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Analyse the functions of perversion and/or the abject in the production of one or more surrealist artists.



Figure 1 and 2, Hans Bellmer, *The Poupée*, 1934. Gelatine silver print, Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago.

Photos: Wiki Art.

Figures 1 and 2 are from Hans Bellmer's series of dolls or *poupees* from 1934-38. Figure 1 shows us a mannequin-like structure with its torso turned away from us. The doll has large sections of its back removed, revealing a dark, hollow interior. The arms are removed, and the legs seem to be semi-detached. We trace our eyes around the curved neck to see a mask-like face turned towards us. The doll's head rests

against the wall, and a dark, thin shadow cascades down beside it. When considering Sigmund Freud's definition of perversion, which I will outline below, these dolls are sadistic, fetishistic and perverse so much so that they incite the uncanny. The chilling fact, however, is that the Nazi response to these dolls was on a similar level of disgust, labelling the dolls as 'degenerate'.¹ Despite inflicting such vast, appalling violence, how and why do these dolls disturb the fascist male? In this essay, I will attempt to explain the disturbing language of the fascist male ego that Bellmer speaks to. Before analysing the images, I believe it is necessary to explore surrealist, psychoanalytical, and historical influences. I will analyse the Dolls in terms of psychoanalysis and explore how the Nazi reaction to Bellmer's dolls is less aligned with the violence portrayed and more to do with their own corporeal anxiety.²

The female body is chosen by Bellmer, problematically, as a site of masculine anxieties. But one must contextualise the psychoanalytic and political culture to find complexity within such graphic sculpture. The first term necessary to define is 'the uncanny'.³ For something to be aesthetically uncanny, it must be made unfamiliar by repression, in a state of neutrality between animation and staticity, real and imagined.⁴ The surrealists were enamoured by the uncanny as, after WW1, the repressed realities of mortality were beginning to surface. In other words, the uncanny exposes conflicts between the life and death drives, explained by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.⁵ The life drives are innate instincts towards self-preservation, entailing instincts towards sexual reproduction. According to Freud, normative sexual practice, or sex without perversion, is theoretically heterosexual activity exclusively aimed at copulation.⁶ Thus, 'perversion' encapsulates any sexual gratification involving other objects, body parts or aims.

During the rise of fascism after WW1, depopulation became associated with the weakening of a nation

¹ Sue Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety*, Cambridge, 2000, 71.

² Taylor, *Anatomy*, 71.

³ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in James Strachey (ed.) *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol II, London, 2001, 217-252.

⁴ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, London, 1993, 7.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in James Strachey (ed.) *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol XVIII, London, 2001, 4-64.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in James Strachey (ed.) *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol VII, London, 2001, 135-243, (149).

and so emphasis was placed on *pure* reproduction in pursuit of a strong 'Aryan' race.⁷ Women were encouraged to retreat from the workplace and be *repeatedly* impregnated by their husbands.⁸ Yet, men of the Freikorps, threatened by feminine political and corporeal difference, created violent fantasies of the misogynistic destruction of women.⁹ These sexual fantasies were inherently perverse, and Bellmer's interaction with these fantasies may shatter the illusion of 'sexual purity' weaponised by Nazism.

When interrogating Nazi sexual drives, the death drive remains a key concept, Freud arguing that the unconscious wills to return to an earlier state or more aptly phrased, 'the aim of all life is death'.¹⁰ Hal Foster elaborates, arguing the death drive is perhaps foundational, despite the pleasure principle being introduced first.¹¹ Due to the life and death drives being fundamentally intertwined, perversions such as 'sadism' and 'masochism' emerge from this interaction.¹² Masochism is the sexual urge to feel pain, to be momentarily fully obedient to the death drives. Yet, in the protection of oneself, sadism emerges, leading to the sexual displacement of the death drive to the outside world. One wishes to dominate, master and, in extreme cases, destroy certain phenomena that reflect the subject, as if to test their own power.¹³ It is within this sadism/masochism and life/death drive interaction that Bellmer places his dolls.

As a surrealist, Bellmer is often associated with the surrealist cult of woman, used as fetish and muse, for example, Breton's *Nadja* or *Gradiva*.¹⁴ However, the dolls have the potential to exist as disturbing realities of the patriarchal subject, prompted by masculine anxieties more than masculine pleasures. In between wars, masculinity was in a state of flux; the fascist doctrine of exclusion and unshakeable masculine

⁷ Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History*, Cambridge, 2011, 62-3.

⁸ Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe*, 62.

⁹ Elizabeth D. Heineman, 'Sexuality and Nazism: The Doubly Unspeakable?', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 11, no.1/2, 2002, 27.

¹⁰ Freud, *Beyond*, 38.

¹¹ Foster, *Compulsive*, 11.

¹² Freud, *Beyond*, 54.

¹³ Foster, *Compulsive*, 13.

¹⁴ Briony Fer, 'Surrealism, Myth and Psychoanalysis', in Fer et al., *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art between the Wars*, New Haven, 1993, 171-247 [183], [235].

authority was contrasted daily with a surge of soldiers returning wounded and fractured.¹⁵ Fascism, asserts Foster, is built on institutional armouring of the body and psyche, which maintains self-definition and defence.¹⁶ Within patriarchal, phallogocentric frameworks that these fascist ideals and psychoanalytic understandings are created, the masculine subject thus views all differences, all ‘others’ as threats to their corporeal identity. He violently wishes to expel the feminine other, such as Jewish people, women, and queer people.¹⁷ The fascist male longs to return to a pre-Oedipal time, before the knowledge of sexual difference and thus all those that embody it become a threat. Masochism that has existed within the institutional repression of all ‘feminine’ differences within oneself is then displaced onto the outside world, transforming into sadism. Therefore, the doll in Figure 2, wearing a wig, dress and seeming to look away from the subject rather than at, becomes the feminine ‘other’. The fascist can displace the feminine ‘messiness’ within themselves.¹⁸ The orderly, institutionalised self is maintained within this violent fantasy. Figure 2 becomes a desperate response to Figure 1, without the gender indicators of costume, and the genitals and breasts concealed, Figure 1 is almost too androgynous for comfort.

Considering this, I wish to introduce the concept of the uncanny double within Foster’s discourse to aptly describe the function of perversion within Bellmer’s photographs. When discussing Freud’s concept of the uncanny, Julia Kristeva states, ‘if anguish revolves around an *object*, uncanniness, on the other hand, is a *destruction of the self*.’¹⁹ It is not just Figure 2 that evokes uncanny familiarity. If the dolls were to remain an object in the eyes of German fascists, Bellmer’s work would not have been labelled ‘degenerate’ and ‘un-German’.²⁰ Uncanniness was experienced, and I will elaborate on how and why Bellmer’s dolls appropriate perversion to provide an uncanny double with the fascist male self.

¹⁵ Amy Lyford, ‘The Paradox of Surrealist Masculinity’, in *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France*, California, 2023, 1-14, [4].

¹⁶ Foster, *Compulsive*, 119.

¹⁷ Foster, *Compulsive*, 119.

¹⁸ Heineman, *Sexuality and Nazism*, 27.

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, Oxford, 1991, 188.

²⁰ Taylor, *Anatomy*, 71.

Kristeva elaborates that ‘the archaic, narcissistic self, not yet demarcated by the outside world, projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien double, uncanny and demonical’.²¹ In Figure 2, the dress and hair attempt to conceal the black cavities within the core of the mannequin. I assert the inclusion of both images within the series is a purposeful uncovering of the displacement of corporeal anxiety onto the female body. By dressing the masochistic projection up as a feminine other, the dark, lacking abysses are concealed and corporeal anxiety is displaced onto her site of castration. By exploring the extremities of the uncanny, Bellmer enacts the perversions that occur when trying to ‘purify’ a population based on masculine, corporeal anxieties.

Still, we can ask, why represent this uncanny double in physical form? As a doll? To answer this question, it is useful to look towards fascist aesthetics. Ernst Jünger, a German philosopher, identified a cultural shift, arguing for a generational bodily affiliation with the machine. Furthermore, Jünger isolates a perception of beauty within machinery due to the capacity of the machine to solve the unpredictable messiness of the ²²[OBJ]. The affiliation with the machine and wholeness aligns the militant machine with the phallus, the destruction of others a response to castration anxiety.

Yet, due to the violent intersection of constructed dismemberment, Foster identifies how the dolls form into ‘castration [...] and its fetishistic defence’.²³ The fascist male constantly strives for a sense of ‘wholeness’, thus he fuses himself with an institutional union of militant fascism.²⁴ Yet this masochistic response leaves the uncanny double represented in Bellmer’s work as feminine and fractured. The pleasure the soldier gains from exercising his dominance with machinery turns him into a pleasure-seeking machine. Klaus Theweleit argues that ‘Perversely distorted, both now become

²¹ Kristeva, *Strangers*, 183.

²² Cited in Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, Vol. 2, Minnesota, 1989, 197.

²³ Foster, *Compulsive*, 87.

²⁴ Theweleit, *Fantasies*, 98.

destroyers.²⁵ Therefore, through the body-object affiliation, the soldier's perverse fantasies of pleasure reveal themselves to be destructive. Bellmer speaks in the mechanical language of the fascist, creating his uncanny, alien opposite that lurks so deeply in his unconscious.

The death drive is displayed to be inherent within the fascist psyche and the site of castration is enacted through destruction. Thus, Figure 4 acts as a doubling of the site of castration. Furthermore, I assert that the lack of blood remains echoes the orderly institutionalisation of perversion. Whether the doll is lying down in Figure 5, or standing, assertive, in perhaps a battlefield, the messy lack of phallus is doubled. Soldier, on winning or losing side, dead or alive, loses all sense of masculine order and control in their paradoxical search for purity.

Thus, within the perverse enactment of fascist male pleasure, Bellmer denies the soldier of the sublimation he so desperately craves to uphold perversion. Sublimation involves the purifying of sexual drives by placing them within cultural institutions. Wholeness is the ultimate goal of Eros and the fascist male. Foster states that *desublimation* is the act of '(re)shattering' the object and subject. Therefore, Bellmer appropriates the pose of the classical nude in Figure 6. This conservative, sublimated practice is given its uncanny double. By enacting the pre-Oedipal castration fantasy, as an adult male, Bellmer creates a horrifyingly artificial depiction of severed femininity within the fascist male. Bellmer could be representing the perversion within the fascist male as he tries to eradicate sexual difference on a global scale.

Whether for the fascist male or Bellmer's perverse fantasies, the Dolls reveal the cultural entanglement of Eros with phallogentricity. From a feminist perspective, these dolls are horrifying, but without looking to solve moral questions about these artistic productions, I believe they function in a more complex way than

²⁵ Theweleit, *Fantasies*, 199.

one's initial reaction of disgust. Or at least, one's reaction of disgust is designed to reveal a deeper understanding of patriarchal anxieties when taken to the extremes of fascism. When one can delve into the language of phallogentric perversion, the psychic mechanisms of sadism and destruction can be identified and, perhaps someday, prevented.



Figure 4, Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, 1935. Gelatine silver print, 66 x 66cm. New York: Ubu Gallery.

Photo: Ubu Gallery.



Figure 5, Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, 1938. Gelatine silver print, 25.4 x 25.7 cm. New York: International Centre of Photography. Photo: International Centre of Photography.

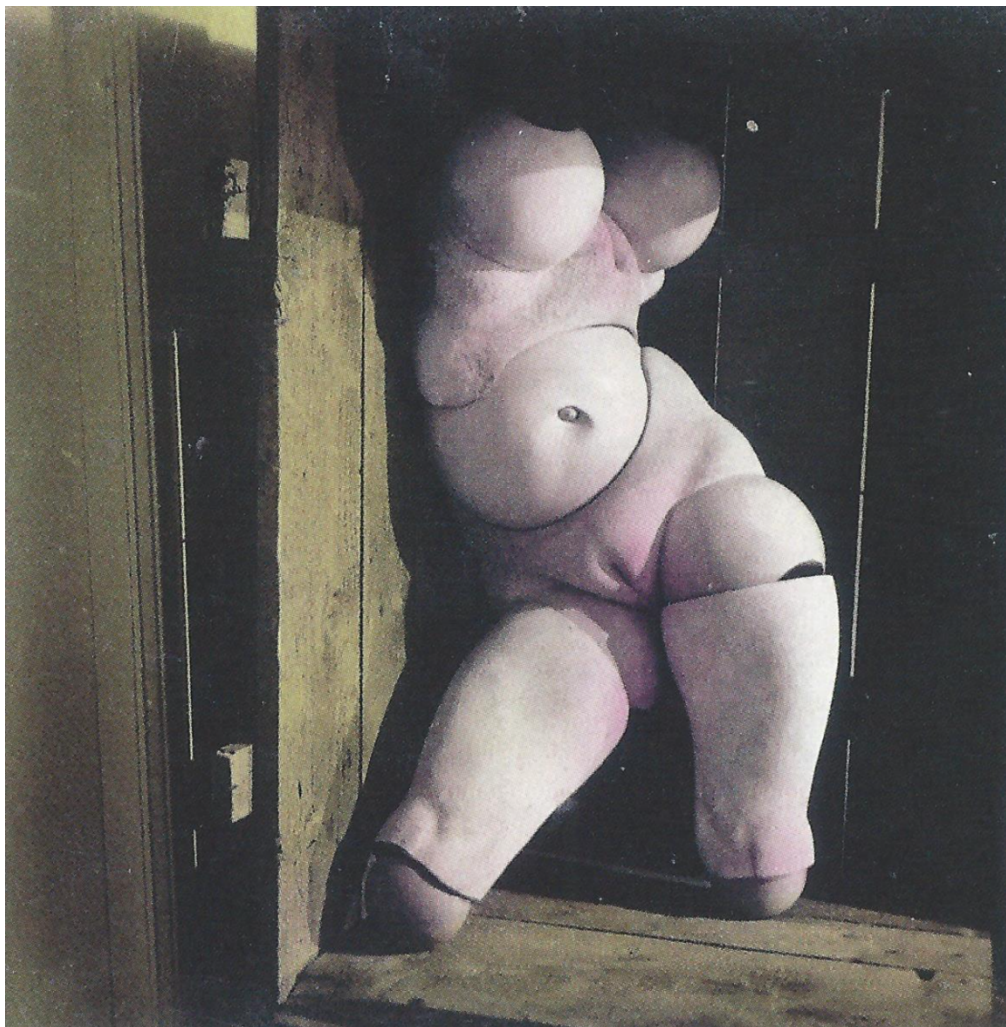


Figure 6, Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, 1935. Gelatine silver print, 67.3 x 63.2cm. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago. Photo: Wiki Art.

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