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The Death of Georges Seurat: Neo-Impressionism and the Fate of the Avant-Garde in 1891*

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Abstract

This essay examines the critical and artistic responses to the death of Georges Seurat in 1891. While some at the time saw the avant-garde divided between scientifically-oriented neo-impressionism and mystical symbolism, the posthumous understanding of Seurat's work increasingly collapsed the two categories. In particular, the neo-impressionist embrace of the aesthetic of Charles Henry, in which compositional lines produced predictable effects on the viewer, made it possible to see Seurat's paintings in purely formal, indeed idealist, terms. The neo-impressionist avant-garde consequently struggled to define its distinctive nature over the course of the year, with important consequences for later art.

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Yesterday I went to Seurat's funeral. I saw Signac who was deeply moved by this great misfortune. I believe you are right, pointillism is finished, but I think it will have consequences which later on will be of the utmost importance for art.

Camille Pissarro, letter to his son Lucien,
1 April 1891¹

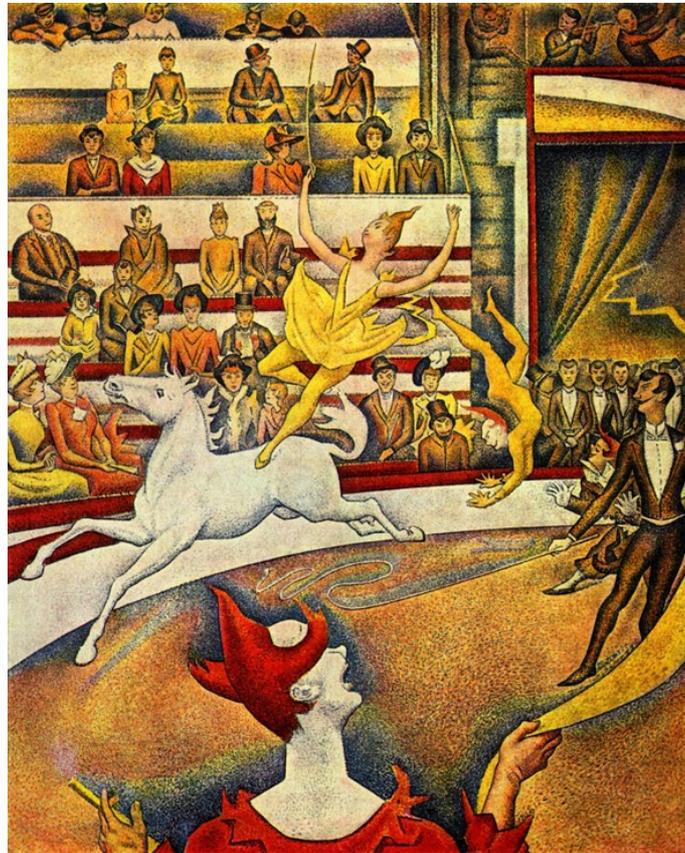
Introduction

[1] When the body of Georges Seurat (1859-1891) entered the family vault in Père Lachaise cemetery, the artist's last work, *Cirque*, still hung in room five of the *Salon des Indépendants* (Fig. 1). At the time, the published reviews of the exhibition suggested a certain lack of enthusiasm for the canvas. The critics agreed that it was a work of

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¹ Camille Pissarro, letter to Lucien Pissarro, 1 April 1890, in: *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro: Tome 3/1891-1894*, ed. Janine Bailly-Herzberg, Paris 1988, 54: "Je suis allé à l'enterrement de Seurat hier; j'ai vu Signac qui est bien affecté de ce grand malheur. Je crois que tu as raison, c'est fini le pointillé, mais je pense qu'il se dégagera d'autres conséquences qui seront d'une très grande conséquence plus tard pour l'art"; trans. in Camille Pissarro, *Letters to His Son Lucien*, ed. John Rewald, New York 1995, 158.

"experimental interest" by a "pure theoretician of impressionism," whose concern with the "science of colors" had led him to expand "the love of pointillism all the way to the picture frames."² But even those who hesitantly admired the painting's "happy result," declined to judge the qualities of the "process" – that is, the neo-impressionist technique.³

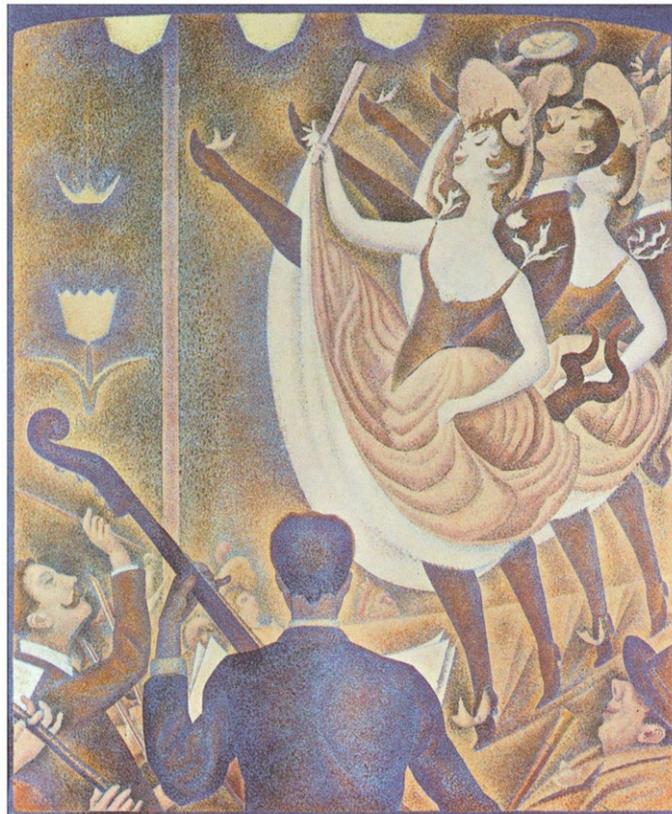


1 Georges Seurat, *Cirque (The Circus)*, 1890-91, oil on canvas, 185 x 152 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris (source: The Yorck Project/Wikimedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georges_Seurat_019.jpg)

² Arsène Alexandre, "Le Salon des Indépendants," in: *Paris* (20 March 1891), 2: "Quant à son grand tableau du *Cirque*, il sera fort discuté; mais si on veut bien se dire qu'il a avant tout un intérêt d'expérimentation, l'on devra reconnaître que cette expérience est curieuse, et qu'il en doit forcément sortir quelque chose un jour ou l'autre." M. F., "Le Salon des Indépendants," in: *Le XIXe siècle* (20 March 1891), as quoted in Eric Darragon, "Pégase à Fernando: À propos de *Cirque* et du réalisme de Seurat en 1891," in: *Revue de l'art* 86 (1989), 44-57, here 56, n. 7: "Le grand tableau de M. Seurat, le *Cirque*, malgré des agencements de lignes assez curieux en leur bizarrerie, est sans perspective aucune. C'est une œuvre de pur théoricien de l'impressionnisme." Ch. Formentin, "Chez les Artistes Indépendants," in: *Le Jour* (27 March 1891), as quoted in Darragon, "Pégase à Fernando," 56, n. 14: "le *Cirque* de M. Seurat où la science des couleurs fait pardonner presque l'incorrection du dessin." Paul ***, "L'Exposition des Indépendants," in: *Le National* (21 March 1891), as quoted in Darragon, "Pégase à Fernando," 56, n. 6: "Et cette peinture charentonnaise n'est pas le cri suprême du genre. Il y a M. Seurat qui pousse l'amour du pointillé jusqu'à pointiller ses cadres."

³ L. Roger-Milès, "Exposition des Indépendants," in: *Le Soir* (26 March 1891), as quoted in Darragon, "Pégase à Fernando," 56, n. 8: "Nierez-vous parce qu'il y a cette complexité d'effets recherchés, nierez-vous que M. Seurat ne soit un artiste? Ce serait là une grande injustice; on peut discuter ses procédés, on ne peut nier la résultante heureuse des efforts accomplis."

- [2] Perhaps no single incident crystallized the seeming failure of *Cirque* to capture and hold an audience than the one later related by Charles Angrand. On about 23 March, he and Seurat witnessed Pierre Puvis de Chavannes enter room five, pause to study some works by Maurice Denis (1870-1943), and then proceed past *Cirque* without stopping.⁴ So upsetting was this pointed indifference that Seurat reportedly fled the exhibit.⁵ Angrand never saw him again.



2 Georges Seurat, *Chahut*, 1889-90, oil on canvas, 169 x 141 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo (source: The Yorck Project/
Wikimedia Commons,
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georges_Seurat_013.jpg)

- [3] In the wake of his untimely demise some six days later, however, Seurat's fortunes rather typically began to rise. In early April, critics started focusing not on the artist's scientific and impressionist concerns, but rather on how neo-impressionism might be folded into the increasingly dominant theoretical understanding of symbolism. To take a notable example, the co-founder of *La Revue wagnérienne*, Teodor de Wyzewa, reversing years of coolness to neo-impressionism, loudly lamented the painter's death.⁶ Jules Antoine gave one possible explanation for such a reconciliation: "Seurat was attempting to get out of

⁴ Charles Angrand, letter to Gustave Coquiot, quoted in Coquiot, *Seurat*, Paris 1924, 166-167. Angrand dates the incident to the Monday or Tuesday before Easter 1891, that is 23 or 24 March. No doubt Seurat was especially disappointed with the reaction to his painting, as he had worked hard organizing the hanging of the exhibition. For his part, Angrand played a special role in the painting: he appears in the first row of circus spectators.

⁵ Charles Angrand, letter to Paul Signac, 1900, cited in Robert L. Herbert, "Seurat and Puvis de Chavannes," in: *Yale Art Gallery Bulletin* 25:2 (October 1959), 22-29, here 29.

Realism, which he found limited. He produced, in this new way, two works: *Le Chahut* [Fig. 2] and *Le Cirque*, conceived in a symbolic spirit."⁷ Before long, even Félix Fénéon came to admit that "Seurat's *Cirque* is symbolic."⁸ Indeed, a consensus gradually emerged that Seurat's work approached more closely symbolism than the impressionism with which he had once been associated, and by early 1892, neo-impressionism had in many respects become indistinguishable from symbolism.

- [4] This essay seeks to explain these shifts in Seurat's posthumous reception by placing them within the context of contemporaneous art theory and production. As a close analysis of the avant-garde in 1891 makes clear, neo-impressionism entered a crisis following the death of Seurat in large part because it had already been collapsed into a rising artistic movement that many perceived, perhaps incorrectly, to be its antithesis. Seurat's painting became a site of contestation, and the very meaning of neo-impressionism was at stake. Would his art, and by extension neo-impressionism as a whole, be understood as a scientific and socially-engaged version of impressionism or as a Wagnerian painting, fundamentally symbolic in spirit?

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Neo-Impressionism and Symbolism in 1891

- [5] To call Seurat's *Cirque* "symbolic" is, of course, to beg the question of definition. Certainly, at first glance the painting's subject matter and pointillist technique offer no obvious relation to contemporary conceptions of symbolism. In what way, for example, could they be said to "express Ideas by translating them into a special language"?⁹ Seeking to explain Seurat's work in precisely these terms, however, Wyzewa approvingly cited the painter's concern with the expressive potential of colors and lines:

He wanted to know why certain combinations of colors produced an impression of joy, and he made, with this concern in mind, a sort of catalogue where each nuance was associated with the emotion it suggested. In its turn the expressive power of lines seemed to him to be a problem that could be given a definitive solution, for lines too have in them a secret power of joy or melancholy.¹⁰

⁶ Teodor de Wyzewa, "Georges Seurat," in: *L'Art dans les deux mondes* 22 (18 April 1891), 263-264.

⁷ Jules Antoine, "Georges Seurat," in: *La Revue indépendante* 19:54 (April 1891), 89-93, here 92: "Il a produit dans cette nouvelle voie deux œuvres: *Le Cahut* et *Le Cirque*, conçues dans un esprit symbolique."

⁸ Félix Fénéon, "Quelques peintres idéistes," in: *Le Chat noir* (1 September 1891), reprinted in Félix Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes*, ed. Joan Ungersma Halperin, Geneva 1970, vol. 1, 200-202, here 202: "Le *Cirque* de Seurat est symbolique."

⁹ G.-Albert Aurier, "Le Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin," in: *Mercure de France* 2 (March 1891), 155-165, here 160: "d'exprimer, en les traduisant dans un langage spéciale, les Idées."

¹⁰ Wyzewa, "Georges Seurat," 263: "Il voulait savoir pourquoi telles alliances de tons produisaient une impression de tristesse, telles autres, une impression de gaieté: et il s'était fait, à ce point de vue, une sorte de catalogue où chaque nuance était associée à l'émotion qu'elle suggérait. L'expression des lignes, à son tour, lui était ensuite apparue comme un problème capable d'une solution définie; car les lignes aussi ont en elles un secret pouvoir de joie ou de mélancolie"; trans.

- [6] Fénéon also thought the "symbolic" quality of any painting came from its formal power to directly affect a viewer. "A work of art," he wrote, "is eloquent through its internal rhythm – irreducible to our consciousness – and not through its program."¹¹ Such a belief in the immediate and expressive power of Seurat's experiments in color and line carried forward in later formalist accounts of the painting and of the artist's career as a whole. Roger Fry, for one, claimed that the canvas was "a deliberate demonstration of the effect of ascending lines."¹² Robert Goldwater in turn took precisely this focus on the expressive use of line to indicate the artist's belonging to the symbolist generation.¹³ This formalist-symbolist reading of Seurat came to dominate the literature, and recent art historians have consistently underlined the painter's deep concern with controlling the effects his paintings might have on their spectators.¹⁴
- [7] Even in 1891, however, there were those who pointed to other ways of seeing Seurat. In his widely-read obituary, Gustave Kahn pointed to a very different "symbolic" content in *Chahut*. "If you are looking at all costs for a symbol," he wrote, "you will find it in the contrast between the beauty of the dancer, an elegant and modest sprite, and the ugliness of her admirer; you will also find it in the hieratic configuration of the canvas and its subject, a contemporary ignominy."¹⁵ Kahn speaks here with some authority on the contents and effects of the painting. Not only did he own it, he had played a crucial role in disseminating the theories that lay behind it.¹⁶ Likewise, his understanding of the social and political critique such a painting implied flowed from his close ties to the anarchist left, something he shared with many of Seurat's friends and admirers.
- [8] Robert Herbert has consequently interpreted Kahn's analysis to mean that *Chahut* and *Cirque* were intended as "satires upon the middle class."¹⁷ *Cirque* thus offers not only a picture of a modern circus – Gustave Coquiote identified it as the Cirque Fernando in

in Paul Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, New Haven 1996, 108-109.

¹¹ Fénéon, "Quelques peintres idéistes," 202: "Mais c'est par ses rythmes internes irréductibles à notre conscience, non par son programme, qu'une œuvre d'art est éloquente"; trans. in Joan Ungersma Halperin, *Félix Fénéon: Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-De-Siècle Paris*, New Haven 1988, 226.

¹² Roger Fry, "Seurat," in: *The Dial* 81:3 (September 1926), 224-232, here 224.

¹³ Robert J. Goldwater, "Some Aspects of the Development of Seurat's Style," in: *The Art Bulletin* 23:2 (June 1941), 117-130; see also, Goldwater, *Symbolism*, New York 1979, 147.

¹⁴ See, for example, Martha Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde*, Chicago 1996; and, Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*.

¹⁵ Gustave Kahn, "Seurat," in: *L'Art Moderne* 11:14 (5 April 1891), 107-110, here 109: "Si vous cherchez à tout prix un symbole, vous le trouverez encore dans l'opposition de la beauté de la danseuse, luxe de féerie modeste, et la laideur de l'admirateur; aussi vous en trouverez un dans le faire hiératique de cette toile et son sujet, une contemporaine ignominie."

¹⁶ See Gustave Kahn, "De l'esthétique du verre polychrome," in: *La Vogue* 1 (18 April 1886), 54-65.

¹⁷ Robert L. Herbert and Eugenia W. Herbert, "Artists and Anarchists: Unpublished Letters of Pissarro, Signac, and Others," in: *The Burlington Magazine* 102:692 (November 1960), 473-482, here 480.

Montmartre¹⁸ – but more importantly a negative engagement with the emerging mass cultural forms of entertainment. The recuperation of this socio-political content has decisively closed the door on any reductively formalist account of Seurat's painting.¹⁹ But a strictly social-historical or political reading of neo-impressionism likewise founders in the face of the evidence of the painter's social engagement with symbolism and his own silence on political matters. Even Kahn ultimately concluded that Seurat's "way of seeking the symbol [...] lay in the interpretation of the subject, not the subject itself."²⁰ Any serious account of Seurat is consequently forced to acknowledge the seeming contradiction between an "iconography drawn from cheapened urban experience" and an "art of resolute formal autonomy."²¹

[9] This interpretative problem first came to the fore in the struggles over Seurat's legacy in the months following his death. Even as certain political claims for neo-impressionism became more explicit in 1891, the formalist-symbolist reading came to dominate. Although Kahn was by no means the only one to propose a way around this divide – he was, after all, a serious symbolist himself – the blurring of boundaries between neo-impressionism and symbolism made it increasingly difficult to understand Seurat's *Chahut* and *Cirque* as critical representations of modernity. By the end of the year, key artists seeking to reanimate Seurat's ambitions found it all but impossible to hold together the distinctive formal characteristics of his style with its intended social-critical function.

[10] Three weeks after Seurat's funeral, Pissarro sent yet another letter to his son Lucien in London, attaching an article by Albert Aurier entitled "Symbolism in Painting" clipped from the March issue of the *Mercure de France*. Venting spleen at the defense of Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) and his *Vision après le Sermon* (Fig. 3), the painter mocked the critic's claims: "How tenuous is the logic of this *littérateur*. According to him what in the last instance can be dispensed with in a work of art is drawing or painting: only ideas are essential, and these can be indicated with a few symbols."²² What seems to have especially infuriated Pissarro was the claim that his own impressionism (and what Aurier

¹⁸ Coquiote, *Seurat*, 102.

¹⁹ On the relation of Seurat's late work to modernity, see especially Eric Darragon, "Pégase à Fernando"; Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Cambridge, MA 1999, 149-280; and, Howard G. Lay, "Pictorial Acrobatics," in: *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture*, ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg, New Brunswick 2001, 145-179.

²⁰ Kahn, "Seurat," 110: "Cette façon vraiment picturale et artiste de chercher le symbole (sans se soucier du mot) dans l'interprétation d'un sujet, et non dans le sujet, était, à son avis, la plus vraiment suggestive, et il n'est pas seul de cette opinion"; trans. in Henri Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories*, Berkeley 1994, 174.

²¹ Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, New Haven 1996, 6.

²² Pissarro, letter to Lucien, 20 April 1891, in *Correspondance*, 66: "Tu verras combien ce littérateur raisonne sur une pointe d'aiguille; à l'écouter, à la rigueur il n'est pas nécessaire de dessiner ou peindre pour faire de l'art, les idées suffisent, indiquées par quelques signes"; trans. in Pissarro, *Letters*, 163-164.

called the "harlequin-like vision of the pointillists"²³) could be dismissed because they offered simply "the faithful translation *devoid of any sense of the beyond* of an *exclusively sensory impression*, of a sensation."²⁴ Better an honest realism based firmly in sensation, Pissarro surely thought, than the escapist and reactionary fantasy Gauguin offered.



3 Paul Gauguin, *La Vision après le Sermon (La lutte de Jacob avec l'ange) (The Vision after the Sermon [Jacob and the Angel])*, 1888, oil on canvas, 72.2 x 91 cm. Scottish National Gallery of Art, Edinburgh (source: The Yorck Project/Wikimedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul_Gauguin_137.jpg)

[11] In the same letter, Pissarro lashed out at his former student in terms that still resonate in present-day accounts of the artist:

I do not hold his vermillion background against Gauguin [...] I hold it against him that he failed to apply his synthesis to our modern philosophy, which is absolutely social, anti-authoritarian and anti-mystical. [...] Gauguin is no visionary, he is a trickster who has sensed that the bourgeoisie is in full retreat, as a result of the great ideas of solidarity springing up among the people – an idea that is still not conscious of itself, but one that will bear fruit, the only legitimate one! – The symbolists are in the same boat! What do you think? That's why we should be fighting them like the plague!²⁵

²³ Aurier, "Symbolisme en peinture," 156: "l'arlequinesque vision des pointillists."

²⁴ Aurier, "Symbolisme en peinture," 157: "la fidèle traduction *sans nul au-delà* d'une *impression exclusivement sensorielle*, d'une sensation."

²⁵ Pissarro, 20 April 1891, *Correspondance*, 66: "Je ne reproche pas à Gauguin d'avoir fait un fond vermillon [...] je lui reproche de ne pas appliquer sa synthèse à notre philosophie moderne qui est absolument sociale, anti-autoritaire et antimystique. [...] Gauguin n'est pas un voyant, c'est un malin qui a senti un retour rétrograde de la bourgeoisie en arrière par suite des grandes idées de solidarité qui germent dans le peuple, idée inconsciente mais féconde et la seule légitime! Les symbolistes sont dans le même cas! Qu'en penses-tu?...Aussi il faut les combattre comme la

[12] Gauguin and symbolism had clearly become the enemy, and for many the differences were obvious. Critics in 1891 consistently divided the avant-garde between Seurat and Gauguin, *pointillistes* and *cloisonnistes*, *impressionnistes* and *idéistes*.²⁶ Nonetheless, Pissarro's spite must have been fueled in no small part by the perception that the symbolists had made inroads to the neo-impressionist camp. He knew full well that Seurat and his closest follower, Paul Signac (1863-1935), had attended the banquet celebrating the symbolist Jean Moréas in February, and indeed that they went to another one, on March 23, in honor of Gauguin's imminent departure for Tahiti.²⁷ That Seurat found himself raising a glass in celebration of his key rival only hours after seeing Puvion reject him must have left a bitter taste in the mouth.

[13] No one in March 1891 could have missed the threat symbolism had come to pose to the once-dominant neo-impressionist avant-garde. Pissarro was no exception. Against the background of "gambits" and jockeying that followed the death of Seurat and of Gauguin's "going away," the heated tone of his correspondence was surely fueled by a need to distinguish the good and the bad not only within the broader avant-garde, but within neo-impressionism itself.²⁸ And what troubled him most was the abandonment of sensation for something else entirely, something quite unsettling to the dyed-in-the-wool materialist. Even if in private Gauguin complained about perceived injuries from "Pissarro and company,"²⁹ and the neo-impressionists in turn mocked Gauguin's pretentiousness,³⁰ in public the interests of the camps were worryingly close. Or rather, for some, they did not seem mutually exclusive.

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peste!"; trans. in T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven 1999, 80. On the context of this letter, see Belinda Thomson, "Camille Pissarro and Symbolism: Some Thoughts Prompted by the Recent Discovery of an Annotated Article," in: *The Burlington Magazine* 124:946 (January 1982), 14-21, 23.

²⁶ See Emile Verhaeren, "Le Salon des artistes Indépendants," in: *La Nation* (22 March 1891), reprinted in Emile Verhaeren, *Écrits sur l'art*, ed. Paul Aron, Brussels 1997, 416-418; Gaston Lesaulx, "A propos des Indépendants: Impressionnistes et idéistes," in: *La Bataille* (31 March 1891), 3; and, Jules Antoine, "Critique d'Art. Pavillon de la Ville de Paris, Exposition des Artistes Indépendants," in: *La Plume* 49 (1 May 1891), 157.

²⁷ Halperin, *Fénéon*, 219-20.

²⁸ On "gambits," see Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of Art History*, New York and London 1992; on "the going away," see Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, and Gill Perry, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven and London 1993, 3-34.

²⁹ Paul Gauguin, letter to Emil Schuffenecker, [Brittany, 1890], quoted in Arsène Alexandre, *Paul Gauguin: Sa vie et le sens de son oeuvre*, Paris 1930, 154: "Quant à ceux qui peuvent me faire de tort, Pissarro et compagnie, c'est plus pour mon talent qu'ils crient que pour mon caractère."

³⁰ Paul Signac, letter to Félix Fénéon, Brussels, 10 February 1891, quoted in Halperin, *Fénéon*, 222: "Be in Love, Be Mysterious, Be Symbolist, Be Boulangist, Be always well dressed, Be Grenadine {syrup}: Trust old Gauguin!"

Denis's Neo-Impressionism

- [14] If one painting at the *Salon des Indépendants* in 1891 exemplified the attempted harmonization of Gauguin-style mystical symbolism with neo-impressionist technique it was Denis's *Mystère catholique* (Fig. 4).



4 Maurice Denis, *Mystère catholique* (*Catholic Mystery*), 1890, oil on canvas, 51 x 79 cm. Private collection (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2012. Photo: © Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts, photo: Louis Deschamps. Reprod. from: Guy Cogeval et al., eds., *Maurice Denis, 1870-1943*, exh. cat., Paris 1994, p. 127, cat. 8)

- [15] The artist's first contribution to the *Indépendants*, the small painting seems to have been chosen with due deliberation. Dated to May 1890, it was the third version of the painting Denis had completed since April 1889. Each variation of the canvas contained the same scene: in a nineteenth-century interior, a white-clad Virgin Mary leans toward the angel Gabriel, who, adorned in modern Catholic vestments, approaches from the left, led by two altar boys carrying candles. On a windowsill, behind which a hilly landscape in early spring can be seen, a single white lily – a conventional symbol of the Virgin, found especially in scenes of the Annunciation³¹ – sits in a vase, echoing the curve of Mary's body. Even if stylistic inspirations in Fra Angelico and Byzantine art might have been missed, everyone in 1891 would have recognized the painting's belonging to a very conventional iconography. The Greek inscription at top right (ΑΣΠΑΣΜΟΣ, *aspasmos*: "greeting") signals the text of Luke 1:29 and marks the moment of the Virgin's *Cogitatio*: "What is this greeting?" Denis himself later referred to the painting as an Annunciation, but he apparently chose the less "banal" title in 1891 in deference to the symbolist poets he then admired.³² Of course, the religious content of the painting could not have been

³¹ See George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, Oxford 1954, 33.

³² See Maurice Denis, "Le Symbolisme et l'art religieux moderne," in: *La Revue des jeunes* 21 (1918), as quoted in *Maurice Denis, 1870-1943*, exh. cat., Paris 1994, 128: "J'avais exposé aux *Indépendants* une Annonciation que j'appelais, par crainte d'être banal, *Mystère Catholique*."

ignored against the background of the emerging Catholic *Ralliement* to the Third Republic.³³ That the Feast of the Annunciation passed while the painting hung at the *Indépendants* must have likewise raised a few eyebrows. Yet, the *aspasmos* of the *Mystère catholique* might also have functioned as Denis's own cryptic "greeting" to his (modern) public; the vestments and setting indicate a desire for the painting to be seen as belonging to modernity, not tradition.³⁴

[16] Perhaps nothing in *Mystère catholique* marked Denis's avant-garde ambitions more obviously than his seeming embrace of neo-impressionism. Across the canvas, the painter applied small dot-like brush marks (*points*) on top of background planes of color. The result is by no means divisionist – hues are subdued throughout, and simultaneous contrast is avoided – but for many, the painting could not be anything but neo-impressionist. In his review of the exhibit, for example, Emile Verhaeren declared Denis "a new disciple of pointillist painting," grouping him in with Seurat, Signac, and Maximilien Luce.³⁵ The Belgian poet was not naïve about neo-impressionism – he owned several paintings by Seurat, had corresponded extensively with him, and for years had reviewed the exhibits of the *Indépendants* in Paris and their avant-garde equivalent, *Les XX*, in Brussels.³⁶ That a critic of such sophistication could nonetheless place one of Gauguin's followers in Seurat's camp seems astonishing in hindsight, but such was the state of play in 1891.

[17] Denis's neo-impressionism was not an isolated case. Around this time, other members of what came to be known as the Nabis adapted elements of the pointillist technique. In 1890, Edouard Vuillard produced several paintings – for instance, *Grand-mère à l'évier* (*Grandmother at the Sink*, 1890, private collection) – that made use of various colored

³³ The Vatican's policy of *Ralliement* can be dated from November 1890, when Cardinal Lavignerie gave a speech calling for Catholic loyalty to the Republic. See Richard Thomson, *The Troubled Republic: Visual Culture and Social Debate in France 1889-1900*, New Haven 2004, 120. On Denis and Catholicism, see Katherine M. Kuenzli, *The Nabis and Intimate Modernism: Painting and the Decorative at the Fin-de-Siècle*, Farnham and Burlington 2010, 105-148.

³⁴ Although scaled for exhibition, the 1889 version of the *Mystère catholique* (now in the Musée Départemental Maurice Denis, Saint-Germain-en-Laye) does not contain the *aspasmos* inscription, suggesting that Denis may have added the Greek specifically for the exhibition of the 1890 version at the *Indépendants*. He later produced three smaller versions of the pointillist painting for private buyers.

³⁵ See Verhaeren, "Le Salon des artistes indépendants," 417: "Un nouvel adepte de la peinture pointilliste est M. Denis." This article was probably more widely read in its abridged form in *L'Art Moderne* 14 (5 April 1891), 111-112. In this second publication, the critic's grouping of Denis with the *pointillistes* rather than the *cloisonnistes* remained unchanged.

³⁶ See Robert L. Herbert, "Seurat and Emile Verhaeren: Unpublished Letters," in: *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 54 (December 1959), 315-328. As indicated by Théo Van Rysselberghe's 1903 painting *La Lecture par Emile Verhaeren* (*The Lecture by Emile Verhaeren*, Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent), the poet continued to function as one of the strongest links between neo-impressionist painting and symbolist literature. Image available online at <http://www.mskgent.be/en/collection/1900-three-portraits/theo-van-rysselberghe-the-lecture-by-emile-verhaeren> (accessed 28 June 2012).

points.³⁷ Pierre Bonnard's key contribution to the *Salon des Indépendants* – the four decorative panels known as *Femmes au jardin* (*Women in the Garden*, 1891, Musée d'Orsay) – manifests a similar paint application. Notably, the background of the first panel, *Femme à la robe à pois blancs* (*Woman in a Polka-Dot Dress*), consists entirely of green dots, echoing but not identical to the polka-dot dress of the female figure. This tongue-in-cheek assimilation of the pointillist technique, without divisionism, points to a highly decorative adaptation of neo-impressionism that leaves sensation-based color theory behind. Fénéon later criticized Denis for precisely this twist on *le point*: "As for the manner: little dots that he brocades on flat background colors, to add some sort of epidermal life to the painting."³⁸ Though the subject matter sits some distance from Seurat's and the use of pointillism is quite different, Denis attempts to adapt neo-impressionism to symbolism. Or more accurately, he does not perceive them to be antithetical.

- [18] In 1891, only Adolphe Retté, a symbolist poet and a friend of Denis, had anything to say about *Mystère catholique*.³⁹ Despite a shared enthusiasm for mysticism and idealism, the critic in fact discussed the painting in primarily formal terms – "what melody of lines and what smoothness of tone!" he proclaimed.⁴⁰ Tellingly, the terms parallel those used to describe Seurat in the same review:

Consider *le Cirque*: what an intense sensation of radiant joy, what an undulating music the lines make [...] Everything plays a part in producing the desired effect: the palpitating orange light in which the picture is bathed, the linear layout, which is made up entirely of curves inflected and *precipitated* in the direction of the main motif.⁴¹

- [19] The analogy Retté here proposes between painting and music was widespread and derives from various sources, including Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Charles Henry. Echoing Wyzewa, the ultimate Wagnerian, it also points to one of the crucial overlaps in artistic practice at this moment: the belief in the ability of lines and colors and other formal elements to convey an emotional, spiritual, or intellectual meaning. In Seurat, the direction of lines and color harmony in *Cirque* are seen to carry feelings of cheerfulness, where for Denis, they seek to impart a spiritual response, what Retté calls the "symbol of

³⁷ On Vuillard and neo-impressionism, see Guy Cogeval, *Edouard Vuillard*, exh. cat., Washington, D.C. 2003, 58-59.

³⁸ Fénéon, "Quelques peintres idéistes," 200: "Comme moyen d'exécution: un pointillis, qu'il broche sur des fonds à plat, pour douer le tableau de quelque vie épidermique."

³⁹ Denis had befriended Retté in 1890, around the time he finished the third version of *Mystère catholique*, and apparently asked him to give a positive review of the Indépendants in 1891. See Kuenzli, *The Nabis*, 37.

⁴⁰ Adolphe Retté, "Septième exposition des Artistes Indépendants: Notes cursives," in: *L'Ermitage* (May 1891), 293-301, here 299: "quelle mélodie de lignes et quelle douceur de ton!"

⁴¹ Retté, "Artistes Indépendants," 294: "Voyez *le Cirque*: quelle intense sensation de joie lumineuse, quelle ondayante musique de lignes. [...] Tout concourt à l'effet cherché: la palpitante lumière orangée qui baigne le tableau, l'ordonnance du dessin tout en courbes infléchies et *précipitées* dans le sens du motif essentiel."

grace."⁴² The shared belief here is that formal devices can structure, indeed determine, an emotional or aesthetic effect in the viewer.

[20] The origins and development of this "affective formalism" can be found in French art theory dating back to the early 19th century and before.⁴³ From Nicolas Poussin to Eugène Delacroix, a strain of thinking about painting sought increasingly to clarify how color and line could be organized by artists to produce coordinated and predictable effects on a spectator. In the writings of Charles Blanc, in particular, these earlier attempts at expressive use of form were theorized and made coherent for later artistic production. Seurat was obviously not the only reader of Blanc's 1867 *Grammaire des arts du dessin* who seized upon propositions like this one: "Straight or curved, horizontal or vertical, parallel or divergent, all lines have a secret relationship with the feelings."⁴⁴ Broadly speaking, then, the theoretical underpinnings of neo-impressionism were nothing new – Signac would later emphasize its origins in the color theory of Delacroix⁴⁵ – only the means of achieving the ends had changed.

[21] The writings of Charles Henry, which first appeared in 1885, seemed to offer both a recapitulation of these older notions of formal expressiveness, and something more adaptable to the artistic moment of the late 1880s. Especially appealing to Signac and others within the neo-impressionist camp was the notion that, as Christine Poggi puts it, "both color and the directional movement of line expressed universal human emotions independently of their descriptive or anecdotal function."⁴⁶ His (pseudo-)science sought to determine, in other words, which forms produced which effects. Whether or not Seurat quoted directly from this dictionary of form-effect in *Chahut* and *Cirque*, the contemporaneous articulation of his own aesthetics parallels that of Henry. In a widely cited statement, the artist clearly identified a direct relation between cheerful, calm, and sad effects and certain precise combinations of color, tint, and line.⁴⁷ Kahn, among others, attributed this understanding directly to Henry's influence. For many, then,

⁴² Retté, "Artistes Indépendants," 299: "symbole de la grace."

⁴³ Much of what I say in this and the following paragraph is indebted to the work of Todd Cronan, whose forthcoming book *Matisse, Bergson and the Philosophical Temper of Modernism* (The University of Minnesota Press) offers a more extended account of this history and its consequences for modernist painting. The absence of the names Charles Baudelaire, Humbert de Superville, and David Sutter from my own account indicates its obvious simplification.

⁴⁴ Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts du dessin: Architecture, sculpture, peinture*, Paris 1867, 532: "Droites ou courbes, horizontales ou verticales, parallèles ou divergentes, toutes les lignes ont un rapport secret avec le sentiment."

⁴⁵ See Paul Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au Néo-Impressionnisme*, Paris 1899.

⁴⁶ Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage*, New Haven 1992, 170.

⁴⁷ See Kahn, "Seurat," 1891, 109. Seurat's subsequent letter to Maurice Beaubourg, which he never mailed, is now more famous, but it did not appear in print until the 1920s. Before then, Jules Christophe's biography of Seurat, which Kahn quotes, contained the only known statement by the artist on the wider theoretical basis of his art.

Seurat's later work was, for better or worse, an experimental test of certain theoretical precepts, ones that very soon became identified with symbolist aesthetics. This is precisely what Wyzewa and others found alluring in Seurat's late work.

[22] Critics of various stripes shared the view that *Chahut* and *Cirque* should be understood in light of the turn to Henry-inspired formalism. In March of 1890, Georges Lecomte declared that in neo-impressionism, "a cheerful sensation [*une sensation de gaieté*] will not be expressed only by bright reds, oranges, greens, and so forth... but by lines directed from low to high and by angles whose summits are turned towards the base. Everything will be calculated with this concern in mind."⁴⁸ A year later, Alphonse Germain riffed on the analysis: "In *Cirque* everything has been put together according to harmony by analogy, the reconciliation of opposites, with cheerful sensations in mind [*en vue des sensations gaies*]: ascending lines in complementary directions [...] successive contrast of tones, a very strong orange dominant, accentuated by a frame opposed in its tones and tints to the whole."⁴⁹ When Retté thus described the "palpitating orange light," the "linear layout," and the "curves inflected and precipitated" in the same painting, he merely echoed a widespread critical consensus about Seurat's adaptation of Henry's theoretical refinements. The only difference he sees in the case of Denis is that the neo-impressionist theoretical apparatus has been grafted on to a wholly religious iconography.

[23] Although relatively few recognized it at the time, we now know the depth of Denis's own commitment to this kind of formalism. In 1890, a few months after completing *Mystère catholique*, he published under the pseudonym Pierre Louis the now famous "Definition du néo-traditionnisme." The opening sentence goes a long way towards explaining the seeming incongruity of a pointillist Annunciation: "Recall that a picture – before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote – is essentially a plane surface covered with colors in a certain assembled order."⁵⁰ Often seen as a shot across the bow of

⁴⁸ Georges Lecomte, "Société des artistes Indépendants. Sixième exposition," in: *L'Art moderne* (30 March 1890), 100-101, here 100: "Une sensation de gaieté ne sera pas seulement exprimée par des vermillons, des oranges, des verts, etc.... mais par des lignes dirigées de bas en haut et par des angles dont le sommet est tourné vers le bas. Tout sera calculé dans ce souci."

⁴⁹ Alphonse Germain, "A l'exposition des Indépendants," in: *Moniteur des arts* (27 March 1891), as quoted in Eric Darragon, "Pégase à Fernando," 56, n.9: "Tout, dans le *Cirque* de Seurat, est combiné d'après l'harmonie par l'analogie, la conciliation des contraires, en vue des sensations gaies: ascendance des lignes se complétant par leurs directions [...] contraste successif des tons, dominante orangé très écrite qu'accentue un cadre en opposition de tons et teintes l'ensemble."

⁵⁰ Pierre Louis [Maurice Denis], "Définition du néo-traditionnisme," in: *Art et critique* 65 (23 August 1890): 540-542, here 540: "Se rappeler qu'un tableau – avant d'être un cheval de bataille, une femme nue, ou une quelconque anecdote – est essentiellement une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées"; trans. Peter Collier in: *Art in Theory, 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood with Jason Gaiger, Oxford 1998, 863. The "Beaux-Arts" section of *Art et Critique* had been filled in the previous weeks by Jules Antoine's "Les peintres néo-impressionnistes," in: *Art et critique* 63 (9 August 1890), 509-510; 64 (16 August 1890), 524-526. For the interest and controversy Denis's article immediately raised, see Alphonse Germain, "Du tempérament peintre," in: *Art et critique* 70 (27 September 1890), 618-620; and, Pierre Louis [Maurice Denis], "A M. Alphonse Germain," in: *Art et critique* 73 (18 October 1890), 667-668.

naturalism, this quote remains a ubiquitous piece of evidence in the story of modernism. Only a few at the time, however, seized on it as an explanatory tool. Remarkably, Fénéon – and only he – drew a direct comparison between this statement and neo-impressionism in his comments on the *Salon*. In a dialogue with "Willy" published in *Le Chat noir*, he argued that the neo-impressionists realized Denis's formalism more persuasively even than the symbolists:

Better than those I first listed for you, my dear Willy, and who assume a drab coloring or cacophonous of aleatory allegories [here he is referring to Gauguin, Denis, and others] these painters realize the definition established by Pierre-Louis Denis himself: 'A picture – before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote – is essentially a plane surface covered with colors in a certain assembled order.'⁵¹

- [24] Importantly, and tellingly, Fénéon was the very first to judge modern works of art by this particular standard, and he applied it to Seurat and company. Although it rests on a less "scientific" formalism than that of the neo-impressionists, it is well to note that Denis deliberately chose to show the most pointillist version of *Mystère catholique* at the *Salon des Indépendants*, thereby begging the very comparison Fénéon proposes. The critic simply confirms what Denis surely intended to convey by following the publication of his neo-traditionist treatise with the display of an explicitly neo-impressionist painting: the two terms rhyme. Whether the public understood Denis moving into the territory of neo-impressionist practice or neo-impressionism moving into the theoretical gravity of symbolism, the underlying proposition is that they occupy the same space.

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Signac's Symbolism

- [25] If there was one painting at the *Salon des Indépendants* that matched in turn Denis's conceptual fluidity it was Signac's *Portrait de Félix Fénéon, Opus 217 (Sur l'émail d'un fond rythmique de mesures et d'angles, de tons et de teintes, le portrait de M. Félix Fénéon en 1890) (Portrait of Félix Fénéon, Opus 217 [Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890])* (Fig. 5). Significantly, the picture portrays the one critic who explicitly drew together the two sides of the avant-garde around the theoretical question of formalist-symbolism, and it does so in a manner that insists on that same conjunction. Fénéon stands in profile, his left hand holding a dandyish top hat, gloves, and cane, his right hand extending a cyclamen flower. That the bloom has frequently been mistaken for

⁵¹ "Artistes Indépendants: Sténographie par Willy," in: *Le Chat Noir* (21 March 1891), reprinted in Fénéon, *Oeuvres*, 1:181-182, here 182: "Mieux que ceux que je vous énumérais d'abord, mon doux Willy, et qui revêtent d'un coloriage terne ou cacophonique d'aléatoires allégories, ces peintres réalisent la définition établie par Pierre-Louis Denis lui-même: 'Un tableau – avant d'être un cheval de bataille, une femme nue, ou une quelconque anecdote – est essentiellement une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées'." Halperin attributes this text to Fénéon alone; "Willy" was the penname of Henry Gauthier-Villars.

a "decadent lily"⁵² no doubt stems from the "unambiguous" reference to Oscar Wilde's legendary promenades through the streets of London carrying a lily or sunflower.⁵³ The Irish writer thought these flowers especially "decorative,"⁵⁴ and Signac's botanical choice likely derived from a similar sensibility.⁵⁵ Of note, the "circle" (κύκλος, or κύκλος) embedded etymologically in the flower's name serves as a cryptic symbolic link to the prominent swirling background of the painting. This "decorative" fan of "beats and angles, tones and tints," manifested neo-impressionism's formalist tendencies in their most pronounced limit case. The Wagnerian musical analogy is, of course, built into the "rhythmic" title, and the opus number – Signac used these regularly at this time – signals a quasi-abstract ambition.



5 Paul Signac, *Portrait de Félix Fénéon, Opus 217 (Portrait of Félix Fénéon, Opus 217)*, 1890, oil on canvas, 73.5 x 92.5 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York (© Museum of Modern Art. Reprod. from: Anne Distel et al., eds., *Signac, 1863-1935, exh. cat.*, Paris 2001, p. 203, cat. 51)

⁵² Robert L. Herbert, *Neo-Impressionism*, exh. cat., New York 1968, 140. See also, *Masterpieces from the David and Peggy Rockefeller Collection*, exh. cat., New York 1994, 38.

⁵³ David Sweetman, *Explosive Acts: Toulouse-Lautrec, Oscar Wilde, Félix Fénéon and the Art & Anarchy of the Fin de Siècle*, New York 1999, 225. See also, Herbert, *Neo-Impressionism*, 141. Wilde had become close to French symbolists at the very moment that Signac's painting appeared in public. He first attended one of Stéphane Mallarmé's famous *mardis* on 24 February 1891, where he likely met, among others, Retté and Fénéon. The two French writers later assisted Wilde with his French-language publications. See Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, New York 1988, 335, 341; and, Halperin, *Fénéon*, 46.

⁵⁴ Ellmann, *Wilde*, 166.

⁵⁵ See Paul Signac, letter to Félix Fénéon, 21 July 1890, quoted in Françoise Cachin with Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon, *Signac: Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint*, Paris 2000, 40: "Ce ne serait point un banal portrait, mais un tableau très composé, très agencé en lignes et teintes. [...] Un Félix décoratif."

- [26] Not surprisingly, the picture's spiraling patterns and colors were widely understood as an experimental demonstration of color-harmony theory and the expressive use of line. Arsène Alexandre, who had close ties to the neo-impressionist camp, jokingly suggested the painting would illustrate Henry's next book.⁵⁶ Given Signac's close friendship and collaboration with the theorist, to say nothing of his own past work – the 1888 *Application du Cercle Chromatique de Mr Charles Henry* (*Application of Charles Henry's Chromatic Circle*)⁵⁷ comes to mind – Alexandre was perhaps only half-joking.⁵⁸ Indeed, the painting has been understood as the most Henry-esque of all.⁵⁹ Despite, or perhaps because of, its theoretical strengths, critics and the public alike puzzlingly dismissed the canvas. Verhaeren called it "cold and dry."⁶⁰ Henry Gauthier-Villars (aka Willy) reported a visitor's comment to her companion: "Look, dearest, at this ginger bread man on a background of vomit."⁶¹ Even Signac's friends struggled to find much of worth. Fénéon's own silence might have been diplomatic – he did display the work prominently for the rest of his life – but Pissarro thought it "bizarre."⁶² For him, the background failed both as a purely decorative motif and as the record of a sensation. That Signac might have intended the excessiveness of his painting "to mock the current rage for the occult and the pseudoreligious mysticism"⁶³ went almost completely unremarked. Retté alone seemed to intuit the gesture, but far from seeing the painting as a satire of symbolism, he declared it another form of symbolism, however "summary" in nature.⁶⁴
- [27] That the critic who most explicitly praised the formalist characteristics of Denis's *Mystère catholique* also situated Signac within the symbolist sphere, points to an otherwise unremarked artistic consonance between their two paintings. Indeed, they both share a

⁵⁶ Alexandre, "Le Salon des Indépendants," 2: "on devra voir, non pas un simple caprice du coloriste, mais une démonstration expérimentale des théories sur la couleur et sur la ligne, qui seront exposées dans le prochain ouvrage de Charles Henry."

⁵⁷ Image available online at <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/90008981?rpp=20&pg=1&ft=Signac%2c+Paul+%28French%2c+1863-1935%29&pos=3> (accessed 28 June 2012).

⁵⁸ Among other things, Signac had provided visual aids for a talk Henry gave to artisans at the Bibliothèque Forney on 27 March 1890. The lecture was later published as *Harmonies de formes et de couleurs*, Paris 1891. See Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchists," 481, n. 48.

⁵⁹ See José Argüelles, "Paul Signac's 'Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones and Colors, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890, Opus 217'," in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28:1 (Autumn 1969), 49-53.

⁶⁰ Émile Verhaeren, "Le Salon des Indépendants," 417: "Ce portrait froid et sec ne nous séduit guère autant que les paysages de même peintre."

⁶¹ Henry Gauthier-Villars, "Le Salon Des Indépendants," in: *La Revue indépendante* 19:54 (April 1891), 107-113, here 110: "L'ésotérisme de ces beautés scientifiques dérouta, le jour de l'ouverture, une adorable jeune femme aux cheveux auburn, qui murmura, musique de rêve: 'Voyez, dearest, ce monsieur en pain d'épice sur fond de vomit.'"

⁶² Camille Pissarro, letter to Lucien Pissarro, 30 March 1891, *Correspondance*, 50.

⁶³ Halperin, *Fénéon*, 146.

⁶⁴ Retté, "Artistes Indépendants," 295: "C'est, en tout cas, d'un symbolisme quelque peu sommaire."

pointillist technique and a similar composition, with prominent figures on the right tilting to the left. Given the traditional symbolic association of the magenta on white coloration of the cyclamen with the Virgin's bleeding heart – the flower is sometimes called "bleeding nun" – the two flowers perhaps complement each other more than the artists could have imagined.⁶⁵ That the paintings make use of such highly conventionalized symbols draws them into dialogue about the newer kind of symbolism they both pursue. In any case, the pictures revel in the mixture of the exotic and the everyday: in Denis's case the Annunciation taking place in a modern house; in the Signac, Fénéon's aesthete outfit and "Yankee" beard, against a crypto-*Japoniste* background. The works sum up certain tendencies towards the decorative (especially the flattening arabesque), the exotic mixed with the quotidian, the use of symbolist motifs, all of which add up to a deliberately artificial pictorial whole. At the same time, their subject matter and general philosophical tack could not be more different: Catholic versus anarchist, French versus international, traditional versus modern. For all their differences, however, these two works gravitate towards a common ground of a synthetic reconciliation of symbolism and neo-impressionism.

[28] The ground of this reconciliation is, to spell it out, a certain shared embrace of a widely-held formalist-symbolist aesthetic. Here is Vuillard's personal paraphrase of Denis's aesthetic theory in late August 1890: "Conceive of a picture really as a series of harmonies, moving away from the naturalistic idea."⁶⁶ And this from October: "The word harmony means nothing but science, knowledge of relationships and colors."⁶⁷ On the other side, Seurat and Signac believed, as Alexandre paraphrased it, that "any given scene is an ensemble of lines from which one tries to find a result with a view to producing a determined effect."⁶⁸

[29] It becomes clear, then, that by the time of Seurat's death, neo-impressionism had already committed itself to a certain kind of formalism that for all intents and purposes was indistinguishable from symbolism, at least as defined by a significant sector of the Parisian avant-garde. The question became, within the neo-impressionist camp – and here the nature of Pissarro's complaints to Lucien become clearer – how to distinguish the progressive, materialist, and political content of neo-impressionism from the perceived reactionary iconography of an artist like Denis. No one – certainly not Retté or Fénéon – really thought the two sides were the same. What the short-lived symbolist adaptation of neo-impressionist technique seemed to indicate, however, was that

⁶⁵ See Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, 30.

⁶⁶ Edouard Vuillard, *Journal*, 31 August 1890, as quoted in Guy Cogeval, *Vuillard: Post-Impressionist Master*, New York 2002, 25.

⁶⁷ Vuillard, *Journal*, 30 October 1890, as quoted in Cogeval, *Vuillard: Post-Impressionist Master*, 20.

⁶⁸ Alexandre, "Le Salon des Indépendants," 2: "une scène quelconque est un ensemble de lignes dont il s'agit de dégager une résultante en vue de produire un effet déterminé."

Seurat's Henry-inspired late style already rested on an affective-formalism that could be understood as identical with some of the most reactionary aesthetic tendencies of the day.



6 Paul Signac, *Saint-Briac, Le Port Hue, Opus 212 (Saint-Briac, Port of the Ville Hue, Opus 212)*, 1890, oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm. The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow (source: Wikimedia Commons, photo: Deror Avi, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%3ABeach_at_Saint-Briac_IMG_6925.JPG)

[30] Given this state of affairs, certain critics began working hard to pry apart neo-impressionism and symbolism. Robert Bernier, for instance, writing in *La Revue Socialiste* in May of 1891, noted real concerns about the "mystical current" in the art of the day. Although clearly sharing Pissarro's attitudes, the critic explicitly advanced his critique in light of the bloody massacre of workers by French troops at Fourmies on the First of May. Looking back at the *Salon des Indépendants*, he finds only the neo-impressionists offering any opposition to the reactionary tendency in art and in politics. Not surprisingly, Bernier especially admired the work of Luce, which he saw as a powerful example of "scientific materialism."⁶⁹ With Luce, against the mysticism of the times, he also placed Seurat and Signac. Surprisingly, and tellingly, however, he does not mention any of Seurat's works by name, and rather than the portrait of Fénéon, Bernier favors Signac's landscapes. That the seascapes of *Saint-Briac* (Fig. 6) would qualify as "socialism in art" no longer surprises – accounts of Signac's politics now fill the literature; that the critic passed in silence over the more prominent neo-impressionist works, however, speaks volumes about the ambiguity of the moment.⁷⁰ He seems to imply that *Cirque* and the

⁶⁹ Robert Bernier, "Le Socialisme en art," in: *La Revue socialiste* 13:77 (May 1891), 603-604.

⁷⁰ On Signac and politics, see John G. Hutton, *Neo-impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science, and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, Baton Rouge 1994; Anne Dymond, "A Politicized Pastoral: Signac and the Cultural Geography of Mediterranean France," in: *The Art Bulletin* 85:2 (June 2003), 353-370; and Robyn Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-*

portrait of Fénéon simply do not suffice as progressive, political alternatives in the aftermath of Fourmies.

[31] For his part, Fénéon was "especially captivated" by *Saint-Briac, les balises, Opus 210* (*The Beacons at Saint-Briac, Opus 210*).⁷¹ That this canvas could, consequently, have exemplified the neo-impressionists outdoing Denis on his own formalist ground, suggests that it could equally well be understood as symbolist. Symbolist, that is, in the effects it sought to produce on the viewer. As Françoise Cachin once put it, "the subject is no more than an excuse for the vibration of color and the symbolism of lines."⁷² Whether such a work would be understood as the materialist record of a sensation or as a formal arrangement of colors and lines frames any interpretation of neo-impressionist painting. For Bernier and Pissarro, this is the nub of the political matter. A painting based on sensation, they believed, could critically engage with historical and material reality. It necessarily represents the world, and as such it situates the world within an ideological framework structured by the temperament and intentions of the artist. Symbolist painting, on the other hand – ideational and formalist – makes no such demands; indeed, when taken to an extreme, the formalist-symbolist logic divorces art from the artist entirely, leaving only the effect a work produces on a spectator.⁷³ The avant-garde in April 1891 could consequently be divided between those who held to the artist's sensation and those who pushed towards artistic affect.

[32] In the summer of 1891, Signac seems to have put his money on affect. Although done from the motif in Brittany, the series of five paintings known as *La Mer: Les Barques (Concarneau)* remain among the least convincing representations of a location and moment that he ever produced. The uncanny repetitions and rhythms in these pictures seem to confirm the symbolist bent of Signac's formalism. That the five works first appeared at the 1892 exhibit of *Les XX* in Brussels under the musical and very abstract titles of *Scherzo (opus 218)*, *Larghetto (opus 219)*, *Allegro maestoso (opus 220)*, *Adagio (opus 221)*, and *Presto (finale) (opus 222)* offers strong evidence for Signac's conviction that a formalist-symbolist aesthetic could provide the appropriate framework for the understanding of his work and for the avant-garde as a whole.⁷⁴

de-Siècle France: Painting, Politics and Landscape, Burlington 2007.

⁷¹ Félix Fénéon, letter to Paul Signac, 7 March 1934, quoted in Anne Distel et al., eds., *Signac, 1863-1935*, exh. cat., Paris 2001, 200: "Balises à St Briac m'a particulièrement capté." It seems clear, despite the later date, that Fénéon is recalling his initial reaction in 1891. Image available online at http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring_05/articles/rosl_10.html (accessed 28 June 2012).

⁷² Françoise Cachin, *Paul Signac*, trans. Michael Bullock, Greenwich 1971, 39.

⁷³ See Todd Cronan, "Paul Valéry's Blood Meridian, Or How the Reader became a Writer," in: *nonsite.org* 1 (25 January 2011), <http://nonsite.org/issues/issue-1/paul-valery-from-author-to-audience> (accessed 26 June 2012).

⁷⁴ In 1891, Signac was hardly alone in seeing landscape painting as a privileged site for the production of affect. See Alphonse Germain, "Le paysage décoratif," in: *L'Ermitage* 2:11 (November 1891), 644: "Le paysage décoratif [...] doit, de plus souvent possible, correspondre à un état d'âme

[33] Something, however, made him balk when he brought the paintings back to Paris for the *Salon des Indépendants*. Robyn Roslak and others have puzzled over Signac's decision to rename the paintings for their second public exhibition – *Presto (finale) (opus 222)* – for example, became *Brise, Concarneau*.⁷⁵ These new names for the same works emphasize the representation of the motif, not the effects of the painting on a viewer. Perhaps Signac wished to keep alive some kind of dialectical interplay between sensation and affect, but it is not completely convincing that these works actually achieve that doubleness. Perhaps what worried him was the accelerating assimilation of neo-impressionism into the expanding legions of symbolism. That Aurier could review the *Indépendants* in April 1892 using language that Signac would have recognized as his own may have simply emphasized the problem that had emerged:

objects, considered abstractly, the diverse combinations of lines, planes, shadows, colors, constitute the vocabulary of a mysterious but miraculously expressive language that one must know in order to be an artist. [...] Charles Henry, who would not be suspected for having symbolist ties, preoccupies himself with this problem and has written several interesting notes, although too superficial, on the signification of linear directions and chromatic combinations.⁷⁶

[34] Here Aurier binds Henry's formalism to symbolism in ways that seem quite evident given the critical reception of neo-impressionism the year before. And if confirmation of the correctness of this maneuver were needed, one could point to an interview published in *L'Echo de Paris* the previous year, and reprinted several times, in which Henry clearly embraced art that was "very idealist, mystical even."⁷⁷ Perhaps this realization of shared affinities is what prompted Aurier's meeting with Signac in Marseilles that summer.⁷⁸ In

et synthétiser toujours – par une dominante expressive des lignes et de colorations *affectives* (gaies ou mélancoliques, sévères ou riantes, selon la destination de la pièce)," as quoted in Robyn Roslak, "Symphonic Seas, Oceans of Liberty: Paul Signac's *La Mer: Les Barques (Concarneau)*," in: *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture* 4:1 (Spring 2005), n. 52, <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/spring05/302-symphonic-seas-oceans-of-liberty-paul-signacs-la-mer-les-barques-concarneau> (accessed 26 June 2012).

⁷⁵ Roslak, "Symphonic Seas," n. 12. Image available online at http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring_05/articles/rosl_08.html (28 June 2012).

⁷⁶ G. Albert Aurier, "Les Symbolistes," in: *Revue encyclopédique* (1 April 1892), 480: "les objets, c'est-à-dire, abstraitement, les diverses combinaisons de lignes, de plans, d'ombres, de couleurs, constituent le vocabulaire d'une langue mystérieuse, mais miraculeusement expressive, qu'il faut savoir pour être artiste. [...] Charles Henry, qu'on ne saurait suspecter d'attaches symbolistes, s'est préoccupé de ce problème et a écrit quelques notes intéressantes, bien que trop superficielles, sur la signification des directions linéaires et des combinaisons chromatiques."

⁷⁷ Charles Henry, as quoted in Jules Huret, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire*, Paris 1891, 414: "Je ne crois pas à l'avenir du psychologisme ou du naturalisme, ni, en général, de toute école réaliste. Je crois, au contraire, à l'avènement plus ou moins prochain d'un art très idéaliste, mystique même, fondé sur des techniques absolument nouvelles." The interview with Henry originally appeared as part of a series, including one with Aurier, which ran from March to July in *L'Echo de Paris*. The interview with Henry was reprinted in *L'Art moderne* 11 (25 October 1891), 343-344. For a brief gloss on the larger issues in Huret's interviews, see Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 416, n. 46.

⁷⁸ Aurier visited Signac when the latter stopped in Marseilles on the 1892 sailing trip that eventually took him to Saint-Tropez. It seems the writer had in mind writing an article on Seurat, but he died of typhoid before he could complete it. See Patricia Mathews, *Aurier's Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory*, Ann Arbor 1986, 14-15.

any case, by the middle of 1892, the two sides of the avant-garde had become so deeply intertwined in their theoretical commitments and critical defenses, that Pissarro's old nemesis began to see them alike. By 1896, Denis would openly trace the origins of his artistic concerns not just to Gauguin, but to the various artists interested in the "laws of harmony that govern the relations of colors, the agencies of lines (researches of Seurat, Bernard, C. Pissarro)."⁷⁹ Perhaps not coincidentally, at the very same moment, Pissarro insisted that he no longer be included on any list of neo-impressionists.⁸⁰

[35] For better or worse, Signac saw this coming. The anonymous publication of his major theoretical and political declaration of principles, "Impressionnistes et révolutionnaires," in the June 1891 issue of *La Révolte* is not usually understood against the backdrop of this move deep into symbolist territory. Rather, it stands most typically as the key document tying neo-impressionism to the anarchist left. When Signac insists on the working-class enthusiasm for neo-impressionism at the *Salon des Indépendants* of 1891 – and the tract is, among other things, a review of the exhibition – he makes a claim that the movement must be understood to play a role in the great political conflicts of the day, but it must do so through form as much as content. "Only artists haunted by a *pure art*," he writes, "and in particular the impressionist painters, whose technique is the negation of the old artistic routines, deserve the sympathy of all those who applaud the breakdown of ancient prejudices."⁸¹ What Signac meant by "pure art" is not entirely clear, but he surely worried about the perceived collapse of the terms "pure art" and "symbolism" to describe the same field of practice. It is only on the heels of his declaration of allegiance to "pure art" that he explicitly rejects the mystical and reactionary tendencies of what he calls the "symbolist-impressionists."⁸² The point had to be drawn out with crystal clarity in June of 1891 precisely because it had been hugely ambiguous in March.

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Conclusion

[36] Ultimately, the differences between Signac's pure art and Denis's formalist-symbolism remain to be defined. A painting like *Le Chenal de Gravelines, Petit-Fort-Philippe* (Fig. 7)

⁷⁹ Maurice Denis, "Notes sur la peinture religieuse," in: *L'Art et la vie* 54 (October 1896), reprinted in Denis, *Théories, 1890-1910: du symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouvel ordre classique*, Paris 1920, 33-34.

⁸⁰ Camille Pissarro, letter to Henry van de Velde, 27 March 1896, in: *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro: Tome 4/1895-1898*, ed. Janine Bailly-Herzberg, Paris 1989, 180-181: "je ne saurais accepter me ranger au milieu des néos [...]."

⁸¹ [Paul Signac], "Impressionnistes et révolutionnaires," in: *La révolte* 40 (13-19 June 1891), 3-4, here 4: "les seuls artistes hantés par l'art pur et particulièrement les peintres impressionnistes, dont la technique est la négation des vieilles routines artistiques, méritent toute la sympathie de ceux qui applaudissent à l'écroulement des préjugés surannés"; trans. Christopher Miller in: *Art in Theory: 1815-1900*, 795-798, here 797.

⁸² [Signac], "Impressionnistes et révolutionnaires," 4.

– one of the landscapes Seurat showed alongside *Cirque* in 1891 – can still be said to demonstrate a drift towards an art concerned, as Robert Herbert puts it, "not with nature but arrangements of forms."⁸³ But Michael Zimmermann best sums up neo-impressionism's claims and ambitions in about 1891: "The new language of art," he writes, "seemed to correspond to the nature of man, to the psychomotor automatism that regulates our aesthetic sensitivity. It was thought that the impressions evoked in the observer by the various individual features of a picture – colour, brightness, and line – could be defined."⁸⁴ Artistic effects could be made predictable and automatic, and their prior origins in the world or the mind of the artist would be made irrelevant. The port of Gravelines and the Cirque Fernando gradually fade from view, displaced by the "cheerful sensation" of the effect of ascending lines. Such was the consequence, it would seem, of Seurat's embrace of a "symbolic spirit."



7 Georges Seurat, *Le Chenal de Gravelines, Petit-Fort-Philippe (The Channel of Gravelines)*, 1890, oil on canvas, 73.34 x 92.71 cm. Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis (source: The Yorck Project/Wikimedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georges_Seurat_017.jpg)

[37] 1891 was, as T. J. Clark puts it, a "watershed in the history of modernism." For him, the transition "has to do with the rise of Symbolism, and the Symbolists' wish to type the previous thirty years of avant-garde activity as positivist, naturalist, or materialist, and for that reason still deeply bourgeois."⁸⁵ Martha Ward also marks the significance of the moment, if only for the history of neo-impressionism. "In the early 1890s," she writes, "shaken by the death of Seurat and searching for new direction, neo-impressionism

⁸³ Robert L. Herbert, ed., *Georges Seurat, 1859-1891*, exh. cat., New York 1991, 349.

⁸⁴ Michael Zimmerman, *Seurat and the Art Theory of His Time*, Antwerp 1991, 387.

⁸⁵ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 129.

would take on the appearances of its nemesis [i.e. symbolism]."⁸⁶ Both these lines of analysis are persuasive, and in a sense what I have argued here is an elaboration of and response to these two art historians. I would only want to expand on their analysis by insisting that the collapse in 1891 of a viable avant-garde alternative to symbolism meant the triumph of a certain kind of affective-formalism that fundamentally altered the field of cultural production in the century that followed.

[38] How this initial posthumous reception came to structure the understanding of Seurat's artistic project as a whole should now be clear. Whether, on the other hand, the artist himself understood the consequences of his embrace of Henry's aesthetics will likely remain a matter for debate. There is, however, one small but revealing piece of evidence to suggest that he did finally recognize, perhaps too late, the impending fate of his art and of the wider avant-garde. In a much-quoted 1890 letter to Fénéon, in which he complains of his near-exclusion from the critic's history of neo-impressionism, Seurat picks out Georges Lecomte's affective-formalist account for particularly sharp scorn: "Already Mr. Lecomte had sacrificed me to Charles Henry [...]."⁸⁷ Although it might seem that Seurat merely sought to underline here the originality of his own inventions before 1886, the terse phrasing suggests a deeper, more unsettling reading: that Lecomte (and others) had simply replaced the painter with the theory.⁸⁸ If so, the death of Georges Seurat came ultimately, we might say, not with the sudden onset of diphtheria in late March 1891, but at the unfortunate moment he convinced his viewers that his paintings were neither the record of sensation nor the representation of a world, but simply affect-producing machines.

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⁸⁶ Ward, *Pissarro*, 203.

⁸⁷ Georges Seurat, letter to Félix Fénéon, 20 June 1890: "Déjà Mr Lecomte m'avait sacrifié à Charles Henry [...]," reprinted in *Seurat: Correspondances, Témoignages, notes inédites critiques*, Paris 1991, 243, trans. in Herbert, *Georges Seurat*, 383. Apparently in response to this letter, Fénéon and Lecomte paid a visit to Seurat, only to find him gone.

⁸⁸ For some time, Seurat had been concerned about the acknowledgement of his authorship of the neo-impressionist technique. See Seurat, letter to Signac, August 26, 1888, in Herbert, *Georges Seurat*, 408.