Symposium, California*, Anna Libri, 1984, p 86.

as the one responsible for the crisis and for its cessation. Morality will be perceived as flowing from him. Mythology is the remembrance of this event through the social order that emerged from it. Ritual is the re-enactment of this event in order to recapture its benefits in terms of inter-individual peace. The religious is thus nothing more than the disintegration and integration of the social order perceived through the terms constituting it.

A social crisis is a time when the differentiations that constitute the cultural order are in danger of breaking down and are no longer capable of containing mimetic desire leading to mimetic violence. A sacrificial victim who can polarise the violence of the whole of society against himself can re-create and reaffirm the originating consensus.²⁸ The differential social structure has as a function the avoidance, or the containment into acceptable limits, of mimetic desire and its direct result mimetic rivalry. When mimetic desire goes beyond those limits set by the social order, the latter enters into crisis. In a feedback loop the crisis of this structure, which is translated into an undifferentiation and the contesting of social roles, leads to even more mimetic rivalry until an explosion of violence leading to the sacrifice of an individual or a class of individuals reconstructs a new social order.²⁹

Based on this theory it is possible to propose a very large schematisation of what happened in France during the nineteenth century. The following picture is painted with very broad brushstrokes but is useful in that it will help us situate the smaller historical period we propose to examine in relation to Paul Gauguin with, it is hoped, more precision.

This instability of social roles was one of the conditions of possibility of industrialisation and capitalist economy. It led to a loss of adherence or belief in the symbolic structure that sanctioned these roles, namely the Catholic interpretation of the Christian religion in Europe. Religion can be a totalising structure that stabilises the elements of the world as an intelligible reality. Its loss meant a loss in the stability of the world as defined by an interpretation of it that was sanctioned by religion. This led to a historical separation between the domain of religion and the domain of nature. This movement of a desacralisation of nature encompassed the whole of Europe and signalled the end of the medieval philosophical project of a synthesis between religion and science.³⁰ The search for sure knowledge became an attempt to reinforce the lost stability or intelligibility of the world. This led, among other things, to science and experimentation, which made innovations possible. An active search for wealth, springing from mimetic desire, made possible the capitalist economy. Coupled with an industrialisation made possible by the advance of science, this in turn reinforced social mobility by gradually taking away the monopoly of wealth and power from the aristocracy and transferring part of it to the bourgeoisie, further destabilising social roles.

If the differentiated social order no longer functioned as a barrier against mimetic desire between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, this is also true for the proletariat which, under the influence of socialism and trade unionism, learned to mimetically desire what the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy had.³¹ A mimetic rivalry ensued between the rich and the poor, the class struggle described by Marx which we believe

28. This is a limited résumé of Girard's theory and cannot possibly do it justice.

29. The French revolution is especially clear in this regard.

30. Arguably the first to explicit this separation is Duns Scotus, in what Peirce describes as his 'Scotistic realism'.

31. In this light it is easy to understand why the socialists felt they had to attack religion. It was the essential warrant against mimetic desire and for the stability of the social roles.

comes about because of a fundamental process of human psychology, in a relation of circular causality with a historical event: mimetic desire leading to mimetic rivalry causing and being caused by the desegregation of the differentiated social order in France. This led to a conflict translated into a continuous struggle for power. In such a context, the fear of undifferentiation of social roles leading to intestinal violence can become the structuring factor in cultural productions and the representations they put forward. We contend that in the second half of the nineteenth century in France the mythologisation of the peasant was constructed around this fear, meaning that the representation of an eternal peasant outside history is a representation of a peasant outside the circle of mimetic rivalry which underlies the fast economical, social and political changes that created contemporary history. This representation functioned as both an escape and a criticism of this circle of mimetic rivalry, usually described as 'modernity'. As a criticism it conveyed alternative options by presenting agrarian society as an option to modernity³² and the peasant as a model of human virtue unspoiled by progress.³³ This is the kind of representation we see in the Catholic revivalists' descriptions of peasant life, or in the descriptions of those believing in a conservative and hierarchical order.³⁴ Fundamentally, the agrarian society is presented as an option because it is perceived as an example of social peace springing from a stable and divinely ordained 'natural' order³⁵ of strict differentiations in social roles, leading to harmony among the classes and among labour and capital.³⁶

The historical evolution in rural France threatened the traditional differentiations and created an atmosphere of mimetic rivalry that, while never being as severe as that found in the city, still drew sharp reactions from conservative forces. Improved standards of living meant that the lower classes could imitate the notables in their clothing and in their behaviour. Eugene Weber points to a sharp increase in texts condemning the consumption exhibited by the lower classes after 1860 and rendered possible by their improved standards of living. He offers two explanations for this censure. The first is:

The middle-class, enriched by the expansion of the market, exalted these virtues that were foreign to the laws of the market and to industrial economy ... it wanted the poor to be the producers of the market (low prices) and not consumers (high prices).³⁷

This explanation presupposes global economic intentions on the part of those bourgeois who were writing such censures, based on knowledge of the laws of supply and demand. This is a bit far-fetched. Luckily he suggests a second, much more realistic and satisfying explanation:

Most were scandalised by the new behavior of the lower classes. There were too many women dressed like ladies of the middle class, too many workers plunged into luxury and intemperance, too many poor people buying pipes, playing-cards, handkerchiefs and ties.... Dress, which brought the newest, most visible proof of the amelioration of the fate of the lower classes, provoked the greatest part of these criticisms. The numerous monographs written by teachers on village life in 1889 talk of the growing liberty in the dress

32. Ronald Hubscher, 'Modèle et Antimodèle Paysan', in *Histoire des Français, XIXe-XXe siècle*, ed. Yves Lequin, Paris, 1983, p 145.

33. Zeldin, op. cit., p 133.

34. Ibid, p 133.

35. McWilliam, op. cit., p 88.

36. Ronald Hubscher points out that at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the XXth, 'Solidarité' (Solidarity) is the leitmotiv in the agricultural syndicates' speeches. The words 'Harmonie' and 'concorde' are also constantly repeated. See 'Modèle et Antimodèle Paysan', in *Histoire des Français, XIXe-XXe siècle*, ed. Yves Lequin, Paris, 1983, pp 145-6.

37. 'La classe moyenne, enrichie par l'expansion du marché, exaltait des vertus étrangères aux lois du marché et à l'économie industrielle ... elle voulait que les pauvres soient les producteurs du marché (prix bas) et non des consommateurs (prix élevé)' (Weber, op. cit., p 42.)

of young women, and sometimes allude to more profound motivations. Clothes, suggest a teacher in the Meurthe, are worn as a symbol of social status and conceived to demonstrate an equality of rank that in reality did not exist.³⁸

The real resistance against the peasants imitating the bourgeoisie came from a resistance to the undifferentiation in social role signalled among other things by a confusion of clothing: a system of social signification and a signal of rank and role. The resistance of the aristocracy against the mimesis of the bourgeoisie is echoed in the resistance of the bourgeoisie against the mimesis of the peasants. This symptomatises a fear of an undifferentiation in social roles as exemplified by this priest who, as early as 1848, delivered an angry sermon to his peasants because they were wearing clothes 'that were not of their condition'.³⁹

Weber very perceptively points to a new dissatisfaction among the peasants and this *despite the fact that they were now richer than before*:⁴⁰ 'the oft noted "unrestrained desire" for material possessions was in fact nothing more than the simple perception of new possibilities that were offered, the satisfaction of newly discovered needs'.⁴¹

The mimetic theory gives us the explanation for this phenomenon. The new desires were in fact the effect of mimetic desire; the peasants, no longer held back by a rigid differentiation in class and social roles, wished to have certain things because they were possessed by the bourgeois, whom they admired and want to imitate. The bourgeois, wanting very much to differentiate themselves from the peasantry and preserve the hierarchical relationship, resisted the peasants' imitations through acts of censure. And this does not have to be on the universal level of a titanic class struggle but on the more prosaic level of the petit bourgeois who resents the peasant who works for him having the same suit that he does – with all the tension and resentment on both sides that this creates. It is the accumulation of such small petty resentments that creates the mass movements we call 'revolutions'.

AVANT-GARDIST STRATEGIES: PAUL GAUGUIN'S USE OF THE PARISIAN VISION OF RURAL FRANCE

When Paul Gauguin wrote to Émile Schuffenecker 'I love Brittany, in it I find the savage, the primitive. When my wooden shoes resonate on this granite soil, I hear the deaf, dull and powerful tone I am looking for in painting'⁴² he was participating in the Parisian vision of rural France and applying it to the particular case of Brittany. This vision does not accord with the reality of a functioning post office that permitted him to sustain a voluminous correspondence with Schuffenecker among others, or with the state of the railway system and roads which markedly improved the economy in Brittany during the end of the nineteenth century.⁴³ This made possible the circulation of Breton goods throughout France and encouraged a flow of artists who arrived in Pont-Aven 20 years before Gauguin got there⁴⁴ and,

38. 'La plupart se scandalisaient du nouveau comportement des classes inférieures. Il y avait trop de femmes habillées comme les dames de la classe moyenne, trop de travailleurs plongés dans le luxe et l'intempérance, trop de pauvres qui s'achetaient des pipes, des cartes à jouer, des mouchoirs et des cravats.... L'habillement qui apportait la preuve la plus nouvelle et la plus visible de l'amélioration du sort des classes inférieures provoquait la plus grande part des critiques. Les nombreuses monographies sur la vie villageoise rédigées par les enseignants en 1889 citent l'extravagance et la liberté croissantes de l'accoutrement des jeunes filles, et font parfois allusion à des motivations plus profondes. Les vêtements, suggère un instituteur de la Meurthe, étaient portés comme un symbole de statut social, conçus pour démontrer une égalité de rang qui en réalité n'existent pas.' Ibid, p 43.

39. Ibid, p 42.

40. He quotes Théron de Montaigué who simply and brilliantly says: 'C'est que la pauvreté se mesure par les comparaisons...' ('poverty is measured by comparison') (ibid, p 44). (Unfortunately Weber does not provide a reference for this quote.)

41. 'Le "désir effréné" de possession matérielle, souvent noté, n'était en fait rien d'autre que la simple perception des nouvelles possibilités qui s'offraient, la satisfaction de besoins récemment découverts', ibid, p 43.

42. 'J'aime La Bretagne: J'y trouve le sauvage, le primitif. Quand mes sabots résonnent sur ce sol de granit, j'entends le ton sourd, mat et puissant que je cherche en peinture' (Paul Gauguin, *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin, 1873-1888*, ed. Victor Merlhèse, Paris, 1984, No. 141, p 172).

43. The building of roads connecting the different parts of France was an ongoing process throughout the nineteenth century, starting with Napoleon who constructed new ones for strategic reasons. Roads were a major contributing factor in breaking the isolation of the different communities living in rural France. The real boom in road construction, however, started in the 1860s, with the systematic connection of all parts of France being undertaken under the Third Republic (Weber, op. cit., pp 286-7). Railway construction, which started in the 1840s and 1850s, was the other major contributor to the integration of the isolated communities of rural France into a larger economy (ibid, pp 299-300).

44. Pont-Aven was already a popular spot for French and American artists when Gauguin got there in 1886. The Pension Gloanec where Gauguin met Emile Bernard in August of that same year was known for welcoming artists, although most were of the academic kind. See Françoise Cachin, *Ce Malgré Moi de Sauvage* (Paris, 1989), pp 26-7.

45. The first person to study how a whole culture can be posited as being an unchanging monolithic entity is Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, New York, 1978.

incidentally, allowed him easily to make several trips between Brittany and Paris during his intermittent stays there in the period 1886-90.

Brittany, part of rural France, is also part of the Parisian vision of it. The self-representation and consequent representation in art criticism and art historical writings of Gauguin's stay in Brittany are the historical products of this vision – in turn, these art historical representations served to reinforce this same image, perpetuating it to the present day.

The supposed primitiveness of Brittany is a mental construct that plays a crucial role in the edifice of meaning created by Gauguin around himself and by art historians around the artist. It represents the presupposition that is outside the dialectical sphere within which debate occurs: a series of statements presupposed to be true without debate and on which the description and self-description of Gauguin's work is based.⁴⁵ This is further reinforced by a confusion between what both the artist and his exegetes are describing (a place outside history,⁴⁶ the dialectic of becoming that is the self-definition and self-description of modernity) and the way they are describing it (constructing the object through a series of presuppositions that are outside the 'sphere of debatability'⁴⁷ that is the self-description and self-definition of art historical writings). This confusion between the described (Brittany as outside history) and the methodology of description (history as outside Brittany) creates a series of self-justifying premises – the methodology creating the object whose existence it presupposes.

F Orton and G Pollock wrote the first article to fundamentally question the representation of Brittany as a primitive land outside history. In a 1980 article entitled 'Les Données Bretonantes: la Prairie de la Représentation', they differentiate between the representation of Brittany by the artists who lived there and its empirical reality, concluding from this differentiation a series of questions to be asked about the historical context of this representation:

Why was Brittany presented as it was? Who was presenting it that way? And whose Brittany do we confront in those representations? When we encounter terms such as savage, primitive, rustic or superstitious in the letter of Gauguin we cannot take them at face value or assume them to be the truth about Brittany, an objective statement of fact, and let them speak as if in explanation of the paintings. We have to recognise them as part of the ideological baggage carried by artistic tourists whose meaning has to be determined within historical conditions from and against which they were produced – conditions of change, relations of difference, and the social and cultural dominance of an urban bourgeoisie.⁴⁸

In answering these questions they propose that the representation of Brittany in the nineteenth century, framed by the experience of tourism, is based on a presupposition of essential difference⁴⁹ between the describers of Brittany (Parisians) and the described.⁵⁰ Brittany is posited as the opposite of modern Paris and its activities. Within this opposition, the trip to Brittany by Gauguin is a search for new spaces of representation brought about by the newly competitive atmosphere of the avant-garde in the second half of the 1880s and a 'crisis of representation' caused by the changing conditions of artistic practice.

In an atmosphere of social confusion and disintegration of both social and artistic fixities this is manifested through questions about what to paint, how to paint, whom to paint for and where to paint.⁵¹ Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* – with its representation of the contradictions and social confusion of modernity – having 'closed' the realistic representation of Paris by taking the pseudo-scientificity of the naturalist aesthetic to its extreme, a need was felt within the vanguard to search for new spaces of representation which would provide the necessary amount of difference from his work – a difference that would represent an 'advance' over this work.

In defining our work in relation to this fundamental article, we need to ask ourselves how the social confusion of modernity, the newly competitive nature of what we retrospectively call the vanguard, Gauguin's representation of Brittany and his self-representation and consequent representation as a 'savage' or a 'primitive' articulate themselves in relation to each other. We believe that we can unify these disparate historical manifestations through the single methodology of the mimetic theory, thus accounting for the results of Orton and Pollock and transcending both to offer a unified account of the relation between the work of art and its sociological context ultimately answering the question Orton and Pollock asked but never answered: why do the paintings of Gauguin look the way they do?⁵²

In a book following this article published in 1992 entitled *Avant-garde Gambits, 1888–1893: Gender and the Color of Art History*,⁵³ Pollock tried to unify these manifestations and came close to our conception of the historical process involved in the formation and disintegration of the groups of the avant-garde, a process which dramatically accelerated after 1886, the date of the last Impressionist exhibition. She proposes that in 1888 the avant-garde was a framework of intense competitiveness, antagonism and ambitions.⁵⁴ Within that framework, consisting of a loose confederation of alternative exhibition spaces – offices of some journals, cafés, and chosen art dealers' galleries – and within the discursive space of art criticism, she describes avant-gardism as a kind of game-play, 'a structure for the production of a series of chess-like moves',⁵⁵ 'gambits'⁵⁶ in the 'game of reference, deference, difference':

To make your mark in the avant-garde community, you had to relate your work to what was going on: *reference*. Then you had to differ from the existing leader, from the work or project which represented the latest move, the last word, or what was considered the definitive statement of shared concerns: *deference*. Finally your own move involved establishing a difference which had to be both legible in terms of current aesthetic concerns and criticism, and also a definitive advance on that current position: *difference*. Reference ensured recognition that what you were doing was part of the avant-garde project. Deference and difference had to be finely calibrated so that the ambition and claims of your work was measured by its difference from the artist or artistic statements whose stature you both acknowledged and displaced.⁵⁷

Pollock attempts to relate the individual level of human psychology to a collective level as described by structuralism through the 'play of

46. James F. Knapp, 'Primitivism and Empire; John Synge and Paul Gauguin', *Comparative Literature*, 41:1, Winter 1989, p. 54.

47. A term borrowed from Noam Chomsky who uses it in a different context to describe the spectrum of political views allowed in the mainstream media.

48. F Orton and G Pollock, 'Les Données Bretonnantes, la Prairie de la Représentation', *Art History*, (UK), p. 330.

49. Orton and Pollock, op. cit., p. 329.

50. *Ibid*, p. 329.

51. *Ibid*, p. 319.

52. *Ibid*, p. 318.

53. Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888–1893: Gender and the Color of Art History*, New York, 1992.

54. *Ibid*, p. 15.

55. *Ibid*, p. 15.

56. *Ibid*, p. 12.

57. *Ibid*, p. 14.

reference, deference, difference'.⁵⁸ Her methodological strategy consists in describing the moves of 'reference, deference, difference' as the staging of an Oedipal formation,⁵⁹ connecting that formation to the Lacanian psychoanalytical explanation of fetishism as the subject's desire for a pre-linguistic totality, and through the category of fetishism to Dean McCannell's structural study on tourism as the underlying structure of Western society, by translating the search for difference, as exhibited by the tourist, into the fetishistic search for pre-linguistic totality or undifferentiation.

This amalgamation of methodologies contains some extremely serious internal contradictions, both on the level of the individual methodologies themselves, and on the level of their articulation in relation to each other. What makes Pollock's demonstration so strong, however, is the schema of 'reference, deference, difference' itself and not its psychoanalytical justification. This schema economically explains the underlying relations between the different moves and movements in the framework of the avant-garde and evacuates the unprovable mythological mental constructs such as 'genius' and 'inspiration' on which the shape of art history has been structurally dependent. In so doing, however, she uses another mythology to justify her schema, the Oedipal formation.

THE MIMETIC MODEL

Pollock's use of psychoanalysis is the symptom of a real need: how to relate the collective actions of those players to individual human psychology thus escaping the formalistic limitations of structuralism. To accept Ockham's razor is to accept that the simplest description that can account for a given set of facts is usually the correct one; in this regard the excessive complexity of Pollock's methodological strategy can be replaced by the simplicity of the mimetic model. All we have to do is to replace the schema of 'reference, deference, difference' with the principle of mimesis.

An artist of the avant-garde imitates/refers to an underlying definition of art he finds desirable. His reference to it is through its own terms. The artist's desire is the result of someone, a 'model' or 'models', indicating to him the desirability of this underlying definition. This can lead him towards an appropriation of what he finds desirable, in some cases causing a mimesis of appropriation translated by intense competitiveness.

When Paul Gauguin was developing 'Synthetism' with Émile Bernard in the summer of 1888, what was the underlying definition of art he was referring to? Simply put, Gauguin was able to give meaning to his actions by introducing them in terms of an opposition that produces meaning, first in an overall opposition to the academicians, which placed him in what we call today the avant-garde, and second in opposition to the naturalism of, among others, Seurat – an action which gave meaning to his position within the avant-garde. The achievement of meaning is then coincident with the achievement of difference. Towards the local production of that meaning the history of art as a discipline functions as a general context in opposition to a

58. *Ibid.*, p 14.

59. *Ibid.*, p 20.

context of undifferentiation which is in fact a non-context of meaninglessness. The meaning art history attaches to Gauguin today is inscribed in this productive opposition, which is inherent in the way he constructed his own position in the avant-garde. In a letter to Émile Bernard written in 1889 he resumes his opinion on the subject (one which is rather banal in the context of Avant-gardism): 'What do you want? Either the mediocrity for which everybody smiles or talent in innovation.'⁶⁰ Placing this innovation in opposition to Impressionism and specifically to Degas he continues:

As for doing painting for commerce, even impressionistic: No. I perceive in the very core of me a higher meaning, one that I tentatively perceived this year. My God (I would say to myself), I may be wrong and they may be right, that is why I wrote to Schuff to ask your opinion to guide me a bit in the middle of my troubles. I see that you have read between the lines that I have lightly touched something – I am now reinforced in my opinions and I will not abandon them (while still looking forward). And this despite Degas who, second to Van Gogh, is the author of the whole debacle. He does not find in my paintings what he himself sees (the bad odour of the model). He sees in us a movement opposed to his.⁶¹

In November 1889, when this letter was written, Gauguin had already abandoned Impressionism and developed his 'Synthetist' style after having seen Bernard's *Breton Women in a Green Prairie*. But after his disastrous stay in Arles, where Van Gogh resisted his attempts to try to get him to paint less from nature and more from memory, and after his stay in Paris in early 1889 in which he had the opportunity of receiving the opinion of Degas, which was not favourable, Gauguin needed reassurance. In the face of the disapproval of one of his first models, Degas – the one from whom he learned a lot of his compositional techniques – he needed his second model, Émile Bernard, to reaffirm to him the desirability of what he was doing – a desirability which Bernard had indicated to him in 1888 through works such as the *Breton Women in a Green Prairie*. Having received this reaffirmation, he imitated it by reaffirming his commitment to what he was doing, going on to define his work and Bernard's as different, even contrary, to that of Degas.

The relation between these artists is structured by a fundamental mimetic dimension. This mimetic dimension of Gauguin's avant-gardism introduces a very important counter-intuitive change to Pollock's conception of the relation between the artists. In the avant-garde the underlying productive definition of art, the object of desire, the thing to which prestige, recognition, and the position of leadership is attached, is the signifying difference as such. Which leads us to a paradoxical conclusion: *Gauguin's act of differing from Seurat and from Degas is in fact based on his imitation of the appropriation of difference as such*. The *appropriation* of difference – as opposed to its simple achievement – is made by Gauguin and around him by art historians, through the perception and the presentation of that difference not as the result of an ongoing process but as the result of the actions of an atemporal personality – a genius. This eclipses the procedural causes of the change by transforming them into the result

60. 'Que voulez vous? ou la médiocrité à qui tout le monde sourit ou du talent dans la rénovation?'

61. 'Quand à faire de la peinture de commerce même impressionniste: Non. J'entrevois dans tout le fond de moi-même un sens plus élevé, que j'ai tâtonné cette année [sic]. Mon Dieu (je me disais), j'ai peut-être tort et ils ont raison, c'est pourquoi j'ai écrit à Schuff de vous demander votre opinion pour me guider un peu au milieu de mon trouble. Je vois que vous avez compris entre les lignes que j'ai touché légèrement quelque chose – me voilà raffermi dans mes opinions et je n'en démordrais pas (en cherchant plus avant). Et cela Malgré Degas qui est après Van Gogh l'auteur de toute la débâcle. Il ne trouve pas en effet dans mes toiles ce qu'il voit lui (la mauvaise odeur du modèle). Il sent en nous un mouvement contraire au sien.' G M Sugana, *Tout l'Oeuvre Peint de Gauguin*, Paris, 1981, p 7.

of a state inherent to the personality in question, a state outside the procedural nature of the change – i.e. into a transcendence. Gauguin's presentation of himself as a 'savage' (i.e. as a member of societies perceived to be outside time and history) and his subsequent representation as such and as a 'genius' in art history (i.e. as the creator of 'timeless' works) plays this role of transfiguring what is the result of a process into the consequence of an inherent atemporal quality of the artist. This need to transfigure the procedural nature of the change into a stable transcendental quality comes from the instability of meaning, the nihilism, that this continuous procedure implies since the *imitative* nature of the act of differing is the result of mimetic rivalry and can lead to undifferentiation, i.e. to meaninglessness.

Art is the positing of pre-meaning; it is not only *generated* but it *generates* meaning, forming the condition of possibility of utterances relating to it, criticism, art history and aesthetics. These in turn influence the generative underlying definition of art and are themselves interrelated with social, political and ideological issues. These issues are *representations* of the world. They serve to structure it into a stability of meaning, defining the relation of human beings with and against each other and against the absolute instability of mimetic violence. Art is then one of the conditions of possibility of a network of representations; a contributing factor to the stability or instability of meaning in a given collectivity, contributing and being contributed to by the differentiation or undifferentiation of social roles. In a context of instability of meaning the appropriation of difference plays the role of a stabilising factor. The importance of the artist as 'genius' (or in the case of Gauguin as 'savage') is that he represents a temporal change in relation to its opposite, an atemporal transcendental stability.

Instability of meaning is inscribed in the overall context of the aggravation of mimetic rivalry and undifferentiation of social roles in the 1880s. The Catholic religion – a totalising and stabilising structure of meaning that had functioned for centuries as an obstacle against mimetic rivalry through its transcendental prohibitions – was losing adherence and had been for several centuries. This crisis was caused by, and in turn aggravated, mimetic rivalry and the undifferentiation of social roles that it implies. This led to the rise of alternative modes of thinking leading to the opposite reaction of reaffirming and reinforcing old ones – both the rise of the new and the reaffirmation of the old are *representations*, ways of reconstituting and stabilising the lost totality of meaning. The constitution of new ideas and the reinforcement of the old, in turn, contributed to a further aggravation of the crisis. The differentiated social order which the Catholic Church helped stabilise and justify through the transcendental undebatability of its doctrines was splintering, forming into opposing groups – this division being the result of mimetic rivalry starting on the inter-individual level, triggering the mechanism of group formation.

The self-definition of the avant-garde against the academician is just one instance of this mechanism of group formation; the self-definition of the synthetists (later symbolists) against the 'naturalists' is another – their succession is part of this same progression of increased splintering. In both cases group formation is contingent on the appropriation of difference since it is implied by the expulsion of those

differed against and it implies a new transcendently stable definition of the self against that which is expelled.

The mechanism of expulsion and exclusive self-definition is applicable to the whole of the avant-garde where the explosion of different styles is explainable through the generalised mimetic valorisation of difference. The need to stabilise this difference into a signifying opposition means that in order to be successful in the avant-garde, difference must not be perceived as a 'novelty', which implies the existence of the process of differing and thus points towards the imitation that underlies it, but 'innovation', which operates through the formation of a more or less coherent and self-contained position that partially or totally excludes that which is differed against, thus eclipsing the imitative relation to it. An artist who succeeds in establishing his difference as an inherent quality is a 'genius' or an 'innovator'. Prestige establishes him as a model. This can lead to other artists imitating him either in terms of imitating the act of creating a difference, or in terms of imitating the *difference itself* – the style achieved. In the first case we have a new splinter, in the second we can witness the formation of a group or a 'movement': those imitating the new model will imitate the difference he achieved *against* those he differed from. The new group or movement will effectively define itself and be defined against those which the model differs from – a symbolic expulsion.

Gauguin, Bernard and Van Gogh were part of a process of group formation that was destroyed in its early stages by mimetic rivalry. The episode at Arles in 1888 between Van Gogh and Gauguin is most probably due to an intense mimetic rivalry that spilled over into real violence – as opposed to symbolic violence. It is not so much evidence of Van Gogh's inherent madness, but the result of extremely competitive inter-individual dynamics between the two. This mimetic rivalry was also to destroy Bernard's relation to Gauguin; because both artists lay claim to the innovation of Synthetism, they became mutual obstacles to its possession. Thus, Bernard and Gauguin, who were each other's models, became each other's rivals.

This process of group formation is as much inclusive as it is exclusive; an expulsion of those the model differed from creates the cohesion of the group. Through this expulsion the group tries to achieve a stability of meaning, a differentiation against the undifferentiation of meaning which the very process of differing implies. Bernard's and Gauguin's pressure on Van Gogh to get him to paint from memory is inscribed within that process. It is an attempt to create a consensus against the phenomenological nature of Impressionism – that nature being an arbitrary term against which to define the self. This consensus would have been the condition of possibility of group formation. Their attempt to convince Van Gogh obeys some very simple rules of group formation: by trying to convince Van Gogh, they were trying to convince themselves through the model of behaviour which he would have represented had he been convinced. In other words, his imitation of them would have reinforced them in their opinions through their subsequent imitation of him. This would have created a cohesion that would have been mutually reinforced through mimesis.

Group formation is an attempt to stabilise meaning by stabilising the relation of each individual in relation to all, and the relation of this all to its negation, i.e. the expelled other. The tragedy and condition of possibility of the achievements of what we call modernity is that this never happens. Stability of meaning, which can be attempted sometimes through philosophy and criticism – as in the case of the critic G Albert Aurier – and sometimes through a mystical justification of the group – as in the case of the Nabi or the Rose + Croix – is never achieved on the overall level of avant-garde. The group either splinters under the effects of internal mimetic rivalry or is contested by someone else looking to define himself against it, looking for that difference which is indicated to him as being desirable through the very process of the formation of the group. And the cycle goes on again and again, at an ever increasing pace, creating more and more ‘innovations’ which overshadow the fact that they are the result of a fundamental process of imitation.

THE ROLE OF THE VISION OF BRITTANY

After Pollock and Orton’s founding article, several writers who studied the relation between the Parisian vision of rural France and Gauguin’s representation of it saw that the province was perceived and represented as being outside both time and history. In her book *Avant-garde Gambits*, Pollock defines this vision of the country as:

...an ideological figure of tourist ideologies. It does not express the real historical conditions which are equally altering rural as well as urban life. It appears as the opposite – untouched, unchanged, simple, natural, wild, primitive, namely, non-modern. The Country becomes the terminus of a whole series of binary oppositions condensed in the terms City versus Country as absolutely opposite poles. As in all binary oppositions, there is hierarchy, with one term dominating its negated partner....⁶²

The question is, how does this opposition create its objects? As we have seen earlier, the image of rural France takes meaning in an opposition to the social undifferentiation and instability of meaning of Paris, but this can be seen from the reverse angle: *the Image of Brittany provides a way of containing and giving meaning to the chaotic undifferentiation of Paris*. For Gauguin Brittany, as a mental construct, is a way of stabilising the undifferentiation of meaning in the avant-garde in relation to its negation, absolute atemporal stability. By being posited outside the historical process it is in fact being posited outside the circle of mimetic rivalry and social undifferentiation which is creating history and in which the sub-culture of the avant-garde plays an active part. Thus the image of Brittany stabilises this undifferentiation into a signifying opposition. The opposition between city and country which Gauguin’s vision of Brittany implies functions as a transcendence, as a series of presuppositions preceding, producing and organising meaning in – among other things – his construction of a self-representation.

The ‘savagery’ and primitivism of Brittany participates in Gauguin’s self-description as a ‘savage’, a ‘barbarian’ and a ‘primitive’. In his

62. Pollock, *op. cit.*, pp 60–1.

63. Alain Buisine, 'L'Original et l'Antérieur: Paul Gauguin', *Revue des Sciences Humaines, Primitivismes*, 227, 1992-93, pp 99-118.
64. 'Je m'en vais à Panama vivre en sauvage'. Paul Gauguin, *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin, 1873-1888*, ed. Victor Merlhèse, Paris, 1984, No. 122, p 147.
65. 'moi je suis plutôt porté à un état primitif'. Ibid, No. 182, p 284.
66. Paul Gauguin, *Oviri. Écrits d'un Sauvage*, ed. Daniel Guérin, Idée/Gallimard, Paris, 1974, p 47.
67. Ibid, p 223.
68. Ibid, p 80.
69. 'Je suis par terre, mais pas encore vaincu. L'Indien qui sourit dans le supplice est-il vaincu? Décidément le sauvage est meilleur que nous. Tu t'es trompé un jour en disant que j'avais tort de dire que je suis un sauvage. Cela est cependant vrai: je suis un sauvage. Et les civilisés le pressentent: car dans mes oeuvres il n'y a rien qui surprenne, dérouté, si ce n'est ce 'malgré-moi-de-sauvage'. C'est pourquoi c'est inimitable.' Ibid, p 339. James Knapp describes this ambiguous self-identification; he writes that 'Gauguin saw himself as both the subjected savage and the dominating conqueror' (James Knapp, op. cit., p 5).
70. In a study of Freud's condensation Tzvetan Todorov distinguishes between categories as non-mutually exclusive and classes as mutually exclusive. We will be using this distinction. See Tzvetan Todorov, *Théorie du Symbole*, Paris, 1985, p 287.
71. Our definition of condensation is described by Freud as 'contresens' (ibid, p 287). In Freud's study this is solely a produced statement, while in our case we consider it to be a *productive* pre-statement.

article 'L'Original et l'Antérieur: Paul Gauguin'⁶³ Alain Buisine remarked on how frequently Gauguin described himself as a 'savage' and as a 'primitive': to his wife in 1887 he wrote: 'I am going to Panama to live as a savage'.⁶⁴ To Emile Bernard in 1888, comparing himself with Vincent Van Gogh whom he describes as being rather romantic: 'Me, I am rather inclined towards a primitive state'.⁶⁵ This same self-description is found in letters to Odillon Redon,⁶⁶ Daniel de Monfried⁶⁷ and André Fontainas⁶⁸ among others. Yet a letter to Charles Morice, written shortly before his death, shows very clearly the ambiguity of this self-identification:

I am on the ground, but not yet beaten. Is the Indian that smiles under torture beaten? Decidedly, the savage is better than us. You made a mistake one day in saying that I was wrong to say that I am a savage. It is nevertheless true: I am a savage. And the civilised intuit it: because in my works there is nothing that surprises, disorients, if not this 'despite-myself-a-savage'. This is why it is inimitable.⁶⁹

In this moving letter, expressing genuine pain we must not forget, the contradictory elements that constitute his self-description show very clearly: 'Decidedly, the savage is better than us'; who is this 'us' if not Gauguin the civilised European talking to Charles Morice, another civilised European, and commenting on those non-European 'Savages'? For an instant Gauguin's savagery disappears in favour of his always implicit statute as a civilised man talking to his equal, only to re-emerge stronger than ever: 'I am a savage and the civilised intuit it', reaffirming this savagery as an inherent quality so essential that it is beyond his control: 'this despite-myself-a-savage'. Gauguin's self-representation and, incidentally, his relations with art historians are summed up in the structure of the relation that is found in this letter. Charles Morice, the 'civilised', the 'us', is in the same position most art historians occupy when talking about the artist and about the 'savages' or the 'primitives', the 'they' which form the presupposition of their discourse. Gauguin, as a representation, condenses these two opposites on a synchronic level and diachronically oscillates between them.

Condensation is the synchronicity of two mutually exclusive classes⁷⁰ into one ensemble. Those classes, because they are mutually exclusive, cannot be said to be the property of the same ensemble at the same time without contradiction. Yet, they derive their meaning from their mutual definition of each other through their opposition. This means that, in its deployment through the succession of time inherent in its perception, this ensemble oscillates between its two mutually exclusive classes. So while one class is present the other will be absent – the relationship between the present elements and the absent is the relationship between the explicit statements and the implicit;⁷¹ for instance, to say that someone is civilised is to imply that someone else is not, i.e. is a savage. Since the meaning of a given present class has its condition of possibility in its opposition to the absent one and vice versa – this including the very presence and absence that only exist in opposition to each other and which encompass the production of that meaning – and since the succession of instants is the condition of possibility of this presence and absence, this means that the opposition

contained in the argument is inherent in its temporality. This coincidence between succession and opposition comes from the law of non-contradiction that governs the production or oscillation of the mutually exclusive classes in time.

In his self-representation as a 'savage' Gauguin is continuously condensing two mutually exclusive classes. Gauguin's work implicitly takes its meaning by being produced within the institutional and historical framework of the avant-garde and by being targeted towards it. Yet he oscillates between this role and its postulated opposite, in essence oscillating between the production of meaning for a Parisian framework and the negation of this same Parisian framework through a valorisation of its opposite – primitive Brittany. Both roles have the condition of possibility of their expression *within* the framework of the avant-garde. By constructing a self-image that is both the affirmation and negation of its condition of possibility, he posits a principle that generates and structures his paintings and their perception as part of the meaning produced by the ensemble of the avant-garde. This principle should not be perceived as a search for identity (the usual art historical explanation for Gauguin's travel to Brittany) but rather as an oscillation within a structure of disguise. The use of this disguise is within a space that is mythological in its description and ritualistic in its practice. This space is Avant-gardism itself.