Les pas perdus: Images of Feet and Shoes in Surrealist Art

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LES PAS PERDUS: IMAGES OF FEET AND SHOES IN SURREALIST ART

by

Emily Patricia Asplund

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of French and Italian

Brigham Young University

April 2008
This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee
And by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

*LES PAS PERDUS*: IMAGES OF FEET AND SHOES IN SURREALIST ART

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Although feet and shoes appear throughout surrealist visual art, their significance within surrealist theory has not been studied as thoroughly as other familiar themes of surrealist art, such as the eye or the hat. The purpose of this project is to recover feet and shoes from their lowly position and to uncover their meaning and function in surrealist theory, particularly the theory of Georges Bataille. Feet were implicitly important to surrealists like André Breton and Louis Aragon, whose early and central literary texts were based on their favorite pastime: *flânerie* or wandering the streets of Paris. Images of feet can play a role in Bataille’s aim of flattening moral hierarchies, specifically the binary hierarchy of elevated/base that is figured in the horizontal orientation of the human body. Shoes can figure the loss of the self, because the peculiar intimacy of their relation with the body blurs the boundary of perceiving subject and perceived object; in this way, shoes as represented in surrealist art can flatten the epistemological hierarchy of subject/object.
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Introduction

When Fredric Jameson set out to describe the *coupure* between modernism and postmodernism, or more accurately to inquire whether such a shift even exists, he started out with pictures of shoes. His study, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, is a broad and also profound analysis of the question of postmodernism that rests on the thesis that “postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world” (6). His vast study takes on film and architecture, utopian theories and navigational methods, modern British literature and the structure of the novel in Eisenhower America, late capitalist economics and Continental philosophy—but he chooses for his initial and most focused illustration of the shift from modernism to postmodernism a painting of an empty pair of worn boots by Van Gogh and a photograph of a row of mismatched shoes by Warhol (see fig. 1.1). The two works are useful as illustrations of the *coupure* because of their similar subjects, which allow Jameson to isolate their stylistic and formal differences. The contrast between Van Gogh’s expressive oil painting and Warhol’s cool photograph demonstrates the features of postmodern culture: its lack of affect or expressivity, its indifference and even hostility toward the viewer, its fundamental lack of depth.

Another picture of shoes is included in the book and briefly mentioned in the text: René Magritte’s *Le modèlè rouge* (see fig. 1.2). This painting was a popular surrealist icon in the 1930s, and its subject matter and composition link it to the other two works. It was painted almost exactly halfway between Van Gogh’s work in 1886 and Warhol’s
work in 1980. It seems perfectly situated to serve as a reference for triangulation, to further elucidate the shift from high modernism to postmodernism by fleshing out surrealism’s role in that *coupure*, which after all did not happen in one fell swoop. Jameson, however, chooses to mention Magritte’s shoe-feet only in passing. One thing Jameson does say about Magritte is that he was “unique among the surrealists” because he “survived the sea change from the modern to its sequel” with the prevalence in his paintings of “the uncanny, Lacanian foreclosure, without expression” (10). But this might be another way of saying that in Magritte’s image of shoes we can detect a moment of transformation from modernism to postmodernism, and the image does seem to contain aspects of modernism while at the same time pointing towards postmodernism.

Magritte’s shoe-feet are one of a large number of surrealist works that feature shoes and feet as their subject matter. We can plausibly and tentatively group these surrealist foot and shoe images with Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes* and other postmodern productions because, as I want to argue in this project, they figure the loss of the self, and this is an important facet of postmodernism, as Jameson describes it. “Those canonical experiences of radical isolation and solitude, anomie, private revolt, Van Gogh-type madness” that “dominated the period of high modernism” all have a subject at their center—the homunculus in Munch’s *Scream* or the absent but implied wearer of Van Gogh’s lonely shoes (14). Modern art is concerned with expressing emotion or ideas, and this implies depth, an inside layer of psyche that has something to say, and an outside world where the expression appears and that may or may not perceive it.

Postmodernism, among other things, is a flattening out of this depth through the death of the subject. This is why Warhol’s shoes are a group of singles, not a matched
pair like Van Gogh’s (Derrida commented, somewhere, that they are a heterosexual pair, according to Jameson, 8). Warhol’s shoes are not waiting to be worn; they are perhaps waiting to be bought, or are nothing more than exemplars for the real commodities that are waiting to be bought, or else they are not waiting for anything—they are nothing more than a photographic negative. Unlike Van Gogh’s shoes that tell their wearer’s story, Jameson doubts whether Warhol’s shoes speak at all (8). In any case, there is no wearer implied, no absent subject to fill out and inspire these objects. Van Gogh’s shoes do imply this kind of absent subject, as Heidegger’s analysis of them in “On the Origin of the Work of Art” insists. These shoes are modern because they have an inside, and moreover they have an empty inside; they are full of the anomie and anxiety and alienation of their absent subject, and these emotions are sufficient stand-ins for the modern subject. The modern subject is even expressionless in its absence.

Magritte’s shoes are an interesting middle point between these two examples of high modernism and broad postmodernism. They resemble Warhol’s shoes in that they are also not waiting to be worn: they contain their own feet. But they also contain a subject and an object, even if the two are fused together, and in this way they preserve the modernist sense of an inside and an outside. There is this suggestion of a depth model that Jameson would say is characteristic of modernity, but in these shoe-feet, that depth is in the process of being flattened; the hidden or inside member of the shoe/foot pair is gradually emerging, pushing itself through the outside mask—or else the outside surface is slowly fading to reveal what is inside. Or else they were interchangeable to begin with, and the depth models of modernism were illusory after all. It is possible that in
Magritte’s image we can witness the first steps away from modernism and onto flatter terrain.

Jameson’s purpose in *Postmodernism* is not just to identify or demonstrate elements of the postmodern but also to offer a “periodizing hypothesis,” to explain how it is possible to identify a movement like postmodernism in the first place (5). Indeed, he asserts that “all isolated or discrete cultural analysis always involves a buried or repressed theory of historical periodization,” and his is more a “genealogy” of periods than a linear history (2). By inserting Magritte’s shoe-feet in between Van Gogh’s and Warhol’s own shoes we can add another generation to the family history of postmodernism, giving us a more complete picture of the growth and evolution of postmodern culture.

Although the focus of this project will not be to establish surrealism as a foundational or originary form of postmodernism, its characterization of the surrealist movement (particularly Georges Bataille’s version of it) as primarily concerned with the dialectical overcoming of binary structure should show its link to the flatness of postmodernism that Jameson describes. Feet and shoes play a central role in this flattening project when we take into account Bataille’s analysis of them. In 1929 Georges Bataille, the surrealist author and theorist, began the project of writing a surrealist dictionary in his influential but short-lived journal *Documents* (Hollier, *Against Architecture* 78). The purpose of this dictionary, however, was not to give the definitions of words that related to surrealist thought, but rather to isolate their job, their function (Bataille, “Formless” 39). He wrote entries for terms such as architecture and formless, but also for body parts—mouth, eye, and the big toe. The entry for this last body part was not published in the journal, perhaps because the photographic illustrations for it,
made by Jacques-André Boiffard, were too large and frankly hideous. Already Bataille’s project of a dictionary that gives a word’s function rather than its meaning heralds the postmodern taste for theories of meaning that locate meaning in systems of relations of signs rather than in some one-to-one relation between signifier and signified. But Bataille’s analysis of the human foot flattens modernist structures of meaning even further, locating the defining characteristic of humans in the foot rather than the head.

What Bataille is seeking in much of his writing, and what the inversion of our habitual hierarchies of thought (head/foot) is meant to achieve, is a loss of the self. Here is another explicit similarity between the surrealist project and Jameson’s vision of postmodernism, because the “eclipse of subjectivity” is one of the most characteristic features of postmodern art (174). The postmodern loss of the subject is total flatness, not a mere repression or “puritanical extinction” of the subject (174). Surrealism, especially Bataille’s version of it with its focus on the loss of the self through ritual and sacrifice, but also Breton’s search for the intoxication of the merveilleux, similarly wishes to extinguish the subject, and not as a kind of expiation or self-denial, but in an act of revelation, tearing away the illusory mask of the subject or the ego that was erected by traditional philosophy and morality. Images of feet and shoes achieve this; they challenge our ideas about beauty, purity, and propriety, and even our notions of our own bodily architecture.

Where surrealism would fail to qualify as postmodern, at least where it would fail Jameson’s test, is in its commitment to the ultimately teleological character of dialectic. The death of the subject in postmodern culture, according to Jameson, results in “an impersonal collective subject, without the charge and investment either of a personal
Unconscious or of a group one… ‘surrealism’ without its manifesto or its avant-garde” (174-5). Surrealism retains the ideas of linear, historical succession (its sense of itself as belonging to an avant-garde) and Marxist, revolutionary intention (its manifesto) that, for Jameson, mark the modernist period. Jameson says that:

The Utopian vocation of surrealism lies in its attempt to endow the object world of a damaged and broken industrial society with the mystery and the depth, the ‘magical’ qualities…of an Unconscious that seems to speak and vibrate through those things. (173)

Jameson’s point here is that postmodernism lacks the depth of an unconscious; in fact, he’s arguing that postmodern art is “surrealism without the unconscious.” He says that modernist photography and painting see their task as a “redemption of physical reality” (he is quoting Kracauer, 173). Postmodern visual art has left behind painting’s “older (modernist) Utopian vocations: it is no longer to do anything beyond itself” (173). It loses the “ideological missions” that modernist painting proposed for itself. He implies that the “uncontrolled kinds of figuration” we see in surrealist art are hallucinatory, and thus point to an unconscious, a depth either of the individual subject or of a collective subject (174).

Surrealist art does, in fact, have a goal, a telos, and ultimately this telos is Utopian: *le surréalisme au service de la révolution*. Its method for inciting revolution is, with Breton certainly, to unearth the unconscious through chance encounters and unusual juxtapositions of images and words. But Bataille’s approach is different from Breton’s, and this, along with his explicit references to shoes and feet, is why this project is centered on Bataille’s renegade surrealism rather than Breton’s canonical surrealism.
Bataille’s concept of the *informe*, the category of thought in which all categories disappear, is an intermediary point between Breton’s intoxicated *merveilleux* and postmodernism’s lack of ideological missions. I will try to argue that the foot/shoe pair, seen through the lens of Bataille’s theory, evokes a true loss of the subject in a relation of sacrifice with an object that becomes part of itself and is thus always cast away from itself. Socio-political, Utopian ends tend to fade into the background in this radical version of surrealism.

Jameson left out Magritte’s shoes, and they were a crucial step in between the affective and hermeneutic depth of Van Gogh’s shoes and the flatness of Warhol’s. A lost step, in fact; a *pas perdu*. I am leaving much out of this study; theories of dress and adornment; gender issues; shoes as commodities; print culture and the close connection between the preferred texts of fashion and of surrealism, i.e. the magazine; sexual and Freudian connotations of shoes and feet; theories of the postnatural body. These will all have to be addressed in some future project. For now I want to begin by discussing the way feet and shoes might function within surrealist theory, specifically the radical dialectic surrealism of Georges Bataille.

The purpose of this project is to examine images of feet and shoes in surrealist art in order to situate these objects within surrealist thought; in other words, to find out what was their job or function. The first chapter will begin with a general discussion of the foot’s most basic role in surrealism: the vehicle for *flânerie*. Then it will attempt to justify its thematic approach with regard to other academic work on surrealism. The second chapter will move to a more specific examination of the role of feet within the goal of surrealist art, which according to Bataille was to eliminate categories of thought in the
viewer by portraying bassesse. The final chapter will turn to shoes and their peculiar relation with feet; it will attempt to show that by virtue of the unique and intimate relation of foot and shoe, images of shoes in surrealist art have the function of representing the loss of self.

Ultimately, this project is not much more than a collection of images that share a common thematic element. But such a collection can be instructive, and hopefully interesting. In his Arcades project, Benjamin discusses the difference between an allegorist and a collector. In a fragment titled “The collector as allegorist” he says that “What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind” (207). The collector brings things together that she believes belong together by virtue of their properties and relations. The allegorist, on the other hand, dislodges things from their context and relies on her own profundity to illuminate their meaning (207). What I want to try to do in this project is be a collector rather than an allegorist, or at least to show how the surrealists collected shoes and feet in their art. I will furthermore try to discuss the properties and relations of shoes that might have led the surrealists in their social and theoretical context to collect them in the first place; these shoes and feet will be, like the objects Aragon and Breton encounter during their wanderings through the urban landscape, taken not as symbols or outgrowths of ideas, but as ideas themselves.
Chapter 1
First Steps

Any examination of shoes in European art in the early 20th century must begin with Van Gogh’s well-known painting of 1886 of a pair of rough, worn out boots (fig. 1.1). The painting is famous in its own right as well as for being discussed by Heidegger in his 1935 lecture on aesthetics, later published as the essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.” In this essay Heidegger refers to the painting in order to demonstrate the essence of art, which he believes is (to simplify the matter greatly) to unconceal the essence or truth of being. So this painting of an old pair of boots reveals something about what boots are, that in which their being consists. The painting does not show us any particular pair of shoes; we could only come to know the essence of any one pair of shoes by walking a mile in them, since “The peasant woman wears her shoes in the field. Only here are they what they are” (Heidegger 159). The painting contains no specific details that would contextualize or particularize the shoes. It is a painting of “A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet…” (Heidegger 159).

The painting is not about a particular pair of shoes, but rather it is about what it means to be a shoe, and furthermore, it is about what it means to be a shoe within a certain world of relations with other objects and people. The painting does something remarkable, according to Heidegger. It is able to evoke the world in which a pair of shoes such as these could function:
From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles stretches the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbirth and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth, and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. (159-60)

This is what a work of art does, according to Heidegger: it calls up a world of meaning. Never mind that the shoes were actually Van Gogh’s, bought in a flea market in Arles and worn every day on his tramps through the village and the countryside (Bonafoux 58). What Heidegger’s analysis addresses is the context of concerns in which Van Gogh made this painting, the world of social and economic relationships in which Van Gogh lived and made his art.

Heidegger rightly emphasizes in his analysis the notion that these are peasant shoes we are looking at, with all that implies. The world that Van Gogh’s shoes opens up was a world where social hierarchies were beginning to collapse and the lives of peasants
began to matter. Van Gogh had been influenced by artists in Paris who were beginning to explore social issues in their work. Paintings of simple field workers by Millet had shocked Paris gallery visitors because they were great paintings whose subjects were not aristocrats or characters from Christian or classical mythology but ordinary peasants. The Revolution of 1848 brought about a concomitant revolution in the Paris art world, as a group of artists gathered in Barbizon and began to look at nature with a new respect and awe. François Millet was part of this group, and he decided to extend to figurative painting the new democratic attitude toward landscapes that was developing in France, inspired by British painters like Turner. His famous painting *The Gleaners* was made in 1857 and established him as part of the new Realist movement, of which Gustave Courbet was the self-proclaimed leader. These paintings of ordinary people in natural poses ran counter to the more traditional approach to figurative art, whose proponents were shocked by the casualness and sincerity of these paintings as well as by their vulgar subjects.

The social changes in 19th century Europe had a generally leveling effect and were mirrored in this new choice of subject matter by artists, who sought to elevate members of the lower classes by painting them not solely in genre studies but in great works of art. Millet lavished on a small group of gleaners the care usually taken only for nobles or gods. A generation later, Van Gogh moved to the South of France, directly inspired by Millet and his social message, to paint rustic landscapes and subjects. In Heidegger’s terms, Van Gogh intended to unconceal in his art the world of the peasant.

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Still another generation later, shoes began to make another appearance in the visual arts. By the time the surrealist movement was in full swing in Paris, from the mid-1920s to the 1930s, the democratization of subject matter in the visual arts was complete. Everyday objects were central themes for the surrealists, and feet and shoes were portrayed in some iconic works of the period. One image of shoes from this era suggests itself here. Magritte’s *Le modèlè rouge* painted originally in 1935 was an iconic image for the surrealists; it was reproduced in a number of media (shop windows, on the cover of an issue of *Minotaure*) and was commercially successful (fig. 1.2).²

The surrealist project unconcealed a world entirely different from Van Gogh’s. Another fifty years after Van Gogh’s time in Arles, when rural areas were emptying out in earnest as the kinds of laborers Millet and Van Gogh painted were rushing into urban centers to find work, the question of what it could mean to be a peasant had completely changed for the Paris artists and intellectuals. The Marxist movement, whose theories had been developed in that earlier generation, was now, in the first few decades of the 20th century, focused on the true underclass of high capitalism, the urban factory worker, as well as the modern world’s other citizen-victims—the commodity, the alienated middle class, the body. The characters who populated the urban landscape were no longer peasants in the traditional sense; the modern peasant was Aragon’s *Paysan de Paris*, a flâneur whose feet trod the passages and boulevards of Paris instead of the far-spreading furrows.

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² The painting was so commercially successful that Magritte’s dealer urged him to complete more like it: “Do not worry about doing business; I will do that for you the moment I have paintings on a par with *The Red Model*” (Papanikolas 69).
Figure 1.2. René Magritte, *Le modèle rouge*, 1937; rpt. in *Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images*, Stephanie Barron and Michel Draguet eds. (LACMA, 2006) 69.
Flâneurs

Since Bakunin, Europe has lacked a radical concept of freedom. The Surrealists have one.

Benjamin, “Surrealism” 215

Wandering through the streets of Paris was more than a pastime for the surrealists; it was a metaphor for their theory, a model for their way of thinking. Two central surrealist texts, Louis Aragon’s Paysan de Paris and Andre Breton’s Nadja, are essentially accounts of various wanderings through the streets of Paris and the people, buildings, and objects met along the way. The workers and trades people walk through the streets on their business; friends like Breton and Giacometti wander through flea markets together, discussing ideas and finding inspiration in unwanted, unfashionable objects; Breton and Nadja conduct their affair while strolling “les cent pas dans le hall” at the Gare Saint-Lazare and in other places in the city; prostitutes stroll through Aragon’s Passage de l’Opera, having “simply graduated from sitting each day at the terraces of neighboring cafes,” and the flâneurs, Aragon among them, prowl the passages after their prey (Breton 713; Aragon 36).

Aragon was especially concerned with the state of wandering in a particular neighborhood of Paris, one that was full of transients and artists, mistresses and prostitutes, where hotel rooms were available by the hour or by the week and there were bookstores that allowed customers to browse without buying. The passages were commercial streets that had been covered in the middle of the 19th century with ironwork and glass to form arcades, facilitating pedestrian travel through what eventually became warrens of prostitution, artistic endeavor and political foment. Benjamin says that this model for city planning, devised by Haussmann, “consisted of long straight streets
opening onto broad perspectives” and that “this idea corresponds to the tendency—
common in the nineteenth century—to ennoble technological necessities through
spurious artistic ends” (“Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” 24). Despite their
original purpose of preventing the kinds of barricades that Paris’ narrow streets permitted
in 1830 and 1848, the passages eventually became home to a new generation of political
activists.

Aragon was one of them. In his novel Paysan de Paris he laments the impending
destruction of one of the passages, the Passage de l’Opera. The Passage de l’Opera is
where one sees “the footsteps of mystery crossing those of whorishness,” and his favorite
path for wandering would soon be demolished to make way for the Boulevard
Haussmann (Aragon 20). Aragon worried this change in the urban landscape might have
the following effect:

…it seems possible…that a good part of the human river which carries
incredible floods of dreamers and dawdlers from the Bastille to the
Madeleine may divert itself through this new channel, and thus modify the
ways of thought of a whole district, perhaps of a whole world. We are
doubtless about to witness a complete upheaval of the established fashions
in casual strolling and prostitution, and it may well be that this
thoroughfare, which is bound to make the boulevards and the Quartier
Saint-Lazare far more easily accessible to each other, will see entirely new
types of person saunter along its pavements, hitherto unknown specimens
whose whole lives will hesitate between the two zones of attraction in
which they are equally involved, and who will be the chief protagonists of tomorrow’s mysteries. (14-15)

It is significant that Aragon seems in one sense to be lamenting the demise of his habitual pedestrian routes but in another sense to be almost indifferent and even curious about the new experiences this change in traffic will bring about. The sense of restless wandering is complete in Aragon; he does not wish to stop his wandering, and does not even wish his paths of wandering to remain as they are. He is a flâneur in the strictest sense, one who is constantly thirsty for new people and objects to watch, new neighborhoods to discover, new streets to walk in. But it is even more significant that Aragon sees in these passages the analogues, even the physical manifestations, of “the ways of thought” of the people who inhabit them. For Aragon, walking through the streets facilitates thinking, mirrors thinking, produces thinking, is thinking. If the product of Van Gogh’s peasant woman’s long trudges through the fields is grain, then the product of Aragon’s long strolls through the passages is thought.

This idea of the freedom of walking is central to Breton’s Nadja as well, as is the identity of wandering and thought. The book is a record of “les episodes les plus marquants de ma vie” (the most outstanding episodes of my life), but its narrative structure mirrors that of these episodes themselves—“hors de son plan organique…dans un monde comme défendu qui est celui des rapprochements soudains, des petrifiantes coincidences, des reflexes primant tout autre essor du mental” (outside its organic form…in an almost forbidden world, that of a sudden closeness, of petrifying coincidences, of reflexes excluding any other mental flight) (651). The narrative, like Breton, wanders. He meets Nadja on the street as both are wandering on the rue
Lafayette, as “sans but je poursuivais ma route dans la direction de l’Opéra” (I aimlessly went my way towards the opera house) and Nadja is wandering in the opposite direction, ostensibly going to the hairdresser, although her manner of attire suggests she was hoping for just such a meeting (683).

Breton was ready for whatever experience might meet him as he walked through the city, and this was both a literal practice and a metaphor for the kind of thinking that was important for him. *Nadja* was written as “une série d’observations de cet ordre” (a series of this type of observation), that is observations about coincidence, seemingly meaningless connections, like the optical illusion produced when one looks at the sign of a hotel from a certain angle so that the word ‘rouge’ appears as the word ‘police’ (Breton 681). Breton’s aim in writing about these random encounters was “précipiter quelques hommes dans la rue, après leur avoir fait prendre conscience, sinon du néant, du moins de la grave insuffisance de tout calcul soi-disant rigoureux sur eux-mêmes, de toute action qui…a pu être prémeditée” (to send some men into the street after having made them aware if not of nothingness then of the serious insufficiency of any so-called rigorous calculation about themselves, of any action that…can have been premeditated) (681). Breton wanted to wander through the streets of Paris, to see what he could see; and he likewise wanted his narrative to wander, so it could perhaps awaken in his reader the same “associations d’idées suspectes” (associations of suspicious ideas) that his wanderings did in his own mind (651).

This restless, peripatetic spirit forms the philosophical foundation of surrealism, and it also represented for Breton his break from Dadaism. In his work, aptly named *Les pas perdus* (*Lost Steps*), he describes various interactions with members of the Paris
avant-garde and begins to sketch his first steps away from Dadism and onto the path of surrealism. In an essay titled “Lâchez tout” he says that “le dadaïsme, comme tant d’autres choses, n’a été pour certains qu’une manière de s’asseoir” (Dadaism, like so many other things, was for certain individuals nothing more than a way to sit down); but Breton didn’t want to sit any more, he wanted to walk (263). He didn’t want to give or devote his life to any absolute idea, whether true or false, as he felt the Dadaists did. “Je meurs si je m’attache” (I die if I attach myself) (263). He felt that Dadaism was stagnant, another way of taking oneself off of one’s feet. What he wanted above all else was philosophical freedom; the freedom to wander, to experience coincidences of thought, to abandon reason. In Nadja he says “Je préfère…marcher dans la nuit à me croire celui qui marche dans le jour” (I prefer to wander in the night than to believe myself someone who walks in the daytime), and the darkness of unreason was his favorite place to find the inspiration of unplanned encounters (681). This then is his battle cry: “Lâchez tout. Lâchez Dada. Lâchez votre femme, lâchez votre maîtresse. Lâchez vos esperances et vos craintes. Lâchez la proie pour l’ombre. Lâchez au besoin une vie aisée, ce qu’on vous donne pour une situation d’avenir. Partez sur les routes” (Let go of everything. Let go of Dada. Let go of your wife, let go of your mistress. Let go of your hopes and your fears. Leave the prey in favor of the shadow. Leave an easy life in favor of need, leave what you are given for some future situation. Hit the road) (my emphasis, 263). For Breton what distinguished surrealism as a theory and as a practice from Dadaism was that it got up on its feet and walked away.

Francis Picabia tells Breton that “Il faut être nomade, traverser les idées comme on traverse les pays ou les villes” (It is necessary to be a nomad, to travel through ideas
just as you travel through countries or cities) (Breton 261). Aragon and Breton both saw their wanderings through the city streets as closely linked to the wandering of their ideas and thought. Ideas, like countries and cities, are, after all, ephemeral—at least the surrealists believed they were. The surrealists, though they were at times broken into factions, shared a desire to abandon the philosophical idealism they had inherited in favor of materialism, in favor of what they could see and touch. And what they could see and touch was the city and its streets. Ideas and cities were analogous for the surrealists; to wander through a city, open to its architecture and its people, was also to wander through ideas, free to think and then abandon whichever ones happened to present themselves.

Thus feet were important to the surrealists, even if their role is only implied by the ceaseless wandering, through the city and through ideas, engaged in by these artists, theorists, and flâneurs. Magritte’s shoe-feet became iconic for the surrealists as well as for those outside the movement; when he designed the cover for Minotaure in 1937 Magritte tucked his shoes into the bottom left corner (fig. 1.3); Marcel Duchamp produced a pair of real shoe-feet for a bookstore window display for the publication of Breton’s Le surréalisme et la peinture in New York, since the painting had been chosen as the cover art for the book (fig. 1.4); and the image was so resilient that Pierre Cardin made a pair in 1986 (fig. 1.5). The image was emblematic of the movement, and it seemed to strike a chord.³

Figure 1.3. René Magritte, cover for Minotaure, December, 1937; rpt. in Marcel Jean, *The History of Surrealist Painting* (New York, 1960) 241.
Figure 1.4. Marcel Duchamp, Enrico Donati, Window Display, Brentano’s, New York, 1945; rpt. in Richard Martin, *Fashion and Surrealism* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987) 96.
Figure 1.5. Pierre Cardin, Men's Shoes, 1986, Fashion Institute of Technology, New York; rpt. in Richard Martin, *Fashion and Surrealism* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987) 97.
Part of its appeal was likely its cheeky revision of Van Gogh’s image. There is an ironic awareness to Magritte’s shoes of the new world they occupy, a world where they no longer need to trudge through muddy fields; these shoes prowl the streets of Paris. There is also a sense of disdain for the affective element of Van Gogh’s image. In Van Gogh’s canvas, the ugliness and vulnerability, the lowliness of the shoes are immediately visually accessible through the drab colors, the lack of shading, and the careless brushstrokes. These shoes are tragic, but also cozy, cunning, sweet, looking up at us. Their pliant, worn leather is an index of the time their owner, their absent subject, has spent in the fields. Heidegger is right that their emptiness is evident—the black space yawning out from them, their saggy, flaccid form, are both lamentation and invitation. They look bereft of their feet and excited to be reunited with them, almost proud of the hard work that is required of them. They wear their wear and tear like a badge. As a romanticization and glorification of the 19th century peasant laborer, this pair of shoes does the trick.

Magritte’s shoes lack this affective facet. They are also empty, in a sense, but they do not seem to be beckoning their wearer to put them on. They say something different about their relationship with the feet that wear them; they are not abandoned, empty husks waiting to be inhabited at last by a living subject. As products of and participants in modern capitalist society, these shoes know that there is no separation between them and their wearer. Magritte’s boots are finer than Van Gogh’s, less worn, but only slightly; they are ordinary shoes, probably mass-produced. They are not centered in the frame, as Van Gogh’s are; instead of beckoning and inviting the missing feet for whom they were made and to whom they belong, these empty shoes point an
accusing toe at the absent body by leaving its place conspicuously empty. But the body
is not gone; it reasserts itself in the shoes themselves.

The surreal element of Magritte’s painting lies in the toes that gradually take over
the bottom of the shoes, morphing the shoes into feet in a painting that is otherwise
markedly realistic. This part of the body, at least, has never left the shoes; unlike Van
Gogh’s shoes, these have not been abandoned, because even in the absence of a wearer
they contain within themselves the part of the body that most concerns them. We might
perhaps see in these shoes the identity of the surrealist flâneur, whose shoes are his
vehicle and his tools, his only home in his wanderings. They carry his feet through the
streets of Paris, and since these wanderings are his “ways of thought,” these shoes are
also his vehicles of thought. Van Gogh’s shoes make us feel the hard toil of the peasant;
Magritte’s shoes make us think.

Things

*Objects metamorphosed before my very eyes; they did not assume an allegorical stance or the personality of symbols; they seemed less the outgrowths of an idea than the idea itself.*

Louis Aragon, *Le paysan de Paris*

Magritte’s shoes are emblematic of the importance of walking in surrealist
thought, but they also illustrate the surrealists’ belief in the power of everyday objects to
inspire and instruct. Cities and the objects in them were not just *like* ideas for the
surrealists; they could also *contain* ideas and *be* ideas. Aragon’s *Paysan de Paris* opens
with a discussion of the passages of the arcades, and specifically the Passage de l’Opera,
which was about to be demolished to make way for a straighter, American style of city planning:

Although the life that originally quickened them has drained away, they deserve, nevertheless, to be regarded as the secret repositories of several modern myths: it is only today, when the pickaxe menaces them, that they have at last become the true sanctuaries of a cult of the ephemeral, the ghostly landscape of damnable pleasures and professions. Places that were incomprehensible yesterday, and that tomorrow will never know.

(14)

Aragon saw that the ephemeral nature of the city had something to tell him. With this insight he anticipated Walter Benjamin’s critical historical method. These are places that are made to be walked through; places where the transient are at home.

Aragon also shared with Benjamin the belief that the objects of everyday life can be repositories of information by virtue of human interaction with them, human use of them. In *Le paysan de Paris* he says that he had noticed that once people no longer believed in mythologies, they novelized them. He wanted to do the reverse and write a novel that would create a mythology of the modern by extracting it from the objects of everyday life, which for him were contained in the streets of Paris. He describes how a city can gradually take on a sacred quality:

Wherever the living pursue particularly ambiguous activities, the inanimate may sometimes assume the reflection of their most secret motives: and thus our cities are peopled with unrecognized sphinxes which
will never stop the passing dreamer and ask him mortal questions unless he first projects his meditation, his absence of mind, towards them. (13)

The “wise man” who endeavors to “interrogate” the objects that populate his world and “guess their secret” is following Breton’s command to let go of everything, hit the streets, and leave himself open to real experience (Aragon 13). This is also the method Benjamin followed in his critiques, and it is furthermore the purpose of my project, namely to interrogate objects. More accurately, my project is about the ways the surrealists interrogated a particular set of objects, and what answers those objects might have given them.

This turn toward objects was a reaction against a philosophical tradition, and we turn to Benjamin for a characterization of this tradition, the stasis Breton wanted to walk away from. The surrealists, along with Benjamin, wanted to return to objects because they felt the philosophical idealism that they had inherited was an illusion, and not a benign one. Benjamin’s critical method has been called immanent criticism; the purpose of this kind of critique is to get at, to reveal truths about an era or a place through an analysis of the material conditions of that era or place, as Richard Wolin explains in his introduction to Benjamin’s thought, \textit{Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetics of Redemption}. According to Wolin, Benjamin felt that neo-Kantian philosophy caused a fragmentation of human experience that turned the modern world into a phantasmagoria. The new-Kantian’s insistence on a distinction between the natural and social sciences, while motivated by a desire to “rescue the concept of autonomous subjectivity from the clutches of 19\textsuperscript{th} century positivism,” also was responsible for the loss of meaning in everyday experience (211). This Kantianism forbade any meanderings into the intelligible
or supersensible realm, but this was precisely the realm in which Benjamin thought he could find a superior, non-mundane concept of experience (Wolin 211).

Benjamin believed that by fragmenting human experience into the sensible and the supersensible, modern philosophy impoverished our experience of everyday life and eclipsed the sense of wholeness in experience (Wolin 212). This fragmentation had its roots in what Benjamin believed was the original sin of human reason: trying to grasp the non-conceptual by means of concepts, or in other words the sin of idealism and reification. The only way to redeem modern experience was to return to a mode of thought that resisted reification and thus was more faithful to real experience. Benjamin wanted to think in images, because “the sensuousness of the image retained greater affinities with the concrete character of lived experience itself” (Wolin 213). Cartesian philosophy cluttered human experience with reified ideals, categories of thought that most often took the form of hierarchical binaries: subject/object, knowable/unknowable, mind/body. But Benjamin believed that powerful ideas could be uncovered in experience that cannot be conceptualized or categorized, only experienced as an image. He therefore tried to renounce conventional philosophical narrative in favor of an unmediated juxtaposition of insights, thereby giving voice to things themselves (Wolin 213). He wanted to redeem experience through a return to material objects; “Truth was to emerge from an unmediated juxtaposition of material elements, insofar as it was something unobtainable through strictly discursive means” (Wolin 213).

Benjamin felt an affinity with the surrealists because “these visionaries and augurs” also sought to overcome the contradictions and dualities that characterized the philosophical tradition they had inherited in favor of liberated wandering through the
passages of thought (“Surrealism” 210). Benjamin and the surrealists shared the view that objects had something to say to them. Benjamin observes that through the course of the romance described in Nadja, Breton is “closer to the things that Nadja is close to than to her” (“Surrealism” 210). He says that Breton “was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the ‘outmoded’—in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago” (210). Breton’s and Aragon’s liberated wanderings through the Paris streets and their detailed accounts of the objects they encountered mirrored their desire to wander through thought, stepping over the illusory barricades of new-Kantian and Cartesian categories. Their writing depicts real experience—encounters with the material world and the ideas it contains.

Surrealist visual artists explored the meanings and significance of these objects in various ways, and most of these works are directly concerned with the interaction between the human subject and the objects in its world. Man Ray’s photographs titled “Man” and “Woman”, for example, express a symbolic relationship between the human body and these strange objects (figs. 1.6 and 1.7). The interaction of the human body with clothing was another important theme for the surrealists, and Man Ray’s photographs of women’s hats explore the sexual coding of the hats, their power to displace and represent parts of the body. But a peculiar relationship exists between shoes and feet that surrealist artists use in an interesting way. When Magritte paints a pair of shoes that don’t just symbolize feet but that are feet, something interesting is going on, something different from what was going on with Van Gogh’s pair of shoes.
What kind of objects are shoes and feet? What might these objects have had to say to the surrealists who often portrayed them in their art? How should we understand works of art like Magritte’s “Le modèle rouge” in terms of surrealist views on the human body and its relations to objects? These are the questions this project will address.

Purpose and Approach

The purpose of this study is to redeem a set of objects that has been neglected in the menagerie of surrealist idea-objects and examine it. This study will examine feet and shoes in surrealist terms, however, to try to understand how they fit into the surrealist philosophical framework; it will assume a surrealist, and thus a modernist, perspective and will search for meaning behind these symbols. In his book Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Frederic Jameson uses images of shoes, the same painting by Van Gogh of an old pair of boots and Andy Warhol’s “Diamond Dust Shoes”, to illustrate the shift from modernism to postmodernism (7). Van Gogh’s painting must be understood as a sign that points to something, some meaning, underneath its outward appearance; Heidegger’s analysis of the painting, for example, is the kind of hermeneutical reading that the Van Gogh painting requires. The notion that the experience of peasant labor can be contained in a painting, as if it were a vessel, is, according to Jameson, a strictly modernist one. Modern art follows modern theory in positing depth models, essentially binaries that structure thought. Postmodern theory and art seek to abandon all depth models of meaning and thought, and Jameson uses the example of Andy Warhol’s work, “Diamond Dust Shoes,” as a work of art that rejects
depth; it is conspicuously flat, a photograph of pairs of shoes stacked on top of one another, the print coated with glitter (7). Meaning is not contained in these shoes; only the interplay of signs on their surface is important.

This project runs the risk of being accused of indulging in a depth-based study of surrealism by focusing on thematic content. I am interrogating feet and shoes to find out what they mean, and this goes against the grain of many contemporary, postmodern analyses of surrealist art. Rosalind Krauss’ treatment of surrealist art, for example, is concerned primarily with postmodern ideas of meaning as spacing and substitution as they are played out in surrealist art; in other words, she is interested in the ways signs function in surrealist art, not what they mean. But as the second chapter of this project will show, the surrealists, Bataille in particular, were interested in objects and signs more for their power to bring about intellectual change in their audience than to convey some idea; in other words, they too were more concerned with the function of signs than with their meaning. In his dictionary for the journal Documents Bataille expressed his aim as defining not the meaning of words but rather their tasks, and this project will likewise examine the role that images of feet and shoes played within the system of signs and ideas that was the underpinning of surrealist visual art.

Furthermore, images of feet and shoes can convey the very ideas about spacing that Krauss argues are central to surrealist art. The relation between feet and shoes is one that effectively conveys the ideas of displacement and spacing that Rosalind Krauss believes are foundational to all surrealist visual art. In looking for a “visual

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4 Her essay “Photography in the Service of Surrealism,” published in both L’Amour Fou and The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths, pursues this analysis most explicitly.
homogeneity” in surrealist visual art Krauss finds that there is a “failure of stylistic concepts derived from the formal, pictorial code…to forge any kind of unity from the apparent diversity of surrealist production, the failure to arrive, that is, at what Rubin called an intrinsic definition of surrealism” (Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* 101). Her argument is that the photographic rather than the pictorial code is where to find a set of aesthetic principles governing surrealist visual art. Surrealist art is essentially photographic because it shares with photography the aim of creating “an experience of the real itself as sign, the real fractured by spacing” (Krauss, *Originality* 109).

Dadaist montages were examples of very evident spacing: they showed very clearly the spaces or blanks between signs, the white page on which the various images were glued as a “fluid matrix within which each representation of reality is secured in isolation” from what it signifies, from its meaning (Krauss, *Originality* 107). But these montages rob the photographic image of its most powerful illusion—the sense of presence. The photographic image gives the impression of simultaneity, of reproducing on one seamless surface everything that existed in the space on which the lens was focused in the moment the aperture opened. Spacing destroys this simultaneity because it shows things as discrete, as separate from one another, or as sequential, one after another. Surrealist photographers rarely used photomontage, but they introduced spacing into their images in other ways, and by maintaining the seamless integrity of the print they achieved the illusion of spacing within presence, sequentiality within simultaneity. They did this through various methods, for example multiple exposures, as in Bellmer’s doll image from 1938 with the silhouette of a shoe superimposed onto it (fig. 1.8). According
to Krauss, surrealist photography is defined by the attempt to create the impression of a reality that is spaced, that contains gaps.

The most important strategy for creating spaces in an image, according to Krauss, is doubling. An image showing duplication “produces the formal rhythm of spacing—the two-step that banishes the unitary condition of the moment” (Krauss, *Originality* 109). These images of doubles open reality up to the possibility of spacing; in other words, they fracture our sense of concrete reality as a group of discrete objects by suggesting that even in a moment captured by a camera each object contains within it its own doubles, subsequent moments of its existence. They don’t impose an interpretation on reality; rather, they “are presentations of that very reality as configured, or coded, or written” (Krauss, *Originality* 113).

Krauss’ view is that spacing, or in other words the presentation of the real as a sign, is also typical of surrealist art in media other than photography. Other surrealist works of art similarly show reality as itself coded or fractured by superimposing real objects, as in Breton’s discussions of found objects that contrive to bring him some message. A photographic illustration of one such discussion from *L’Amour fou* where a small slipper and a large spoon are joined (*faisant corps*) is one example that is relevant to this project (fig. 1.9). The odd spacing of these two normally unrelated objects signified for Breton a *mise-en-abyme* where together they formed a shoe of which the slipper was the heel, itself being composed of a spoon and a slipper-heel, and so on to infinite regress. This vision signified for Breton “his own desire for love” and began his quest of *L’Amour fou* (Krauss, *Originality* 113). Surrealist painting also tends to be realistic in some aspect: color, texture, carefulness of rendering. A surrealist painting
Figure 1.9. Man Ray, “De la hauteur d’un petit soulier faisant corps avec elle...,” 1934. Published in André Breton, L’Amour fou; rpt. in Rosalind E. Krauss, L’amour fou: Photography and Surrealism (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985).
reads as real until we notice something odd or horrifying about it, as with Dali’s *Three Young Surrealist Women holding in their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra* (fig. 1.10); or else a surrealist painting might read as horrifying until we notice something real about it, as with Dali’s *Beigneuse* (fig. 1.11).

The operations of spacing and doubling are employed in various media in surrealist art, but for Krauss, the photograph is the richest medium for the surrealists to pursue these issues. Photography is the paradigmatic medium for this kind of spacing, since it is itself a double of the objects it portrays, or at least it seems to be. The surrealists exploited photography’s “special connection to reality” to produce images that give the impression that the spacings and doublings they have inscribed in the images exist in reality and were simply passively captured in film. “In this way the photographic medium is exploited to produce a paradox: the paradox of reality constituted as sign” (Krauss, *Originality* 112). Surrealist photography is meant to appear “straight”, a passive record of reality, when in fact it “is contrived to the highest degree…Contrivance, we could say, is what ensures that a photograph will seem surrealist” (Krauss, *L’Amour Fou* 91).

Krauss’ argument is that this spacing, this inscription of gaps onto the real, is the principle that unites all surrealist art, photographs and sculptures and paintings alike. But the surrealists did not just represent reality as if it were coded or full of signs; they perceived reality as full of significance, and their visual art was structured to give its viewers this same glimpse of a world structured by surrealist thought. Aragon, for example, believed that in the reality of the streets of Paris through which he wanders “a mythology ravels and unravels” and he revels in “this sense of the marvelous suffusing
Figure 1.10. Salvador Dalí, *Three Young Surrealist Women holding in their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra*, 1936. The Salvador Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida; rpt. in *Dalí. Mass Culture*, Félix Fanés, curator (Fundacion “la Caixa”, 2004) 85.
everyday existence” (Aragon 10). Surrealist images are links in a chain of signification that begins with a reality that it sees as containing ideas within its objects. Breton referred to this view of reality as representation as either the Marvelous or Convulsive Beauty.

This is why certain objects or body parts became so prominent in surrealist art; things like eyes and hats had something to say to surrealists, they figured in surrealist ideas, and so they reappear throughout the visual art of the movement. The eye in particular was a body part/object that fascinated the surrealists. Bataille wrote extensively about the eye and its susceptibility to displacement onto other parts of the body, in other words its signifying power. His writings are full of references to eyes, including his novel L’Histoire de l’œil and several essays including “The Pineal Eye” and “The Solar Anus” and one titled simply “Eye”, he employs the image or concept of the eye to illustrate the same notion of signification or representation that Krauss described as foundational to surrealism. Eyes multiply and are displaced in his writings to show spacing in the same way body parts multiply in Hans Bellmer’s doll photographs (see fig. 1.8). Bataille imagines the jesus, an eye that opens on the top of the head and reconfigures the normally horizontal axis of visual perception to become vertical (Bataille, “The Jesuve” 73-8, “The Pineal Eye” 79-90). This eye stares at the sun, its spherical analogue, and the two become interchangeable signs for one another. But the sun is not only the god of light but also of death and decay, of fire and decomposition. The sun is also a solar anus, it is the identity of the fire-god Prometheus and of the eagle that forever consumes his liver, the elevated god of the visible and the knowable and the destructive force that demands sacrificial mutilation, and so the eye is displaced yet
again, this time by the anus ("Sacrificial Mutilation" 70). The eye is interchangeable
with the mouth, the anus, the sun, the head and other objects and body parts in Bataille’s
writings; he is evoking in writing the same notion of displacement and representation that
Krauss says is the special trait of surrealist visual art.

But feet are also doubles: they come in pairs and they divide themselves into
equal sets of even tinier doubles, toes. They are further doubled and displaced by the
addition of shoes, objects that indicate the feet they cover by doubling them in both form
and function, essentially replacing them. Bataille’s frenzy of substitution and
representation was very carefully arrayed around very specific parts of the body because
they were the locations of philosophical ideas that were important to him and to the
surrealist project in general. The eye was an important symbol to him of the assumptions
and associations linked to this part of the body; by playing with that symbol, substituting
it for other body parts, creating jarring juxtapositions, Bataille was trying to uncover
these unconscious but deeply rooted values. He wanted to expose the dualities that
underlie our thought and prompt us to think of the world in terms of good and evil,
elevated and base, high and low; he believed that by exposing to us the structure of our
thought by challenging that structure, making it topsy-turvy, he could dismantle the
structure itself. This aim is reminiscent of Breton’s goal in writing Nadja, which was to
inspire other young men to set out in the streets to wander freely.

Feet and shoes also play a role in this upending of duality, although a neglected
one. They imply duality in ways that other favorite symbols of the Surrealists (hands, the
eye) do not. Yes, the eye does carry with itself the presumption of a world of objects
outside itself that it can see and thereby capture and possess; but the foot carries its shoes
with it wherever it goes, and it can be separated from them in a way that exposes the
nature of the relationship. We cannot examine sight abstracted from what it sees, but we
can easily observe a naked foot or an empty shoe. The tensions and anxiety that are the
hallmarks of modernism are fundamental to this lowly appendage, the contradictions and
complications of urban life inherent and evident in it. Whereas the eye needs to be
recovered from the lofty position it inherited from Enlightenment thought, to be
problematic in order for us to appreciate its ambiguity, the foot is already base and
problematic. It wears its shame gleefully, comically, on its sleeve. It is a ridiculous body
part; not central and scary like the eye, or touching and personal like the hand, or noble
and hard like the head, or shocking and vital like the genitalia.

Why not discuss feet and shoes in the same terms as the eye? They are just as
suggestive of doubling and displacement—after all, they come in twos, and their job is to
displace the body. They are furthermore linked to shoes in a way that is also suggestive
of doubling and signification. They also carry a sexual connotation if not as provocative
as that of the eye then certainly more commonplace. But most importantly, they occupy
the pole opposite Bataille’s pineal eye, and thus carry significance for his project of
destroying Cartesian ideals by rotating the axis of the human body. A thematic analysis
of so-called straight photographs, such as Boiffard’s toes, is useful since there is little in
the photographs that is contrived besides the choice and isolation of a particular body part
(fig. 1.12). This particular body part must be significant, and the purpose of this project
is to uncover its significance. I want to bring feet out of the shadows.

Bataille is the only theorist of the surrealist movement who wrote explicitly about
feet and shoes, so whatever scholarship exists on the role of feet and shoes in surrealism
refers to his writings. He was interested in the ways the human body can contain and influence thought, and his essay “The Big Toe” describes how the vertical orientation of the body is profoundly linked to ideas about morality. The head is the highest point of the body, and its reaching for the exalted sky leads us to associate it with privileged ideas of rationality, morality, light, and goodness. These are all, of course, reifications, ideals we invent to help us order the world. Humans have a tendency to ignore or hide from the opposite reifications: desire, sin, darkness, and evil, because “there is a bias in favor of that which elevates itself” even though “within the body blood flows in equal quantities from high to low and from low to high” (Bataille, “The Big Toe” 20). The foot, for example, is the body part that is located at the opposite pole of the body’s axis, and so it occupies the ignored region of all that is dark and base. By bringing it out of the shadows into the light of analysis Bataille discovers that “the big toe is the most human part of the body”; it distinguishes the human body from the simian body because it is not opposable like an ape’s big toe (Bataille, “The Big Toe” 20). It enables humans to be upright, and this vertical orientation is the basis for the “bias in favor of that which elevates itself” (Bataille, “The Big Toe” 20). Humans have a “secret horror” of the foot that leads them to “conceal its length and form as much as possible,” but this is the result of a failure to recognize the foot’s significance—without the foot, the human life that is “erroneously seen as an elevation” would not be possible (Bataille, “The Big Toe” 20-1). Bataille’s purpose in discussing this most simple and base of body parts is to disturb the habitual patterns of thought that privilege elevation over baseness.

Denis Hollier discusses “The Big Toe” in Against Architecture, an analysis of Bataille’s thought that emphasizes its spatial and structural aspects. In a section titled
Slaughter he discusses the context of Bataille’s articles about individual body parts, including “Mouth,” “Eye,” and “Big Toe” as entries in the Documents dictionary published in September 1929 (Hollier, Architecture 77). Bataille took “a ‘structural’ problematic connected to an organic reading of the human body insofar as it poses problems that are peculiar to it” in these essays about body parts, and the result was a kind of “lexicographical organ removal” (77). A dictionary is already the kind of text that sections off the field of reference; it divides signs from one another, it mutilates language, and “Bataille makes use of the form itself for ‘anatomical’ ends,” turning it into a tool of dissection of the body even as the dictionary is a tool of dissection of language.

The articles carve the body part they refer to out of the body, disconnecting it from its “organic supports” and “turning it into the locus of a semantic concentration through which the part takes on the values that are tied to the whole” (Hollier, Architecture 78). Bataille’s aim in his dictionary was to carve words out in a similar way, to dissect the body of language. But he felt that “a dictionary would start from the moment in which it no longer provides the meaning of words but their job” (qtd. In Hollier, Architecture 30). His analyses of the various parts of the body were intended to identify the job of each of them, not the physiological job, however, but their job within the architecture of the body and thus within “modern pictorial space” (Hollier, Architecture 79). The architecture of the body and its representation in art were symptoms of the system of values and ideals that Bataille wanted to overcome, and so ultimately the “job” of each body part was its role in this value system. But since Bataille wants to dismantle this system, the “job” of each body part within the system is also the key to its “job” in unraveling the system by achieving the informe. The big toe article,
however, was not published in the dictionary along with the others, and Hollier’s
treatment of this lowly part of the body is similarly scanty; he reiterates Bataille’s idea of
the foot as the origin and shame of the human body and its connection with the reversal
of values and then proceeds to a lengthy discussion of the eye (77). The mouth and the
eye receive much greater attention from Hollier, and indeed from Bataille. It seems more
could be said about the foot’s job in surrealist visual art.

Rosalind Krauss and Michael Sheringham also discuss Bataille’s ideas about feet,
but their analyses are more about the function of the photographic medium within the
surrealist movement than the toe or foot itself. Sheringham discusses ‘Le gros orteil’ but
only as an illustration of his interpretation of “the treatment of photography and the
poetics of the photographic document” (95). He is interested in Boiffard’s photographic
illustrations of Bataille’s essay because they “combine the irrefutable reality of the
document with a hallucinatory presence that opens the real to the play of fantasy”
(Sheringham 96). These images have “the double power of a document and a fantasy:
[they are] at once a ‘vision du réel’ and a ‘vision de rêve’” (99). Boiffard’s photographs
serve a performative function: by distorting the human figure the image causes us to “call
into question our definition of the human”; but the image is also a photograph, and is thus
a document, an “incontrovertible [record] of the reality of what was before the lens” (99).

What is interesting for Sheringham about Bataille’s essay is how it becomes
illustrated, documented, by Boiffard’s photographs (such as fig. 1.12) and the surrealist
payoff of the photographic medium. These images of and ideas about feet and toes serve
Sheringham’s larger aim of tracing the origin of the philosophy of everyday life pursued
by de Certeau and others back to the surrealists and their own fascination with everyday
objects, a fascination Bataille and Breton shared. Sheringham’s analysis, however, is not of the objects that are documented in the images or the essay, feet themselves, but rather the way the images themselves function.

Rosalind Krauss also discusses Bataille’s essay and Boiffard’s illustrations of it within the context of a theory of the function of photography in the surrealist movement. Her analysis is similar to Sheringham’s in its emphasis on the idea of doubling, although for Krauss this doubling, or spacing, that is inherent to photography is “the indicator that the wild sounds of babbling have been rendered deliberate, intentional, and that what they intend is meaning. Doubling is in this sense the ‘signifier of signification’” (Krauss, L’Amour fou 31). Because as a medium photography has duplication built into it, because it is endowed with a “very special connection to reality,” the surrealists used it as a tool to examine the nature of signification (Krauss, L’Amour 31). Krauss also focuses on the importance for surrealism of photography as a medium. She argues that surrealism is, essentially, a photographic movement because both the movement and the medium are concerned, at their heart, with signification as a pure concept (Krauss, L’Amour 31).

Krauss reads surrealist photographic images as explorations of this very idea of signification; Sheringham, with Didi-Hausman, sees surrealist photography as a performative medium. My approach to Boiffard’s images and Bataille’s essay will be to focus not on the photographic medium and its aptness for the surrealist project, but rather to concentrate on the objects being represented in these works—feet and shoes—and to talk about how these objects themselves could be meaningful in the context of surrealism.
Hollier discusses a statement about shoes made by Bataille in an article in *Documents* called “L’esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions” (Hollier 13). Bataille wrote “I challenge any art lover to love a canvas as much as a fetishist loves a shoe” (qtd. in Hollier, “The Use-Value of the Impossible” 13). Hollier’s article, “The Use-Value of the Impossible,” discusses the implications of this statement within the context of disagreement amongst contributors to *Documents* about the meaning of the term use-value. Hollier explains that Bataille’s view of use-value was connected to his ideas about sacrifice and expenditure.

For Hollier, Bataille’s choice of the shoe as the object possessing use-value serves to underline the diverging views of the term—the ethnographers in Bataille’s circle used it to refer to something like usefulness; Bataille, along with Leiris, saw use-value as similar to Benjamin’s idea of aura (Hollier, “Use-Value” 13). An object with use-value does not, for Bataille, have exchange-value, because it is unique; it cannot be exchanged because only it will do. This is the kind of love the fetishist feels for the shoe, and Bataille’s choice of object here is important. The shoe fetishist chooses an object that has a very clear use and then ignores that use. He uses the shoe in a way that was unintended, and this is the idea of expenditure; the shoe is only valuable to the fetishist when it is used up.

Hollier talks about Heidegger’s analysis of Van Gogh’s painting of shoes, but he says that Bataille’s Van Gogh is not Heidegger’s Van Gogh:

Not the Van Gogh of shoes without a subject, of the shoes unbound by painting, but that of another unbinding, the sacrificial catachresis which seized his body proper, the detaching of the ear which belongs to the body.
An ear which might belong to someone who spits it out over the market, crying: this is my body, inexchangeable. An ear diverted from the exchange market. (13-14)

Bataille’s Van Gogh doesn’t belong to art history but to “the bloody myth of our existence as humans,” according to Hollier, and his homey painting of a pair of shoes has little to do with Van Gogh’s sacrifice (Hollier, “Use-Value” 14). But Hollier’s discussion of shoes is brief, serving to illustrate the central purpose in the article, which is to discuss the concept of use-value; a more focused conversation with shoes as objects within Bataille’s surrealist theory reveals a closer link between shoes and Van Gogh’s unbinding of his ear than we might suspect.

What I propose in my project is a more surgical look at the same themes Krauss is interested in—doubling, signification, representation—as well as the ideas of Bataille, discussed very thoroughly by Hollier, Sheringham, and Krauss, as they relate to a very specific set of symbols that appear across media and in the work of various artists who were part of the surrealist movement. Feet and shoes are such rich objects, full of secrets and connections to everyday life and central to the wandering that marked surrealist literature. Again, as Hollier explains, Bataille’s dictionary for Documents, of which the essay on the big toe was meant to be a part, was intended to elucidate not the meaning of a word but rather its job (Hollier, Architecture 30). The purpose of this project is to interrogate feet and shoes, just as Aragon says the wise man interrogates the objects that occupy his world, in order to understand their job within the surrealist project. It is a furthering of Bataille’s entry on the big toe for his dictionary, an analysis that attempts to sever feet and shoes from the rest of the body, to dissect them, to examine them and their
peculiar characteristics, in order to discover their job within the system of meanings of the surrealist movement. These sphinxes might have some answers.
Chapter 2
The Surreal Foot

Discussions of feet in surrealist art and literature tend to focus on their sexual and Freudian significance, but this chapter will talk about the foot in terms that are more aligned with the intellectual aims of the surrealist movement. This discussion will be more closely aligned with the thought of Bataille and his surrealism than with Breton and his canonical surrealism, because Bataille is more explicitly attentive to the body and its signifying power than Breton. The reality of the surrealist movement, so to speak, was that its visual art was heavily focused on the human figure, and so Bataille’s explicit theoretical treatment of the body is vital to a reading of a particular part of the body. Furthermore, Bataille’s thought was structured in its analysis of the structure it critiqued, namely Cartesian duality and its corollary Western morality, and in its development of techniques for eliminating it. Bataille in his turn felt Breton participated in Western morality and its dualities by privileging all that was light, brilliant, and elevated and ignoring all that was dark and vulgar. Bataille’s own prescription for overcoming traditional categories of thought was to drag everything base out of the shadows into the light of day.

Overcoming Contradiction

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. One would search in vain for any
In his second Surrealist manifesto André Breton identifies the fundamental motivation of Surrealism as the overcoming of binaries (245). When he urges his readers to follow him and “hit the road” in *Les pas perdus*, he is asking them to leave behind a very specific system of thought that he believed was stifling intellectual and social discourse. In his book *Against Architecture* Denis Hollier describes the system of thought that both Breton and Bataille were trying to overcome as a building, an erection, that sets humans at its head (Hollier 86). This structure is science, the Enlightenment notion of knowledge, based on classification and categorization, and mankind is both its ultimate subject and its ultimate object. Hollier describes how Linnaeus set forth the first scientific classification system of natural organisms in his *Systema naturae* in 1735, and in it he arranged living beings into categories of order, genus, species, etc. At the top of his classification is man—“nature’s system begins with him, he is no. 1, *heading* it all”—because he alone among creatures can *produce* knowledge. The specific difference of man, the characteristic that separates him from all other animals, Linnaeus identifies as the “Know thyself”, a distinction that in the French editions of *Systema* is formulated as *homo sapiens*, the special name for humans that eventually caught on (Hollier, *Architecture* 86).

As Hollier explains, this system of classification with man at its head had the interesting effect of introducing humans into the object of science, the field of knowable things, as the subject of science, the knower of all knowable things. “Man, therefore, is indeed the being that produces itself with science”; but the surrealists, Bataille especially,
found that the vision of humanity produced by science was a sham (Hollier, *Architecture* 86). Categories of classification, Linnaeus’ for example, were nothing more than ideals to the surrealists, human inventions that we assume are real. Among these reified ideals was reason, the supreme virtue that supposedly enables man to perceive categories and places him at the head of all creatures; for the surrealists, reason was a prison that prevents us from experiencing the world. In *Paysan de Paris* Aragon describes the difficulty of “tearing himself away from…the mental habit” of subjecting any thought he might have “to an abstract examination. This spirit of analysis, this spirit and this need, have been transmitted to me” by “innumerable tortuous processes” that he can only undo with great effort (Aragon 9). He asks: “can the knowledge deriving from reason even begin to compare with knowledge perceptible by sense?” (Aragon 9). The resounding answer heard on the lips of all surrealists, of course, was no.

What the surrealists found most troubling about this system of ideals was that it had become the basis for a system of values and morals that further separate us from the world of facts (Bataille “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix Sur in the Words *Surhomme* [Superman] and *Surrealist*” 33).1 Georges Bataille believed that this system of values was especially pernicious because it was arrayed in terms of dualities or contradictions, placing value on one member of the contradiction and ignoring the other. As Hollier explains, “Science, having glazed the world over with the idea, eliminates any difference that is not logical, or reduces it to a specific difference” (Hollier, *Architecture* 87).

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1 In this essay Bataille is actually attacking the mainstream surrealists, led by Breton, for themselves creating ideals in their attempt to escape the ideals of bourgeois prisons, but the language of values, ideals, and the world of facts would have been shared by Breton and his followers, since it came directly from Marx. Bataille cites *The Revolution First and Always*. 
other words, science or reason must categorize every object, and what it cannot
categorize because it is other or is only, as Aragon says, “perceptible by sense,” it
relegates to a lower category and ignores as unknowable. The system of values that
emerges goes from top to bottom: whatever is higher is more human, more rational, more
abstract—in short, elevated; whatever is lower is more animal, more irrational, more
vulgar—in short, base.

For Bataille, the directional aspect of this system carries over to (or perhaps emerges from) the vertical orientation of our bodies, and our system of values extends to
our own organs. The head is valued because it is high; the foot is disgraceful because it
is low. But Bataille believed that to overcome these bourgeois values it was not
sufficient to try to “forge at once values situated ABOVE all those values, bourgeois or
otherwise, conditioned by the order of real things”; a truly subversive approach must rely
“on presently lower forms whose interplay will in the end destroy bourgeois prisons”
(Bataille, “The ‘Old Mole’” 33). The purpose of this chapter is to show how surrealist
portrayals of the foot directly enact Bataille’s approach to subverting the bourgeois
system of values.

This reading of surrealist art will ignore for the most part Freudian interpretations
of images of feet that identify them as primarily phallic symbols. Breton is credited with
introducing Freud to France, and his version of surrealism is heavily in Freud’s debt. Hal
Foster, whose book Prosthetic Gods examines modernist responses to the intrusion of
technology onto the body, seems to read surrealist visual art principally as fetishistic;
indeed, he believes “the dominant model of the surrealist photograph is the fetish” (Foster
236). There may be some truth to this, and Krauss agrees that the essence of photography
as a doubling medium links it to fetishes, since the fetish is a double created in response to castration anxiety (Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* 113). Certainly feet can be fetishes, and many surrealist images of them have clear phallic characteristics, for example André Kertész’ *Distortion* (fig. 2.1). This image of what appears to be a severed leg with feet at both of its ends formally resembles a castrated phallus, and the two feet are an added element of doubling.

But this kind of reading ignores the philosophical motivations that made the surrealist want to provoke anxiety in their audience in the first place by “relying on presently lower forms” like severed body parts (Bataille, “The ‘Old Mole’” 33). The surrealists had in mind very clear philosophical and political aims for their art, and it would be a mistake to view surrealist art primarily as a field for exploring Freudian ideas or as a manifestation of an artist’s neuroses. The surrealists were above all interested in intellectual freedom from categories, in the value of coincidence, dreams, wandering. The visual art they produced was, to some extent, aimed at furthering this aim of intellectual freedom. Certainly, many surrealist images can be seen as fetishes, phallic symbols, depictions of castration anxiety; but these same images can also be seen as attempts to dislodge categories of thought and liberate the mind from the bonds of reason.

Works of art that feature feet and shoes within the surrealist oeuvre tend to call up contradictions or binaries in a particularly striking way. Shoes and feet *imply* binaries along two important planes: first, to place a foot in the center of an art work instead of a face is to call into question the relation of the foot to other body parts, its almost invariable subjugation in categories like elevated/base; second, the nature of the relation between a shoe and a foot is powerfully suggestive of other relations, for example
Figure 2.1. André Kertész, *Distortion*, 1933; rpt. in Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT, 1985) 103.
between subject and object, that would have been concerns for the Surrealists. The foot becomes the axis point joining these vertical and horizontal binaries. This chapter will address the way this vertical configuration of the body, and the foot’s lowly place in it, is explored in surrealist art.

The Foot as Axis-point

Two early Surrealist paintings of feet set against a seaside background show explicitly this axial nature of feet. The 1926 painting by Joan Miro, *Personnage lançant une pierre à un oiseau*, shows a stylized human figure standing on a beach, apparently throwing a rock at a stylized bird (fig. 2.2). The human figure is roughly vertical and consists of one large foot that is planted in the sand, a bulbous body and small circular head seeming to grow out of it. The painting is bisected by the horizon over the dark sea and the shoreline forms an even more stark contrast between land and sea. The foot here is planted at the site of boundaries—between land and sea, earth and sky, bird and man.

Even more striking is the play along the vertical plane of this image: The figure is in a vertical configuration, but the size of the foot compared to the tiny head suggests play along this vertical plane.

This image seems to embody the pyramid of values that Bataille is trying to dismantle even as it calls their hierarchy into question. Just as in Linnaeus’ classification of organisms, the human figure is situated at the highest point of the canvas, in the upper right corner; and its almost perfect circle and glowing lightness against the dark sky identify it as an ideal. It rests on a body that is organized on an axis slightly tilted from
Figure 2.2. Joan Miro, Personnage lançant une Pierre à un oiseau, 1926; rpt. in André Breton, Le surréalisme et la peinture (Paris: Gallimard, 1965) 124.
the vertical, suggesting its throwing motion, if abstractly. The bird, its tiny head in the middle of the canvas, is entirely below the horizon, except for the top of the plumage on its head. Its body is no more than a line, tilted slightly from the horizontal, its wings forming a bow from which the arrow of its body will be shot. Although it is unlikely Miro would have been familiar with Bataille’s ideas about the axial structure of thought (the painting dates to 1926, and Bataille began developing those ideas in 1927 in his essay “The Solar Anus”), the painting seems nevertheless to express Bataille’s idea of the verticality inherent in man’s idea of himself and the horizontality of his idea of animal nature (Stoekl xi).

Even lower on the canvas, lower even than the bird, is the figure’s foot. It is shown in profile so that it is arranged horizontally; it is exactly horizontal in fact, whereas the bird is tilted slightly, its own head angled higher than its tail. For Bataille, the horizontal axis is representative of animal life in what Hollier calls “a problematics of modern pictural space” (Hollier, *Architecture* 79). Baseness and animal nature correspond visually to the horizontal arrangement of the animal’s mouth and anus. The vertical axis corresponds to the orientation of plant life and of the human body, as both point upwards, towards the sun. The foot of Miro’s figure seems to be placed at the lowest position in the hierarchy of the composition: not only is it literally placed lower on the canvas, but it is completely flat and horizontal, more animal and base than the bird. Its form is exaggerated and splayed, breaking apart into five reaching toes, whereas the body and the head are discrete, clearly outlined against the dark sea and sky. It is also the only of the three clearly delineated parts of the figure that rests entirely on the sand, no
part of it emerging from the earth. The head, as Bataille says in his essay “The Big Toe”, is “raised to the heavens and heavenly things” (Bataille, “The Big Toe” 20).

Another surrealist canvas shows a foot on a beach, and this early painting of Dali’s, *The Bather*, further elucidates the boundaries evoked by feet (fig. 2.3). Dali has enhanced the central role of the foot by severing it from its body, even dividing it further until what is left on the beach is a hideous toe. This toe rests on a beach and occupies the axis-point between the horizontal boundary of bright blue water and brown sand and the vertical boundary between darker, finer sand on the right half of the beach and lighter, coarser sand on the left half. This hideous toe, severed but still alive and writhing, straddles all the quadrants of this grid, inhabiting all categories but not belonging wholly to any. In both Miro’s and Dali’s images the foot stands at the boundary of human/animal, high/low, self/other.

While both paintings evoke axes and boundaries, Miro’s preserves the normal vertical configuration that we are used to seeing in an upright figure. Although the relative sizes of the body parts emphasize the foot, it remains in an inferior position to the head. Dali’s image more radically shifts this configuration by presenting the foot, or at least a part of it, in the center of the frame. Reclining figures can have sexual or morbid connotations in part because of this ninety-degree rotation of the vertical axis, as we can see in this Dali canvas showing another hideous figure on a beach (fig. 2.4). In this chapter I will discuss the ways surrealists employed images of feet as a way to rotate the vertical axis of the body to

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2 It is interesting to note the play between hands and feet in this image. Dali almost never uses feet to suggest sexuality; hands, however, are powerfully sexually suggestive in his work. This is somewhat unusual, given the commonplace notion of the foot as a phallic symbol.
express their embrace of materialism and their disdain for idealism and its binary categories.

**Head/Foot**

The surrealists’ ultimate aim was intellectual freedom from the structures of idealist thought that imposed categories like high/low, light/dark, good/evil on thought. One way of representing and perhaps producing this freedom was to inscribe a challenge to these binaries in the images they produced. Just as ideas could be contained in the streets, buildings, and flea markets of a city, they could be contained, or projected onto, the object most readily available for experience—the body. Within the structure of contradictions that Breton was endeavoring to escape, the vertical configuration of the body, head/feet, corresponds to other hierarchical binaries so that the head is identified with all that is light, visible, rational, and good. The foot is lower in space than the head and so is dark, invisible, stupid, and evil. To isolate the foot in an image is to subvert the habitual abstraction that places feet either outside the visual field or in a position inferior to the head.

The renegade surrealist philosopher Georges Bataille believed that one contradiction encompassed all the idealist morality the surrealists were against, that of elevated/base. He felt that by flipping this binary, surrealist art could achieve the dialectical transcendence that Breton insisted was the sole aim of the surrealist project. Bataille and Breton did not get along; Bataille called himself surrealism’s “old enemy from within” and published briefly the journal *Documents* that was seen as a challenge to Breton’s canonical surrealism (Krauss, *L’Amour Fou* 64). Many excommunicated
surrealists followed Bataille to *Documents* when they had fallen out of Breton’s favor (among them were Desnos, Leiris, and Boiffard, Krauss, *L’Amour Fou* 72). For his part, Breton dismissed Bataille as an obsessive, an “excremental philosopher” (“Second Manifesto” 624). He charges that despite his embrace of baseness, Bataille still reasons, and this prevents him from ever truly challenging the status quo (Stoekl xi). Breton was devoted to dreams and the chance encounter as a way of escaping categorical modes of thought, and he found Bataille’s writings too structured. But what the two shared was a commitment to Marxist dialectic and its power to bring about altered states of consciousness and, ultimately, revolution—freedom from bourgeois morality and its reliance on reified binaries. Both were interested in Freud and in the potential of everyday and found objects as sites of desire and the surreal. They differed mainly in their respective opinions of the success of the other’s approach.

Bataille and Breton were both materialists, but Bataille’s materialism took a distinct direction; his writings are characterized by a thematic concern with the human body, its various parts, characteristics, and functions. Hollier says that with his focus on the human body “Bataille is really intervening against the catachresis requiring that man only take form with architecture, that the human form as such, the formation of man, be architecture” (Hollier, *Architecture* xii). On the contrary, Bataille believed that the human body expresses man’s soul in the same way as architecture expresses the soul of a society (Hollier, *Architecture* 31). Breton was more concerned with the material world outside his own body; his novels involve long walks through Paris, love affairs, strange objects found in flea markets; Bataille’s fiction is decidedly more erotic and violent, and his theoretical writings, on subjects like sacrificial mutilation and the role of the eye in
mythology and in the psyche, almost always take the human body as their subject matter. By turning his critical eye on the body Bataille was able to achieve a triple dialectic: this approach subverted moral reification first by simply being a materialist critique, not an a priori discussion of ideas; second by choosing as its material the object most easily placed on the inferior side of moral binaries, the body; and finally by identifying moral principles imposed on the body itself and inverting them. The basis of Bataille’s dialectical method was to find every vertical binary and quite literally turn it on its head, thereby exploding the ultimate moral reification, the binary of elevated/base.

Bataille was influenced by the Nietzschean notion that morality is a construct that can blind us to the truth of things. “Man,” according to Bataille, “has a light head, in other words a head raised to the heavens and heavenly things,” but these distinctions, between raised and lowered, heavenly and hellish, are not real, observable facts of the world (Bataille, “The Big Toe” 20). Rather these concepts are just that—ideas created by humans, categories, metaphors we use to lump groups of objects together: “mud and darkness being the principles of evil as light and celestial space are the principles of good” (Bataille, “The Big Toe” 20). These principles are what humans, and especially philosophers, create in order to remain, to qualify as, human. These moral concepts are organized along a vertical plane, with the upper extremes given the status of ideals and the lower end banished to shameful disgrace. They give structure to our thought and our moral system by serving as categories into which we can place objects, including the various parts of the body. At the higher end of this vertical plane are light, reason, knowledge, the head and the eye; at the lower end are darkness, instinct, desire, the viscera and the feet. Whatever is elevated is good and beautiful, worthy of attention and
acceptable for consumption; whatever is base is evil and ugly and not worthy of human thought or notice.

But just because something is not visible, dwelling in darkness, does not mean it is not there. In his essay “The Language of Flowers” Bataille shows that “vegetal nature” insists on the harmony of the elevated and the base. The life of a rose, for example, relies on the existence of both the “rather sordid tuft” of the flower’s interior as well as its outer petals; of the tall, clean stem visible above the earth and the system of “roots swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin” (Bataille, “Flowers” 13). From “the stench of the manure pile—even though it seemed for a moment to have escaped it in a flight of angelic and lyrical purity—the flower seems to relapse abruptly into its original squalor” (Bataille, “Flowers” 12). Bataille evokes this most traditional symbol of ideal beauty to show how reification cuts off much of reality from thought.

Bataille’s aim is to attack “the substitution of natural forms for the abstractions currently used by philosophers” (Bataille, “Flowers” 14). What he is specifically railing against is precisely the reification and fragmentation of experience that the philosopher Walter Benjamin was opposed to. And the solution he proposes is similar to Benjamin’s: specific, objective analysis of things themselves; in a word, materialism. Bataille in particular is drawn to the parts of things that tend to live in darkness, the parts that congregate at the base end of the elevated/base plane. Ultimately, analysis of bassesse is meant to achieve Bataille’s ultimate goal for surrealism, namely the informe.

The Informe
In his subversive journal *Documents* Bataille published installments of a surrealist dictionary, one whose aim was not to provide the meanings of words but rather to elucidate their function (Bataille, “Formless” 31). He wrote an entry for the term *informe* describing it as a formlessness that eliminates all categories of thought; it was another way of thinking about Hegelian or Marxist dialectic, one that brought dialectic into the realm of images. *Informe* was not given a meaning by Bataille but rather a job: “to undo formal categories, to deny that each thing has its ‘proper’ form, to imagine meaning as gone shapeless” (Krauss, *L'Amour Fou* 64). In other words, its job was to overcome contradictions, not by bridging them, but by eliminating them altogether, liberating thought from every category. *Bassesse* was the mechanism by which Bataille proposed to bring about the *informe*, and at the same time it characterized his own work: the mechanism was simply to pay attention to baseness, to turn the usual vertical configuration of things upside-down, to make visible the ugly and the dark. Krauss calls this “the mechanics of fall” (Krauss, *L'Amour Fou* 64). By a simple axial rotation, arranging the foot and the head at the wrong poles, for example, either visually or conceptually, Bataille believed he could reveal the ignored material underpinnings of traditional morality and its reifications—and thereby dispel those failed ideals. This is the notion of *bassesse*, the simple mechanism of upending the vertical plane of contradiction to focus on what normally goes unnoticed—the roots of things.

Bataille also believed this approach to surrealism was more effective, because more dialectically sound, for the Marxist project of surrealism than Breton’s. *Bassesse* was an answer to Breton’s method of dialectical reasoning, an alternative way to come to terms specifically with the opposition of elevated and base. Bataille opposed Breton
because while they shared a commitment to the Marxist program of bringing about revolution through subverting bourgeois values, Bataille felt that Breton had not been able to transcend the binary that most typified bourgeois morality: elevated/base. This vertical binary encompasses, for Bataille, all moral abstraction and reification, all failure to see a rose’s root system or rotting stamen. He believed that the mental state that Breton sought after, the dreamlike, uncanny merveilleux, was just another form of elevation.

Bataille accused Breton of having bourgeois values; Breton was an Icarus, enraptured by all that is elevated and “full of disgust for this too base world that he believes he scorns—scorns more than anyone has ever scorned it before him” (Bataille, “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme [Superman] and Surrealist” 42). For Breton, “all that does not aim at the annihilation of being in an interior and blind radiance” is vulgar (Breton, “Second Manifesto” 42) and Bataille sees in this sensitivity to vulgarity a lingering concern for propriety and in this love for radiance a willful ignorance of the darkness that underlies it. Bataille believed Breton was blind to “the shabby, sinister, or inspired events occurring all around him…what constitutes the real decomposition of an immense world” because of his naïve distaste for the base (Bataille, “Old Mole” 41).

Breton’s claim of escaping bourgeois values was unconvincing to Bataille, who saw in Breton’s search for “an interior and blind radiance” not a rigorous, Hegelian empty abstraction, but rather an Icarian flight into “the brilliant immensity of the sky” (Breton, “Second Manifesto” 42). What Breton was searching for in the marvelous was, in Bataille’s view, an escape from contradiction, rather than an elimination of it.
Breton’s escape to a luminous dreamscape did not reconcile the contradiction of elevated/base; instead he underscored it and placed himself on the side of the elevated, a move that would result in a precipitous drop towards the very ground from which he was trying to escape.  

For Bataille, morality consists ultimately in a hierarchical ordering of reifications along a vertical plane with a subsequent masking of the categories and objects that reside at the lower pole; by looking up toward the sky for a resolution of contradictions, Breton maintained the moral status quo, according to Bataille. This was the reason Breton’s project would ultimately fail to produce revolutionary agitation; his ideas were too rarified, too out of touch with, in both the moral and the economic senses of the word, the base. Only by rotating the vertical plane, by turning to bassesse, could the surrealists hope to shake the masses free from the prejudices of bourgeois morality. Bataille appeals to Marx’s discussion in the Communist Manifesto of the revolutionary force that emerges from the base, from the working class, as an “Old Mole”, a subterranean force that deals in material facts. This revolution has nothing to do with the bourgeois idealism and elevation that represent imperialism, Christianity, or revolutionary utopias (Bataille, “Old Mole” 35). It bubbles up from and keeps its roots in the deepest layers of society. For Bataille, surrealist art, literature and theory must sink down to the same thorough baseness to bring about revolutionary aesthetic experiences. In order to complete the dialectical movement and transcend the elevated/base binary, surrealism must achieve the informe, the elimination of this most basic of abstractions.

3 In fact it might make good Hegelian sense to think of Bataille himself as this very fall from the heavens, the moment of dialectical opposition to Breton’s quest for elevation, although Bataille would object vehemently.
Krauss claims that Bataille’s contribution to surrealist production was to encourage the creation of images that did not decorate “but rather structure the basic mechanisms of thought” (Krauss, L’Amour Fou 64). She is referring to the concept of the informe and its influence on many surrealist artists and thinkers. This influence emerged in the title of the magazine Minotaure that began publication in 1933, three years after Bataille’s own journal, Documents, had folded. This title of this new publication showed the influence of Bataille’s ideas about the informe, since the minotaur was one of its avatars. One way to get man’s head out of the clouds is to substitute for that human head, the seat of reason, the head of a dumb bull. The normal polarities of head/body, human/animal have been swapped in this character, so the animal resides at the upper pole of the head, the human at the lower pole of the body. This reconfiguration is meant to awaken us to the very fact of these categories and to suggest their emptiness. The concept of the minotaur had a job to do—namely, to restructure thought, to eliminate the artificial categories of thought created by philosophy and morality; in other words, to achieve the informe.

Another of Bataille’s favorite personifications of bassesse was Acephalus, a mythological creature with no head (fig. 2.5). This is another way of playing with the head/body, human/animal polarities; in this case, instead of inverting one of these binaries, we simply remove one of the poles—the head. The effect of this is “a rapturous escape from the self” (Bataille, “The Sacred Conspiracy” 181). This is a being that I meet beyond myself and “who makes me laugh because he is headless”; this headlessness is a freedom “from serving as the head of, or the reason for, the universe” (Bataille, “Conspiracy” 180). The head represents, for Bataille, the delusion that humans are
Figure 2.5. André Masson, Acéphale; rpt. in Georges Bataille, “The Sacred Conspiracy,” Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) 180.
elevated above all other beings because of their capacity for reason and morality; this elevation produces the anxiety of solitude and “the thought that it is he or God who keeps the rest of things from being absurd” (Bataille, “Conspiracy” 180). The head cannot recognize its affinity with and dependence upon the lower parts of the body because it must maintain its elevation above them, and this creates anxiety and is delusional. But a headless being carries none of this terrible responsibility and is, furthermore, impossible and thus absurd and laughable. Denis Hollier relates this figure of Acephalus to a carnival spirit that seeks loss incarnate: “Bataille’s Acephalus does not merely represent a grotesque celebration of upside downs and bottoms up, but the more abysmal image of a topless bottom” (Hollier, Architecture xxiii). The point of ritual is not to discover plenitude through loss, but to experience raw otherness, the otherness constantly present in oneself: “Bataille’s carnival…is the moment in which the I lives its loss, lives itself as loss” (Hollier, Architecture xxiii). The loss of self is the ultimate moment of the informe, and we see in the figure of Acephalus the mechanism of axial rotation used to achieve it.

But these figures, the minotaur and Acephalus, maintain the vertical orientation of the body; they focus their debasing energies on the human head. If cutting off the head of the body releases it from the burden of reason and elevation and other such moral hierarchies, why not cut off the whole upper part? Why not remove other sources of moral and intellectual polarities, the digestive and reproductive systems, as well as the head? Bataille proposes another reconfiguration of the body’s vertical orientation that is taken up by many surrealist artists and might rival the minotaur and Acephalus as a mascot for bassesse: the human foot.
Headless Foot

Bataille writes about the foot in his essay for Documents “The Big Toe”, part of the surrealist dictionary that also included the essays “Mouth”, “Eye”, and “Solar Anus” (Hollier, Architecture 78). The essay was accompanied by photographic illustrations by Jacques-André Boiffard (fig. 2.6). The foot, for Bataille, is a base organ; perhaps the most base. The foot “is not, however, specifically monstrous: in this it is different from other parts of the body, the inside of a gaping mouth, for example” (Bataille, “The Big Toe” 22). It is not as vital and vulnerable as other organs, such as those involved in digestion or reproduction. But this only means it is even more base than those much more central parts of the body because it is useless and ridiculous. Not only is the foot base in its lack of vitality, it also occupies the most obviously physically base position with regard to the vertical arrangement of the human body. Clearly, it is at the bottom of the corporeal heap. It is beneath notice.

But although the foot does not have a vital biological function, its symbolic function within Bataille’s view of the human body is crucial. The shame of the foot derives directly from humankind’s delusions of grandeur, from the kind of reification that leads him to ignore the parts of experience that are base: “though the most noble of animals, he nevertheless has corns on his feet; in other words, he has feet, and these feet independently lead an ignoble life” (Bataille, “The Big Toe” 22). The concept of nobility, of elevation, is what causes him to privilege the head and ignore the foot. But like the roots of a flower, the ignoble foot is precisely what makes possible the noble life.

Hollier explains that since the toe inscribes the specific difference designated by sapiens, instead of the “Know thyself” proposed by Linneaus, the article “Le Gros orteil” “could be read as a text that indirectly describes the anatomical conditions of its own production”; man would not have been sapient had he not first stood up (Against 86).
of the rest of the body. The vertical arrangement of the human body, so crucial to man’s conception of himself as rational and moral, as different from other animals, has its very origin at the foot, the point of intersection of the horizontal earth and the vertical body.

The human foot, for Bataille, is the only uniquely human body part, despite its lowly status. Humans share all other organs with apes and cows—brain, eyes, digestive and reproductive systems. Only the big toe belongs to the human alone. But it is not only its form that distinguishes the human foot from the feet of other animals; more important is the function the human foot serves, which is to hold the human body upright, allowing it free use of its hands and raising its head to the sky, and to thereby separate it definitively (in its own view at least) from every other animal, a separation that is central to the human concept of itself. Bataille compares the human body to a plant or tree in its vertical arrangement, and it is by this verticality that man differentiates himself from other animals, moving on the earth “without clinging to branches, having himself become a tree, in other words raising himself straight up in the air like a tree” (Bataille, “The Big Toe” 20). But at the base of this vertical stance is the foot, “giving a firm foundation to the erection of which man is so proud” (Bataille, “The Big Toe” 20).

The foot is thus the foundation for humanness and at the same time its shame, since in order to provide this foundation it must remain planted in mud. It is the last contact for humans with our animal origins, but as with any pair of opposites, each requires the other for its continued existence. Just as a rose depends on its hidden system of roots, the head can only be elevated because it is held up by feet that are planted in the ground. Humans would not be human without the opposite category, animal, and the foot is the axis point of this pair of opposites, an emblem of shame and triumph attached to the
end of our legs. It continually holds off and jumps off from the earth, and is continually planted in it. It is the origin of humanness and a constant reminder that it needed an origin.

Bataille’s essay on the big toe is an example of bassesse; by turning his critical eye on the foot, a part of the body doomed to obscurity and ugliness, Bataille reveals the tension that exists even in this seemingly uncomplicated body part. The head/foot binary masks the ambiguity of the foot; it is not a locus of a simple pole, but rather an axis point where the boundary between human and animal is blurred and where their mutual dependence is obvious. The rage of being at one and the same time elevated and base, human and animal, is the reality of humanity that is masked by traditional, binary thinking and that is revealed through bassesse. The human foot is the emblem of this ambiguity; it sticks in the door of idealism, refusing to let it close.

Images of feet have a similar effect in visual art. The act of placing a foot at the center of a work of art is a radical reconfiguration of the traditional vertical orientation of the body; it suggests that the head has not simply been replaced by the head of an animal, or been removed and disposed of, but has in fact been supplanted, relegated to the nether regions beneath notice once occupied by the foot. We are used to seeing portraits of faces, but the sight of a toe, given the same care and detail that the beautiful face of a woman might be given, is disgusting—and this is precisely Bataille’s point. This image of Boiffard’s, an illustration for Bataille’s essay on feet, was cropped to give the impression of a portrait, the nail of the toe a travesty of a human face with all the crisp detail that would suggest a careful portrait. But somehow the suggestion of any affinity between the head and the toe is repulsive, or at least comical.
We are accustomed to seeing a certain kind of mutilation in pictorial space: the bust or portrait. From the sculpted busts of Roman senators to the Mona Lisa to Holbein’s portraits of merchants to Chuck Close’s self-portraits, the history of Western art is full of severed heads. We tend to think of this gesture of art as natural, and these works never appear to us as violent mutilations of the body. We might think of the act of isolating the face or the head as simply a way of showing the part of the body that is the most expressive, the center of communicative activities and perception, the part of the body that reveals a person’s soul. This view is based precisely on the assumptions and values that Bataille is fighting against. All art is a kind of mutilation; Krauss explains that “photographic cropping is always experienced as a rupture in the continuous fabric of reality” and Hollier says that painting “deforms the body…through a refusal to reproduce” it (Krauss, Originality 115; Hollier, Architecture 79). But we tend to feel more comfortable with the kind of pictorial mutilation that isolates faces than with images of isolated toes, for example, and this is precisely because we are in thrall to bourgeois values that privilege the head and consider it the proper metonymic figure for the human individual.

For Bataille, art that mutilates the body in other ways can do something more than a pretty portrait—it can be the same kind of “lexicographical organ removal” that Hollier says Bataille performed in his dictionary articles on the eye, the mouth, and the big toe. By dissecting the body, art works such as de Chirico’s self portrait provoke “insubordination in the part, which then refuses to respect the hierarchical relations defining it by its integration into the organic system as a whole” (Against Architecture 78). Dismantling body image should precipitate the dismantling of the viewer’s value
system. Dali, who was deeply influenced by Bataille’s thought, expressed a similar idea in his essay for Minotaure in 1934 called “Les nouvelles couleurs du sex-appeal spectral”; he says that woman will become spectral through the disarticulation and deformation of her anatomy, that the collapsible body is the aspiration of feminine exhibitionism, which will become furiously analytic, permitting the hanging of each piece of the body separately, as if on hooks, just as the body of her mate is mounted on the hooks of the devouring praying mantis (Dali, in Il y aura une fois, 115). Bellmer’s image of a dissected mannequin neatly arranged on the floor (although it looks as if each piece might be mounted sur griffes as Dali suggested) expresses a similar drive to take the body apart for inspection (fig. 2.7).

Bataille writes about another butchering of the body in art—the ancient Australian phenomenon of “hand-templates obtained in caves by applying the hand to the wall and surrounding it with paint” (Bataille, “Sacrificial Mutilation” 69). He discusses this phenomenon in the context of a discussion about automutilation, where he explains that the desire to project “outside the self of a part of oneself” is the desire for heterogeneity that provokes all sacred ritual and artistic production (Bataille, “Mutilation” 68). Dali’s article stresses the sacred aspect of mutilation, relating the displayed body parts to a religious mantle, and referring to the eating of each separate body part in language reminiscent of a Christian sacrament. Bataille also sees mutilation as a sacred act, and he links the production of art with sacrificial mutilation, as in his
discussion of Van Gogh’s self mutilation. But the reason it is sacred is that it brings about the loss of self, which is the same state as the loss of habitual categories that Bataille thinks art should provoke, the *informe*.

Hollier says that Bataille’s texts from the *Documents* period characterized “pictorial space with automutilation as the rejection and destruction of the human figure in *practice*” (Hollier, *Architecture* 79). The Australian hand-templates were illustrative of this view of art as an attack on “the architecture of the human body” because they often showed that “one or several phalanges are missing” from the hand that was the template for the trace, and for Bataille these works of art showed the convergence of ritual and art, both of which are motivated by the desire to lose the self or to spend the self (Hollier, *Architecture* 80, Bataille, “Mutilation” 69). To take apart the body in a work of visual art is to attack the architecture of the body that has become a habit for us; it is a challenge to the prejudice in favor of either the whole body or at least (or perhaps even better) just the best part, the head. To furthermore isolate the foot is to rotate the vertical axis of the body to the most radical degree.

This trick of axial rotation is meant to cause us to question our reaction to the image. What assumptions allow us to be disgusted by this part of the human body? Why is an isolated face an acceptable distortion of the body in art, while an isolated toe is not? This blindness to the foot originates in pervasive moral reifications; the disgust we might feel when looking at a portrait of a toe is what is required to dislodge our thinking from the stagnant categories that imprison it. One of Boiffard’s toe photographs challenges our bodily prejudices directly by showing a big toe whose isolation and placement make it look like a facial portrait (fig. 2.8). The toe is relentless, forcing us to admit its formal
Figure 2.8. Jacques-André Boiffard, *Illustration for Georges Bataille, “Le Gros Orteil,”* *Documents*, no. 6, 1929; rpt. in Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985) 100. This image is flipped in order to emphasize its similarity to facial portraits.
affinities with a face, suggesting that there is as much humanity in the foot as there is in the head, taking apart our habitual categories of thought. This is a total inversion of the head/foot binary, a stunning example of the mechanics of fall. Works of art depicting feet take as their theme the inherently conflicted nature of humanity, the shame of its animal origins and its desperation to escape them and anxiety in the success of its escape. In doing this, they perform the function of bringing about the informe.

On the one hand, works of art that take feet as their central subject make the foot a figure for the conflicted nature of the human body; the foot becomes a synecdoche for the body, a stand-in for the material reality of the body that challenges the entire set of moral prejudices and attitudes that constrict modern thought. In this sense, the foot stands alone. On the other hand, surrealist art has a tendency to show various body parts in isolation, not to give them metaphorical power but to evoke the idea of mutilation and severing of the body.  

So if we return to Dali’s Bather (fig. 2.3), we can see a portrayal of just this vision of humanity that Bataille is proposing: the toe, location of the intersection of the elevated

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5 In her article “The Legs of the Countess” Abigail Solomon-Godeau discusses the obsession with having herself photographed of the Countess de Castiglione, a famous beauty and Second Empire court celebrity from 1854 to the early 1860s (69). Solomon-Godeau explores the implications of the photographic portraits the Countess had made of herself using framing and cropping techniques similar to those the surrealists used: she had pictures taken of just her legs, reminiscent of pornographic photographs of the era that showed slightly more, and in one case took a photograph of her own feet. In one famous shot, she gazes at the camera, her one eye visible through the oval hole of a passe-partout frame, deflecting her gaze “outward toward the spectator in a manner that permits her to be at once subject and object of the gaze” (108). The article focuses on a period of history outside the scope of this project, but it contains a fine discussion of some of the sexual and economic implications of feet within the pictorial space of mid-19th century Paris.
and the base, the human and the inhuman, is at once hideous and lovingly rendered as it sits in its position at the boundary of land and sea. This toe absorbs the repugnance that arises from the knowledge that we cannot escape the duality of living on a beach, of being both human and animal, both rational and full of desire. The foot, emblem of humanity, dwells at the boundary of mud and sky, and this makes it grotesque. This also makes it human. This tender humanity is an indictment of the fragmentation of modern life that cuts off this most human of body parts, leaving it on the sand, linked to the rest of its mutilated members by red traces of sinew or perhaps memory. But it is at the same time a celebration of all that is base and that has been blocked out and ignored to make room for the illusion of the elevated. This is perhaps an image of the aftermath of some orgiastic sacrificial rite in which the toe, for once, not an eye or a finger, has been severed from the body and flung back to the shore. It is cast down from the height of the body elevated behind it, already floating away from the sand, away from the earth and out to sea. This might be the most profound of sacrifices, the sacrifice of an unnoticed body part that nonetheless is used at every moment. Or perhaps the body is attempting an escape from its toe, an escape into the top of the canvas, into the brilliant immensity of the sky from the gritty sand and the ghastly toe, only to find itself unhinged without the roots of its own elevation, and only to find itself still tied to the toe, if only by a few bloody threads.

Bataille’s ideas about the significance of the foot help us read surrealist images of isolated legs such as Kertesz’ “Distortion” and Hans Bellmer’s second series of dolls. These images play with polarity and axes in a number of ways. The Kertesz piece reduces the human body to a horizontal limb with feet at both ends, suggesting a radical
distortion where the axis of the body is rotated to the horizontal position and both poles are fitted with base feet. Rather than collapsing the high/low polarity of the body, this image explodes it, spreading it out along the horizontal axis and making its poles identical to one another so that no matter how far they stretch in either direction, they arrive at the same place. Instead of reaching for the sky on one end and the mud on the other, this axis walks in circles. Or perhaps the identical poles negate one another, like a magnet with two negatively charged poles; the polarity of this distortion is nonexistent—there is nothing in this figure but unity.

Bellmer’s images show similar figures, pairs of legs joined at the hip with feet at either end, and these images present a similar rotation of the body’s axis, although Bellmer plays along the horizontal and vertical axes in his series (see, for example, fig. 1.8, p. 35). Some of these dolls are horizontally configured, resembling either mangled dolls left behind after play or helpless, flailing creatures walking on four legs. The effect in either case is a dehumanization of the human form. Others of the dolls are vertically configured, standing against a wall for support, their upper pair of legs awkwardly splayed in the air. The foot has colonized the body in these images, supplanting the head as the dominant pole of the body’s structure, but at the same time taking apart the very idea of structure, since both halves of that structure are the same.

Magritte’s “Entr’acte” shows a similar kind of mutilated human body, although these creatures are polar, having a foot at one end of their long, snakelike body and a hand at the other (fig. 2.9). But this is also a challenge to the body’s structure, because these arm-legs seem to behave exactly as they would if they were attached to a body with vital organs, a digestive system, and a head: they clasp one another’s arms, they recline
on the floor, they appear to converse with one another. These axes may display polarity—one end is a hand, the other a foot—but they are literally folded in on themselves, precluding the notion of a true axis that extends in a straight line.

These works all present a challenge to our habitual ideas about the orientation of the human body and about which parts of the body are proper for isolation in art, and thus they challenge the system of values, the structure of thought that are linked to that orientation. In various ways these works offer up the foot as a sacrifice, liberating their viewer from the habits of categorical, idealistic thinking and returning to an examination of the world of base materials.

One question remains: if the foot is the origin of humanness, if it is both the emblem of the vertical rise from mud and thus also the one remaining point of contact with that mud, then what does it mean to cover the foot with a shoe? Bataille claims the urge to hide the foot comes from the “rage of seeing oneself as a back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to refuse—a rage that is easily directed against an organ as base as the foot” (21). The shoe serves to conceal the flatness and baseness of the foot and soothe the rage and anxiety of maintaining rigid hierarchical binary concepts, what Benjamin believes to be the original sin of humanity.

Is the shoe humankind’s triumph over the material world? The origin of his ultimate mastery over even his own origin? If this contact with mud is the basest, most shameful corner of human bodies, then to overcome it would seem to be the most sublime achievement. Is the shoe the ur-technology? Or by covering over such a powerful symbol of the baseness Bataille thinks we should acknowledge, do we fall prey to the temptation of idealism?
Or does the shoe perhaps displace onto a product, a commodity, this last point of contact with baseness? If humans are always trying to distance themselves as much as possible from mud, and if the foot is the last point of contact, then they invent shoes as a way of eliminating or at least attenuating, mediating that point of contact. The shoe, in fact, becomes the point at which man and beast touch, the last tenuous grasp between the human body and the earth from which it tries to escape. This role has been displaced from the foot onto the shoe.

More important, do we in fact hide this point of shame by covering it with a shoe, or do we only emphasize even more our very need for a covering? Do we make the shoe an emblem of original human shame? These questions lead into the next chapter of this project, which will address the second plane of the shoe/foot axis, the plane on which the foot and the shoe interact and tell us something about other binaries that interested the surrealists.
The previous chapter discussed the function of images of feet within the system of pictorial space Bataille believed was dominant in modern art. Many of these images challenge traditional notions of the vertical orientation of the body and thus of the system of values that is tied to that orientation. And since the foot represents the essential ambiguity of humanity by being the emblem of both its rise towards self-knowledge and of its need to rise from its base origins, these images are particularly provocative examples of the *informe*, or the erasure of dualistic categories. In particular, these images of bare feet challenge the vertical binary elevated/base that lines up with the vertical orientation of the head and the feet in the human body, and therefore challenge specifically ideas about moral and aesthetic values.

This chapter will discuss a different axis of polarity that is challenged in surrealist art by an object that is closely related to the foot: the shoe. Because it covers the foot, the shoe raises questions not of the value placed on various body parts, but rather of how the body perceives and interacts with the world of objects it inhabits. In terms of a traditional system of binary ideals, shoes raise questions about the modern subject and its relation to objects. As with the foot, very little has been written about this role for shoes in surrealist visual art; the purpose of this chapter is to examine the role of shoes in surrealist art and its implications for the modern notion of subjectivity.
If we take seriously Bataille’s ideas about feet, then the act of covering them becomes a displacement of the dual nature of humanity—its pride at having emerged from mud and its shame at retaining a last connection to mud. Shoes are perhaps a final attempt to erase or attenuate this connection to base origins by hiding it, substituting for the shameful foot an inorganic object, a product of human endeavor and ingenuity. But the shame of the foot is not covered over; it is merely displaced, because the shoe is both a triumph over the foot and a constant reminder that there is something that needs to be covered up. In this way the shoe has the same dual nature as the foot, compensating for some lack and at the same time being a symbol of that lack, only now this ambiguity and anxiety are projected away from the body, into the object world.

According to Bataille, we cover our feet with shoes in order to hide the rage and shame they provoke in us as reminders of our failure to leave the mud we sprang from (“The Big Toe” 23). Does this work? It seems that the ambiguity and horror of the foot is merely displaced onto the shoe, which becomes a fetish or prosthesis for the foot. Both prostheses and fetishes are objects that possess a dual nature, like the foot: they protect the body from trauma (fetish) or extend the body’s powers (prosthesis); but at the same time they represent the threat they protect from and the lack of physical power that led to their invention. The ambiguity and anxiety of the human body, its desire to escape the earth into the sky and its inability to do so, are located in the foot; with the shoe, the foot has a prosthesis, a primitive kind of technology that maintains this tension by both protecting the foot and blocking its perception of the ground. In images of shoes, the question of the human subject is displaced from the foot onto an object of human production.
In his book *Prosthetic Gods* Hal Foster argues that the various factions of the early 20th century avant-garde movement reacted either with enthusiasm or with anxiety to the technological prostheses. Foster claims that the surrealists were resistant to technology and viewed it as an intrusion on the body. I want to dispute that claim in this chapter by appealing to surrealist images of shoes and showing that in these images we can see shoes as objects that fall somewhere between the boundary of subject and object, man and machine. The foot is a perceiving organ, an agent of the subject, but shoes cover it up and mediate its contact with stimuli, and in this sense shoes are barriers, intrusions on the body; they are a kind of primitive prosthetic technology.

But what certain works of surrealist art reveal, for instance Magritte’s shoe-feet (see fig. 1.2) and the doll series by Hans Bellmer, is that shoes are also invested with a powerful humanness, perhaps by virtue of the closeness of their relation with the body. Because of their peculiar relation with the body, shoes are a special kind of fetish that can be an emblem of the destruction of subjectivity that Bataille sought in the *informe* and Breton sought in the brilliant immensity of the sky. According to Benjamin, the “loosening of the self by intoxication is…precisely the fruitful, living experience” the surrealists pursued for themselves and sought to produce in their readers and viewers, and shoes can figure this loosening (“Surrealism” 208).

The Foot as Organ of Perception

When surrealist visual artists redeem feet from the shadows, the viewer is meant to rethink her received notions of the foot’s position with regard to the rest of the body. Another aspect of the foot that becomes salient in these images of the foot is its nature as
a perceptive organ. In the body’s hierarchy, the eye holds a privileged position as a
perceptive organ even for Breton, who insists in *Le surrealisme et la peinture* that vision
is the highest sense (26). Next in line for perceptive ascendancy is the sense of touch,
figured by the hands. But the foot also has a close connection to the world of objects; in
fact, in Bataille’s view, it is our only primal link to the earth that gives birth to us and
allows us to live in the realm of the visible. The foot does not grasp objects or
manipulate them as the hand does, but it lives in close contact with the ground out of
which buildings and flea markets arise, and for Aragon and Breton this contact of the foot
with the street is precisely the openness to sensation and information that a perceptive
organ should possess. Boiffard underscores this overlooked capacity of the foot in his
image of a foot and a hand clasping one another, their fingers and toes intertwined (fig
3.1). This image collapses the polar relation between hand and foot that sees hands as
perceiving organs and feet as ugly objects; the foot substitutes another hand in this
clasping position, and their relation is so close that each member is both touching the
other and being touched by it.

The foot is given (or has restored to it) a perceptive role in this image, and this
calls into question our notion of a unified, perceiving subject. The traditional subject
passively receives through perception, ideally visual perception, information about a
world of objects existing outside it. From these data it can draw conclusions and make
inferences about this outside world; in can come to know it. In this Cartesian view of
subjectivity, vision is the dominant sense because it perceives without the mediation of
touch. It most closely resembles the pure subject itself because it is untainted by
objectivity: its agent, the eye, sees the objective world but is not itself seen by itself; it
reaches out and grabs visible objects, spanning the physical distance that lies between; it can encompass objects without being touched by them. Hands are perceptive organs too, but they muddy the process of data collection by entering into it as both an organ that touches and a hand that is touched and feels itself being touched. The information relayed by the hand includes not just data about the object it is touching, but also data about itself, about what it feels like to be touched. Already this kind of perception shows the subject to itself as something other than a passive receptacle of data; to restore the foot to the position of perceiving organ further complicates the Cartesian model.

Boiffard brings foot and hand together in this image, suggesting their similarity in a way that achieves the informe by collapsing the hand/foot hierarchy.¹

These appendages, usually strictly differentiated in visual art as in everyday life, intertwine so that perceiving subject and perceived object become indistinguishable. The foot reclaims its role as an agent of perception, although its role is not as pure and uncomplicated as that of the eye. But this becomes complicated by the fact that feet are so often shod. What happens to a foot’s perceptive capacity if it is covered by a shoe? If the sense of touch fails to meet Cartesian requirements of ideal perception because of its mediated quality, then the fact that feet are blocked from most perception of the ground degrades their perceptive abilities even further. Shoes mediate and block the foot’s contact with the world, and in a sense they become the foot’s world, the only kind

¹ The Cartesian notion of what Foster calls “the presumed mastery of the subject in sight” was openly challenged by Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Lacan, but for the surrealists the ascendency of sight was still an entrenched assumption they were trying to dislodge. Their thought and activities were among the first steps down the path taken by these later thinkers. Martin Jay’s book Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, explores the rigorous challenge to vision by 20th century philosophers.
of object it ever touches and is touched by. The foot on its own would be relegated to ignominy on Cartesian perceptive terms, and covering it with a shoe only buries it deeper in the world of dumb, nonrational objects.

But of course the surrealist project intends to smash these illusory Cartesian categories. We have seen that in Bataille’s view the foot represents the very origin of humanity: it is the ground from which the vertical body springs, desperate to escape the kind of close relation with the world that is figured by touch and to open up distance between itself and the world by privileging visual perception; and it is the body’s emblem of shame in realizing its ultimate failure to retreat from the world. But since Bataille’s project is to challenge and eliminate all ideals based on binaries, this shame and failure of the foot is precisely what makes it useful for the surrealist project. In reclaiming the foot and bringing it to the center of the frame, surrealist images challenge not only the vertical axis of elevated/base in which the foot is dirty and vulgar; they also challenge the foot’s place in the horizontal axis of perception, allowing it a place alongside the hand as a perceptual organ. This becomes complicated by the shoe, which mediates every interaction of the foot and the world. If the foot is seen as the face of the surrealist subject, and if this face is so obviously masked, its perception of the world mediated, then it cannot qualify as a perceiving subject in the traditional sense. One way of approaching the surrealist foot is as an emblem of human subjectivity as a loss of traditional subjectivity, an intertwining of perceiving subject and perceived object, between mind and world, rather than the discrete separation of them that Cartesian idealism requires.

Prosthetic Shoes
Bataille suggests that the purpose of shoes is to hide the shame of the foot and its ambiguous implications for human subjectivity (“Big Toe” 20). Seen in this way, the shoe would be an attempt to overcome this ambiguity, to sever once and for all the human subject from the world of objects it is so stubbornly linked to; it would be the ultimate achievement in verticality and elevation. But what actually happens is that the ambiguous nature of the foot is displaced onto the shoe. Instead of blocking or hiding the connection of the human body to the ground, the shoe becomes a reminder and an emblem of that connection, a symbol that the connection was or is there and needed to be hidden. The issue of subjectivity also is displaced from a member of the human body onto a product of human labor; the question of how the human body is related to the world of objects is given a new field with a new kind of object, one that is made by humans to enhance the body’s function. The question of subjectivity in the modern world concerns a world of objects, advanced machines and technologies, so closely related to us that it becomes even less clear who is touching and whom is being touched, who is seeing and whom is being seen.

We might choose to look at shoes as primitive technologies, very simple machines that we develop as a protection from harm and as tools to extend the power of our movements and activities. Shoes are a primitive and originary prosthesis. Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* discusses a process by which an organism “extrudes structures from its own surface” as a barrier to the “ceaseless impact of external stimuli” (Foster 144). These carapaces are almost as important in the organism’s functioning as its perceptive organs. But just as when a hand touches an object the object touches it back, when the body pushes the prosthesis the prosthesis pushes back. The shoe both
protects the foot from climate and injury and constricts it, both by pinching and blistering it and by mediating its perception of the ground. If we choose to see the foot as a sort of originary technology, surrealist treatments of it in visual art should have something to say about their attitude towards the proliferation of technology in their world of objects.

When we add shoes to the image of the foot, we break down another illusory barrier between the traditional subject and the world of objects. The shoe mediates the foot’s contact with the outside world, just as the sense of touch mediates the subject’s access to the world more than the sense of sight. First we challenge the subjective order by giving feet pride of place as emblems of the human body, perceptive organs in their own right; then we cover up these organs, wrapping them in tough materials that mediate their contact with the outside world. The foot/shoe pair is essentially a case of isolated interaction between the human body and an outside object, a laboratory for investigating the subject/object relationship.

Primal Technologies

In his book *Prosthetic Gods*, Hal Foster talks about how the concept of the body changed in the early 20th century and the ways this change affected various theoretical movements. According to Foster, in the first decades of the 20th century, the human body and machines were seen as alien to one another, and so their interaction took on a peculiar, dualistic quality that Foster, borrowing from Marshall McLuhan, calls the double logic of the prosthesis (109). Machines and technologies are prostheses that are constructed to compensate for some lack of ability or perhaps to enhance some ability, and to the extent that they are successful they become agents for the body. But at the
same time, technological prostheses impose themselves on the body because they can never be fully part of the body, fully under its control; and furthermore, they are constant reminders of the lack or need that motivated their construction in the first place and that persists. Essentially, prostheses for Foster are fetishes for the 20th century; they are meant to respond to a threat or a lack, but they end up being reminders of that lack and locations of anxiety.

Prostheses and fetishes share this double logic, and Bataille’s discussion of the human foot suggests itself here as well. The foot has a double logic in that it makes possible the vertical orientation that is characteristic of the human body but also dwells in mud, ensuring that the human body never achieves complete elevation. Feet, prostheses, and fetishes all dwell at the boundaries of categories, and this is precisely why they are useful for the surrealists, whose goal was to overcome the binary structure of idealist thought. These categories are all examples of the ways modernist theorists were attempting to rethink the relation of the individual subject with the external world.

Freud believed that the machine or prosthesis was either a magnificent extension of the body or a troubled constriction of it; in these early days of technological revolution, it became clear that it was both (Foster 109). There is something about industrial technology that troubled modern consciousness in a way that previous technologies had not. Enlightenment thought had elevated technology in its pre-industrial form to a position rivaling that of religion. Technology in the form of agriculture, architecture, shipbuilding, medicine and warfare was seen as a new savior that originated not from some metaphysical realm but in the human mind. But once technology’s development started accelerating, that view changed. Something about the
This anxiety in the face of technology was certainly the result partly of the rapidity of industrialization; but part of it was also a reaction to the role technology played in World War I. European consciousness emerged from that war with a grim realization of the violent potential of technology and with a feeling of physical vulnerability. The body after World War I was mutilated, fragile, and disposable (Foster 109). The trauma of such a deadly and gruesome war, one that was unprecedented in its use of technology to kill, led in part to the modernist desire to destroy the old bourgeois subject. All were haunted by the damaged body of the worker and of the soldier (Foster 114).

But not all artists and intellectuals in Europe reacted to this trauma in the same way. Foster believes there were complementary reactions to the new intrusion of technology onto the body, although both kinds of reaction were attempts to rethink human subjectivity. One set of reactions, those on the left side of political views, held out a “hope to resist new technologies in the name of some given natural body”; the other side, which Foster claims was generally aligned with the political right, wanted to “accelerate [technologies] in the search for some imagined postnatural body” (Foster 109-10). Both were transformations of subjectivity, since both tended to treat the body as if it were already fragmented, already dead (Foster 121).

On the pro-technology side were, among others, the Italian Futurists, who attacked subjectivity as interiority and favored a bodily metamorphosis into machine; if alienation was to occur, the Futurists wanted it to be complete. They believed that man
should be alienated even from his own body, and his transformation into a machine should be encouraged and even expedited. The surrealists, on the left-leaning side of approaches to the new subjectivity, took the opposite view that technology constricted the body, according to Foster. They were interested in exposing the right-wing move to join the body with industrial machines in a harmonious capitalist rationalization “as often irrational in its effects” (Foster 114). By isolating body parts, or otherwise mutilating, distorting, or transforming them, surrealist artists were commenting on the state of the modern body and obliquely expressing nostalgia for the whole, pre-technological body. In the fragmented bodies of surrealist art we see a parody, almost a caricature of the real mutilation that modernism and technology inflict on the body, in Foster’s view.

According to Foster’s argument, these various early 20th century artistic and theoretical movements—Dada, Futurism, Bauhaus, surrealism—each chose one side of the prosthetic debate; each either celebrated or denigrated technology. He claims that “this restrictive advocacy of resistance or acceleration was as pronounced in modernist art as it was in critical theory, and it marks a structural limitation of both formations” (Foster 110). Yet if we look at surrealist thought as being an attempt first and foremost to destroy Cartesian subjectivity and epistemology rather than a primarily Freudian exploration of subjectivity, as Foster does, we get a very different picture of the surrealist’s attitude towards technology and its relation to the body.

The shoe has a role to play in this: it expresses a more nuanced approach to subjectivity and the interplay between bodies and objects than Foster argues the surrealists took. The shoe is a peculiar kind of fetish or prosthesis because it seems not just to be parasitic on the body or useful to the body, but rather to be part of the body;
Magritte’s *Le modèle rouge* suggests this as do the images of Hans Bellmer. The shoe can be emblematic of the primal unity of the human body and the world of objects, including man-made objects and especially everyday objects with which we have an intimate relation. If we think of the shoe as a primitive technology, one that spans the space between living bodies and the inorganic world, we get a picture of the surrealists as accepting of technology in principle. This tells against Foster’s view of surrealism as taking an anti-technology stance of nostalgia for the whole, pre-modern body.

Bellmer

Some of the most shocking surrealist images dealing with issues of the modern body and its interaction with the objective world, particularly with shoes, are the series of doll photographs made by Hans Bellmer. He created hideous mannequins, female figures assembled into grotesque jumbles of excess or mismatched body parts, that were frank sexual fetishes. The figures are suggestive of Freudian notions of doubling and castration anxiety and the displacement or transfer of meaning or function of one body part onto another (fig. 3.2; Lichtenstein 126). His dolls are about doubling and castration anxiety, but they are also about hysteria, repressed sexual trauma, the fear of growing up, separation and identification. In Bellmer’s dolls “the body becomes a site of disharmony and frustration—a prison of tangled, libidinous desire locked into an uncomfortable cycle of self-reflection and autoeroticism” (Lichtenstein 116).

Much of the writing about these images focuses on their Freudian content, and it is clear why. Foster, for example, feels the need to reassure his reader that Bellmer’s
scenes “are representations, not realities” because this is “a fact that some viewers still tend to overlook” (Foster 232). He urges us to “not be too quick to pathologize Bellmer” and proceeds to analyze the images using ideas from several of Freud’s essays. The images’ sexual charge is clearly their principal characteristic for him. Thérèse Lichtenstein’s book about Bellmer, *Behind Closed Doors*, discusses his work almost exclusively in Freudian and sexual contexts. But I want specifically to talk about the shoes in these images and how they function. Obviously these shoes are fetishes, and therefore are another layer of fetishizing laid over the fetishized mannequins. But there is something else going on here too, something to do with the body and its relation to shoes. Bellmer’s images reveal some peculiar qualities of shoes that are not sexual but rather contribute to the surrealist project of overcoming Cartesian categories.

Most of the dolls wear shoes, usually the kind of patent leather shoes that are suggestive of a doll’s or a girl’s shoes, and the juxtaposition of this hint of vulnerability and humanity against such hideously mangled bodies is jarring (fig. 3.3). But it is the shoes that do this; there is something human that inheres in them. Without them the images would not be as powerful as they are. These images say something about the curious nature of shoes and their relation to the body. Shoes are doubles of feet, just as Bellmer’s hideous mannequins are doubles of the female body, and are themselves doubled; but they are something more than doubles. They impart a touching humanness to Bellmer’s images that suggests they are almost part of the human body. Because of their unique status as objects that are not part of the body but not entirely separate from it, shoes achieve the *informe* by calling into question the notion of a discrete boundary between the body as a perceiving subject and the world of perceived objects.
Hans Bellmer was an artist living in Berlin during the Nazi party’s rise to power, and he vehemently opposed their regime. He had worked in advertising until 1933, when he decided he would no longer produce work that “might even remotely contribute to the government’s well-being” (Lichtenstein 5). He set out to produce images that would critique the authoritarian state in which he lived. The images he is best known for, and for which he earned acceptance into surrealist circles, are his violent and sexually charged series of photographs of mutilated female mannequins, which he called dolls. The construction of these dolls was “the remedy, the compensation for a certain impossibility of living” and if the images he produced were scandalous it was because for him “the world is a scandal” (Lichtenstein 5-6). They evoked the mannequins in the windows of fashionable shops, young girls’ play dolls, fetish dolls and sex toys, and the corpses of mutilated or deformed women. In 1934 his young cousin Ursula was going to study at the Sorbonne, and he gave her some prints from his first series of dolls to show Breton in Paris, who immediately published them in the surrealist journal *Minotaure* (fig. 3.4).

The photographs were a sensation in the surrealist community and they inspired many other works. Paul Eluard published a story called “Appliquée” in *Minotaure* in 1935 about a young girl who dreams of an alter ego, her double; this story was inspired by Bellmer’s dolls and was accompanied by some of Bellmer’s photographs. Eluard later took Bellmer’s dolls as inspiration for a series of prose poems, writing a poem for each of 14 photographs. But his poems lack the violence and sexual voracity of the images: “You never hear her talk of her country, of her parents. She is afraid of a negative reply,
Figure 3.4. Hans Bellmer, “Poupée: Variations sur le montage d’une mineure articulée,” two-page spread, Minotaure, December 1934; rpt. in Thérèse Lichtenstein, Behind Closed Doors: The Art of Hans Bellmer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 42.
she fears the kiss of a silent mouth. Agile and liberated, gentle mother-child” (Lichtenstein 53). His dolls were the inspiration for the famous street of mannequins at the International Exhibition of Surrealism in Paris in 1938 (see a photograph of Raoul Ubac’s mannequin fig. 3.5), but again these derivations lacked the power of Bellmer’s own images (Lichtenstein 6).

Bellmer’s dolls are monstrous amalgamations of female body parts, photographed in contexts suggestive of domination and vulnerability. There is a deep current of Freudian theory running through these images that can be traced back to Bellmer’s own psychological state but also to his source of inspiration. Bellmer had seen the Offenbach’s opera *The Tales of Hoffman*, based on stories for children by E.T.A. Hoffmann, and was enthralled by the story of The Sandman, and especially by the depiction in it of a life-size doll, Olympia (65). Although he had already been planning to construct his dolls, this paradigmatic story of the uncanny deeply influenced him.

The story is about a young man, Nathaniel, who is driven by the scopic drive to look through his telescope into the buildings of the city he lives in. He looks into the workshop of a toymaker and falls in love with a doll in the shop, Olympia. From this distance he allows himself to project his own feelings and actions onto the doll, animating her through fantasy and imagining her to be his soul mate, his female double. Olympia is dismembered by the dollmaker/father, and Nathaniel eventually commits suicide. Freud famously used this story to elaborate his idea of the uncanny, a category of objects or experiences that produce a feeling of unease or horror. The category of the uncanny is closely related to the surreal: both employ a mechanism of doubling or
displacement and both are designed to produce an emotional or intellectual state of confusion, where normal categories are suspended or destroyed.

Freud describes as uncanny, or *unheimlich*, the strange feeling that is associated with doubling and the anxiety of castration associated with it. It is often produced by images of mechanical processes at work “beneath the ordinary appearance of animation” (Freud, “The Uncanny” 132). The familiar, *heimlich*, suddenly becomes unfamiliar and threatening when we perceive the inanimacy that underlies what we perceive to be living beings but realize are doubles, as with Olympia and other automata. Any time an inanimate object mimics a living being we feel tricked, unsure of our own perceptions, no longer at home in the world. Another way of understanding the uncanny is in terms of concealment and revelation; Freud calls uncanny anything that has been uncovered that ought to be hidden, as with an automaton whose mechanical workings are meant to be secret. Freud saw Hoffmann’s tale as a perfect expression of the uncanny.

Nathaniel’s experience of unwittingly falling in love with his own double and then seeing her dismembered is, for Freud, a prime example of the uncanny. It typifies the castration anxiety that accompanies the oedipal stage, “when sexual difference and the symbolic are instated” (Lichtenstein 101). Realizing that his mother lacks a penis, the little boy creates a double of his own penis out of fear that he could suffer the castration he thinks his mother has undergone. The double or fetish only serves, however, to remind him of the threat, and the more fetishes he creates, the more he is reminded of the threat. Nathaniel watches through his telescope (another phallic symbol or fetish, one that directly connects the uncanny to the eye and thus to the tale of Oedipus) as dismembered doll parts move and his own double is taken apart; in other words, he is
blinded, castrated. He sees that his double was his own invention and could not protect him from the threat of castration. This uncanny glimpse of the dismembered dolls makes Nathaniel aware of the fiction he has created, and thus of the threat of castration that caused him to create it, a threat that remains in place. The blood-chilling notion is that there may be other automata surrounding him that he takes for living beings. The realization of the mechanical workings underlying apparently living beings reflects Oedipus’ realization of his own inability to escape the mechanical forces of his fate that are beyond his control, the inevitability of sexual difference and patricide.

Bellmer’s dolls employ the idea of the double, the automaton, as the embodiment of the threat of castration, as a fetish. Already the figure of a mannequin suggests a double, an imitation of a living body, as does Hoffmann’s Olympia. But Bellmer pushes this idea of doubling, creating dolls whose own bodies are doubling. His first set of figures seem to be multiplying parts so rapidly and uncontrollably that they are folding in on themselves (fig. 3.6). The second set of images, from 1935, are more straightforward examples of fetishistic doubling—two pairs of legs joined at the waist, clumsy and helpless (fig. 3.7). These dolls recall Kertesz’ snakelike Distortion (see fig. 2.1) and Magritte’s Entr’acte (see fig. 2.9); all show isolated legs with feet and/or hands at their ends and are easily read as phallic symbols. They are all fetishes in the Freudian sense. Krauss sees Bellmer’s dolls as Medusa’s heads, containing a “multiplication of penis symbols [that] signifies castration” (Amour 76). They suggest a violent sexuality—the victimization and mutilation of a helpless and inherently female being—that expresses Bellmer’s attitudes toward the predations of the Nazi regime, which in some sense was the ultimate threat of
castration, the ultimate father figure, according to Lichtenstein (Lichtenstein 21). She also discusses Bellmer’s own psychological state at length, citing the early death of his tubercular wife, his sexual fascination with his young cousin Ursula, and his strained relationship with his father (a “conservative, punitive, authoritarian” figure who disapproved of Bellmer’s cross-dressing) as origins of the sexual content of his images. Indeed, Lichtenstein’s approach to Bellmer is biographical, and thus almost wholly psychoanalytic. Like Foster, she approaches Bellmer’s works as primarily Freudian texts. Even Bellmer’s avowed anti-Nazi motivation in making the dolls is turned into a displacement of his Oedipal feelings towards his father onto der fuhrer: “a return to the preoedipal stage [in his work] seems to have functioned as a personal psychic rebellion against the father and a revolt against the law of the Nazi Fatherland” (Lichtenstein 72).

In the hands of Foster and Lichtenstein, Bellmer’s images come across as dangerous, pathological, obsessive outbursts of troubled sexuality.

This is no doubt part of what prompted Breton to publish them immediately. But the images were interesting to the surrealists for other reasons that had to do more with the intellectual effects the images could produce than the psychological. The surrealists were not interested in artists’ personal neuroses; they wanted their art to send people out into the street, wandering freely through ideas without the constraints of Cartesian categories. Art, for the surrealists, had a job to do. They wanted to escape the strictures of the tradition of thought they had inherited, specifically its rational categorization of the world into binaries; Bataille called this “category that would allow all categories to be unthought” the informe and sought it in everything that is low and base (Krauss, L’Amour Fou 64). The surrealists were probably more interested in the capacity of Bellmer’s
images to produce the *informe* than in their Freudian content; more precisely, it was the similarity of the category of the uncanny with the *informe* that constituted the affinity between Bellmer and the surrealists. The shock of violent sexuality in Bellmer’s images, which can and often is read in psychoanalytic terms, is a form of *bassesse*, and this is probably why they were so enthusiastically accepted for publication in *Minotaure*, a journal that was heavily influenced by Bataille and his concept of the *informe* (*Krauss, L’amour fou*, 64).

Both the uncanny and the *informe* involve realistic representations, doubles, of everyday objects or figures that are distorted through an action that reveals some aspect of the object that normally remains hidden, and this has the effect of suspending or blurring habitual categories like familiar/unfamiliar, animate/inanimate. But the uncanny and the *informe* also call into question the habitual category subject/object, because both categories call into question the subject’s perceptive abilities: Nathaniel’s telescope, his prosthetic eye, fails to reveal to him Olympia’s true nature; and avatars of the *informe*, Acephalus for example, are deprived of their eyes and I am arguing that the foot is deprived by the shoe of its perceptive abilities. Both the uncanny and the *informe* also challenge notions of the boundary between the perceiving subject and the world of perceived objects and thus the notion of a discrete self, and in both cases this is achieved by the mechanism of doubling: the double is another case of the uncanny, just as Nathaniel viewed Olympia as his double, and the production of a double, according to Freud, is a response to the blurring of the boundaries of individuality and the threat of castration that arise during the oedipal stage, when a young child is developing an idea of himself as a subject, separate from his mother; and the *informe* is the annihilation of the
self as perceiving, rational mind by the loss of all categories of thought. So we can substitute the category informe for the uncanny in our reading of Bellmer’s images. In fact, considering the deep influence of Bataille’s ideas on Minotaure, the journal in which the images were published, such a reading would more accurately represent the images’ role in the surrealist movement.

These images of doubled legs conform to the image of the informe I suggested in the previous chapter in their eradication of all the subjective, perceiving organs; like Acephalus, these dolls have lost their heads—and also their hearts, stomachs, and hands. Bellmer has inverted the vertical polarity of the body. But he adds a layer of complexity to these figures, because these are not just bodies; almost without exception they are wearing shoes. His second series of dolls, made in 1935, show almost no doll faces but a proliferation of doll shoes. The presence of the shoes seems to heighten the disturbing quality of the images by contributing to the illusion that the figures are real bodies, not mannequins. In this way, it seems that shoes enhance the uncanniness of the figures, and if we think about shoes as a class of objects they seem to fit Freud’s concept of the uncanny. They are inanimate objects that follow the form of feet so closely that they seem to mimic feet, to almost become an extension of them. Shoes are doubles of feet; the stiffness of the material they are usually made from ensures that even when they are empty they retain the shape of the feet they are meant to cover. Empty shoes have the eerie quality of an absent body that an empty dress, for example, does not. Furthermore, shoes are considered necessary for daily function in a way that other clothing is not; we might wear gloves to chop wood but not to play the piano, but we almost never go without shoes (gloves were another recurring image in surrealist art, though they didn’t
receive as much attention as shoes). They stand in for our feet in most situations. An empty shoe is often an eerie, disturbing sight, perhaps because we are so used to seeing shoes at the end of people’s legs that we think of them as feet, and seeing them alone is almost like seeing severed body parts. These automata, like Hoffmann’s Olympia, are dead objects that mimic life.

Seen in this way, as doubles of feet, the shoes in Bellmer’s images are emblems of castration anxiety, an additional doubling superimposed onto the doubling of the mannequin and her mutilated form. The shoes are fitted onto bodies so deformed that they have no need of the shoes as protection for walking. The shoes are fetishes, attempts to ward off castration and the threat of violation, but also reminders that the threat exists. They are also fetishes in the more contemporary, sexual sense, because they are almost always the patent leather Mary Jane style of shoe that immediately evokes young girls and, of course, dolls. The shoes’ presence seems to enhance the hideousness of the images, to intensify their uncanny quality. The shoe mirrors, doubles the concept of the mannequin as a mockery or a travesty of the human form, because a shoe is a mockery or a travesty of the human foot.

But if the presence of the shoes in these images underscores their violence, it is because they seem to be the most recognizably human element of the composition. As a class of objects, shoes may share some characteristics of uncanny automata, but in these images it becomes clear that they are something more than just doubles of the feet: they have an inherently human quality. Bellmer’s dolls are not at all subtle in their mutilation of the human form: they were carefully constructed to be anatomically correct to a gruesome degree, but their ball joints are also meant to be evident, as well as the texture
of their plaster surface. Their configuration is meant to be clearly physically impossible, and the lighting and high-focus photography expose the seams and materials of these constructions. In one sense this is consistent with the idea of doubling and with the fragmentation of the body. But this fragmentation needs an element of the real in it, otherwise the figures would look ridiculous instead of grotesque. The only unmanipulated objects, the only real, heimlich objects in the photographs are the shoes. Because shoes are substitutions for feet rather than just clothing for them, because they stand in for feet, they add this element of wholeness to the dolls. Without them the mannequins would lose this link to real bodies that wear shoes and would seem less vulnerable and poignant. Shoes contribute to the uncanny quality of Bellmer’s doll images, but only because even in their uncanniness, there is something canny, something inherently human about shoes. Bellmer’s images uncover this peculiar quality of shoes.

The doll pictured in figure 3.8, for example, is among the most detailed and graphic of Bellmer’s models. It shows his interest in the use of the ball joint in anatomy. The limbs are beautifully shaped, the surfaces shaded and almost classically proportioned, the pose relaxed. This is almost an idealized nude, albeit a slightly strange one. This image is from Bellmer’s first doll series made in 1934, the series that was first published in Minotaure. The majority of Bellmer’s doll images after 1934, like the doll from the series of 1935 in figure 3.9, are wearing shoes, stockings, and no other clothing. The boots are an unmistakable visual cue of humanness in this image, orienting the legs towards the wall, identifying them as legs. They provide a context for the figure, a connection between it and the world that we live in, a world where feet are most often covered by shoes. In this way the shoes in Bellmer’s images prevent the mannequins
from being too idealized, such grotesque mutilations of the human form that they stray too far from reality and become cartoonish or worse, for the surrealists, idealized.

But it is significant that Bellmer chose shoes to play this role and not some other article of clothing. Many of Bellmer’s dolls are nothing more than legs, some joined at the waist with another pair of legs, some emerging from between a dirty mattress and a wall, casualties at the end of some violent schoolyard game. In the absence of a face, shoes seem to do the trick of identifying a figure and arousing our interest and emotional concern for it. Bellmer’s choice of severed legs as the only body parts for his second series of dolls is an example of Bataille’s mechanism of *bassesse*, placing the basest, most lowly parts of the body at the center of the frame as a way of leveling hierarchies and eliminating categories. But when Bellmer puts shoes on the ends of these severed legs, he takes a step outside the body and examines the relationship between these mutilated subjects and an inanimate object.

Shoes imply feet, formally speaking, in a way that other articles of clothing do not imply the body parts to which they belong. This is the notion that Dali and Schiaparelli played with in their collaborative project of a shoe hat (3.10). A shoe has a much more narrow functional scope than other articles of clothing, and in this way it is similar to the hat—it is not really possible to put a hat anywhere but on the head, and shoes can really only be precariously placed on any body part other than the foot, and the effect is comical (slightly so at least in this snapshot of Dali, taken by his wife; fig. 3.11). A hat only fits a head; but almost any kind of material, even some other piece of clothing, can be appropriated and made into a hat (anyone who has seen the film *Grey Gardens* knows
Figure 3.10. Salvador Dali, Page from Sketchbook, c. 1937, Private collection; rpt. in Richard Martin, *Fashion and Surrealism* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987) 110.
Figure 3.11. Gala Dalí, Salvador Dalí at Port Lligat, c. 1932; rpt. in Richard Martin, *Fashion and Surrealism* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987) 110.
that it is possible, and is considered chic by many fashion insiders, to transform an old cardigan into a turban). But a shoe is not so easily repurposed or replaced. It can sit on a head, but it doesn’t fit there. Dali’s sketches of shoe-hats are bizarre because the idea of a shoe on one’s head is an example of bassetse, the exchange of the foot and the head, displaced onto inanimate objects.

But it is also bizarre because shoes are formally so tied to feet; they fit feet. Shoes are made from tough materials and they conform so closely to the shape of feet because they serve not just as doubles of feet—they are feet. Or almost. They differ from other articles of clothing in the responsibility surrendered to them by the body (various articles and styles of clothing are exchangeable depending on the occasion, but shoes are constant) and in their fidelity to the body part they are made for (a dress without a body might serve as a scarf or a rag, a hat may become an improvised fan, but shoes know their place). Shoes are so closely tied to feet that they are perhaps the most intimate prosthesis we have; they are almost part of the human body. A shoe without a foot is very obviously empty.

Shoes are something more than doubles of feet—they are substitutions for feet, they are, in western society, the foot’s avatars, its agents. They are a part of the body in the same way a snail’s shell is part of its body, a shield that it creates and throws off from itself but also carries around in all its perambulations. This peculiar nature of shoes means that when they appear in surrealist art, they are fetishes, doubles of feet, but also something more. Their job in the pictorial space of surrealism is to figure the loss of the self.
Sacrifice

The sight of an empty, abandoned shoe is an uncanny one; it is almost like seeing a severed foot, so close is the relation between foot and shoe. Bataille perceived the relation of the body with inorganic objects as an inevitable consumption that was part of everyday life. The communion of foot and shoe can even result in a sacred loss of self, since the shoe is thrown out from the body, a part of it and also separate from it. This approach to the products and objects used by the body does not indicate the kind of anxiety that Foster claims the surrealists felt about the encroachment of the world of objects into the body. Rather, it shows that the surrealists wanted precisely to lose the self through a sacrifice of a fetish.

In his preface to his *Arcades* project (called “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century”), Benjamin talks about the phantasmagoria of the national exhibitions of industry that were popular diversions in the 19th and early 20th centuries (and that might be compared to any number of contemporary phenomena, most likely the mall). He calls them “places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish” in which the exchange value of the goods trumps their use value such that these items, beyond the purchasing power of the working class spectators, become divertíssemens instead of useful objects (17). These exhibitions created a universe of specialites, a dream world of objects that are useless apart from their power to distract and to attract desire. These commodities, some so far beyond the reach of the common worker, others constantly made new, inspire the unquenchable longing reserved for deities.

According to Benjamin, clothing played a special role in the commercial pantheon: “Fashion prescribes the ritual according to which the commodity fetish
demands to be worshipped” (Benjamin, “Paris” 18). It derives this authority from the intimacy of the relationship between clothing and the human body; fashion “couples the living body to the inorganic world” (19). This is an explicitly sexual coupling, for Benjamin, who describes a tendency to submit to the dictates of fashion as succumbing “to the sex appeal of the inorganic” (19). He then quotes a passage from Apollinaire that illustrates an indiscriminate congress of the human body and the world of inorganic objects: “Any material from nature’s domain can now be introduced into the composition of women’s clothes. I saw a charming dress made of corks…Steel, wool, sandstone, and files have suddenly entered the vestmentary arts…They’re doing shoes in Venetian glass and hats in Baccarat crystal” (19). This perverse union of body and object world is justified as modern because it is presented as new. Any debasement of a commodity that arises from assigning it a price, from signifying it, is mitigated by its newness—a quality of inestimable value.

But this newness is also an illusion, and fashion is a deceitful oracle, because the coupling of the living body and the inorganic world is the oldest idea in the book. Bataille wrote extensively about the constant tension in human life between the sacred and the profane, or the heterogeneous and the homogeneous. Human social activity can be understood as divided into two realms of experience: everyday life, the homogeneous or profane realm of civil society and consumption; and ritual, a class of sacred activities motivated by the heterogeneous drive. Unusual events, such as periods of mourning or entry into a new phase of life, can motivate a desire to temporarily abandon normal activities and undo the homogeneity or the wholeness of a society and even of the physical body. Animal sacrifice and sometimes self-mutilation are examples of “the
rupture of personal homogeneity and the projection outside the self of a part of oneself, with their rage and pain” (Bataille, “Sacrificial Mutilation” 68). This kind of ritual removes from the individual or the society the ideas and objects that it cannot contain, including the idea of a discrete self.  

The opposite pole contains the everyday, profane activities of social life. These activities require the absorption of heterogeneous entities into a harmonious whole, and the means to this is the process of appropriation, whose elementary form is oral consumption (Bataille, “The Use-Value of D.A.F. de Sade” 95). If sacrifice is a redemption from homogeneity, an act of removing from the whole some undesirable member or quality (sin, for example), then eating is a redemption from the division of heterogeneity, a healing of the torn fabric of community (by eating the symbolic body of Christ, for example). But “man does not only appropriate his food, but also the different products of his activity: clothes, furniture, dwellings, and instruments of production” (Bataille, “de Sade” 95). Bataille is saying that the natural, everyday state of humans is to be in a homogeneous relation with the everyday objects that surround them, to consider those objects as being a part of their own bodies. The idea that the living body could be coupled with the inorganic world is not a new one, although fashion pretends it is.

The Body

Pretend-on mettre encore la main sur un homme ‘naturel’?

2Religions, however, should not be thought of as answers for the human need for heterogeneous projection of self; rather, they are “the totality of prohibitions, obligations, and partial freedom that socially channel and regularize this projection”; in other words, they are appropriations of the need for sacred heterogeneity (96).
But the homogeneity of the human body and its products is not the kind of dissolution of the subject Bataille is after. He is not like the Futurists, whom Foster describes in *Prosthetic Gods* as eager for the complete consumption and consummation of human body and machine into a postnatural body, the loss of the subject to the technological world (Foster 110). Nor is Bataille reacting with anxiety to the imposition of technology on the body as a restriction, as Foster argues was the surrealist stance (Foster 109). Instead, Bataille explains the interaction of body and world in biological, digestive terms, insisting on the necessity both of the consumption of objects by the body and of the excretion of its waste products through acts of sacrifice, mutilation, and art that permit the temporary dissolution of the subject. Though Foster argues that “this restrictive advocacy of resistance or acceleration was as pronounced in modernist art as it was in critical theory, and it marks a structural limitation of both formations,” in fact Bataille’s views do not advocate either a resistance or an acceleration of human reliance on technology (Foster 110). And we might choose to see in the case of shoes a special kind of prosthesis, a primitive technology that is intimately connected with the body and can thus be a candidate for sacrificial self-mutilation, a sacred emblem of the loss of the self.

In his essay “The Use-Value of the Impossible” Hollier quotes Bataille from his essay in the last issue of *Documents*: “I challenge any art lover to love a canvas as much as a fetishist loves a shoe” (qtd. In Hollier 13). Bataille is disparaging here the exchange-value of art as compared with the sacred use-value of the fetish shoe. Hollier discusses Bataille’s choice of shoes in this challenge and refers to Van Gogh, not to talk about his painting of shoes but rather to relate Bataille’s reference to fetish shoes with his ideas
about sacrificial mutilation. The shoe that has been made into a fetish is no longer in use; its singularity belongs not to its value as equipment, because any shoe might do for trudging through the fields. For the fetishist, the shoe is valuable in itself, an object of reverence. Hollier talks about Heidegger’s analysis of Van Gogh’s painting, but he says that Bataille’s Van Gogh is not Heidegger’s Van Gogh.

Not the Van Gogh of shoes without a subject, of the shoes unbound by painting, but that of another unbinding, the sacrificial catachresis which seized his body proper, the detaching of the ear which belongs to the body. An ear which might belong to someone who spits it out over the market, crying: this is my body, inexchangeable. An ear diverted from the exchange market. (13-14)

But perhaps the Van Gogh of shoes without a subject is the same Van Gogh who detaches his ear; perhaps Van Gogh chose to paint shoes because of their inherently fetishistic character as doubles of the feet, part of the body but not part of it, conforming to the foot’s contours and mediating its access to the ground, the location of the human body’s last contact with its muddy origins or the displacement of that location. If shoes span the supposed divide between body and world, then an empty pair of shoes is in a sense like a severed ear; it is already a “rupture of personal homogeneity” because it is a dead object that nonetheless acts as a member of the body, and when it is empty it is even more a “projection outside the self of a part of oneself” (Bataille, “Mutilation” 68).

If Bataille’s intellectual aim is to overcome Cartesian dualities and especially to eliminate the self, we might think that a homogeneous relationship of body and world would be desirable for him. But for Bataille, the appropriation that defines homogeneity
is precisely the force behind the Cartesian system of dualities and its conception of a discrete subject. The aim of the Cartesian subject is knowledge and possession of the world, and through perceiving the world of objects it appropriates or consumes them. Science and philosophy, according to Bataille, have sought to identify “all the elements of which the world is composed,” or in other words to eat all the objects of the world, digesting them down to their fundamental particles (Bataille, “de Sade” 96). The goal of science and philosophy is “the establishment of the homogeneity of the world,” the rationalization of all objects of perception (Bataille, “de Sade” 96). Within this world of identical objects, the subject is paradoxically maintained: it eats but is not eaten. The subject is the hungry self who indiscriminately consumes all objects, since they are finally identical and interchangeable, exchangeable.

But all eating leads to excretion, and heterogeneity must follow homogeneity as the analogous action of throwing a part of the self outside of the self. The gluttonous homogeneity of the subject must “lead to a terminal phase in the sense of excretion when the irreducible waste products of the operation are determined” (96). Presumably, this refers to revolution. The waste products of personal homogeneity (excrement, gods, cadavers, bodily fluids) are sacred by virtue of the act of sacrifice that expels them, sets them apart. Likewise the waste products of social life must be expelled in rites that allow the members of the society to free themselves from the stifling sameness of homogeneous society.

These waste products are not interchangeable; they are not part of the buffet table of edible objects Bataille says scientists and philosophers want to make of the world. They are set apart, unique, sacred. When the shoe is removed from the body through the
dissection and mutilation of art, framed and cropped, it becomes a kind of fetish that is more than a fetish; it is a double of the body, an inorganic copy of the foot, but it is also a part of the body, its constant companion in its wanderings. Perhaps the fetishist loves his shoe the way Van Gogh loves his ear, and thus perhaps an image of shoe is like an image of a severed foot. Nonetheless, shoes are separate from the body; we can take them off, we can discard them without any harm to ourselves. But we soon have to put them on again, reappropriate them, because we cannot do without them. In this sense they are different even from an ear or a finger, which I can certainly live without. Shoes have a humble sort of indispensability that is different from the vitality of the digestive organs or the vulnerability of the eye.

The image of a shoe is not horrific in the same way as might be an image of an isolated eye or mouth, both of which invoke a sense of violent ritual (fig. 3.12). It suggests an abandoned carapace or perhaps a layer of skin shed by a molting snake; some other shoe has surely replaced it, but it was once alive and inhabited. Roger Parry’s photograph of a pile of abandoned trash, among it the bones of animals and partly decomposed shoe, shows the similarity of a shoe and a bone—they are perhaps equally important to a human’s functioning (fig. 3.13). The shallow arrangement of the objects, all left behind and scattered on the dirty grass, suggests this. But our eye is drawn to the shoe in this image. It occupies the upper half of the frame and is made of white canvas; it is a woman’s shoe with a medium heel. Why is this shoe more suggestive of violence than the jaw bone to its left? It looks decayed and mangled and the impression is that it was ripped from someone’s foot, violently severed from her body. The body is contained
in, coded by this shoe, in a way it wouldn’t be in an image of an abandoned hat. This shoe is like a cadaver or a bone, the remnant of a body, except that it is made by, taken up by that body; it is and always was in some sense an inanimate object. And yet…

The shoe is a fetish in the sense that it is a double of the foot, designed to protect it from stimuli. But it is also a fetish in Bataille’s sense of an object possessing use-value, a unique object that cannot be replaced because it is not specifically useful, just valuable. But shoes surpass even this definition of fetish, because they adhere to the body so closely; they follow and accompany its movements and retain its form so completely that they become part of the body. It shares with the foot its ambiguous, tortured character; it stands in for the foot in almost every situation; the foot may consume the shoe, but the shoe consumes the foot right back. It is a part of the human body, and yet not, and as such it is a heterogeneous element, and yet not. It is a part of the body that is always severed from the body, always thrown from it in a sacrificial mutilation. It is the foot’s constant companion and agent that nonetheless can never be wholly appropriated by it. Just as the foot figured the collapse of the moral categories of elevated/base, the shoe collapses the perceptive or epistemological categories of body/world, subject/object; both have a role to play in achieving the “category that would allow all categories to be unthought”: the informe (Krauss, L’Amour Fou 64).

Let us return to Magritte’s images of shoe/feet, because we can see them now perhaps in a way that is informed by Bataille’s ideas (fig. 3.14). They are not fashionable shoes; the image is not about the phantasmagoria of the new. They are rather objects that are haunted by the bodies they have grown out of as carapaces, and when they are taken
off they take part of that body with them in a kind of sacrificial mutilation. These are fetishes in the sense that they span the boundary between body and object, not by being eaten or used up by the body, but by acting as a prosthetic for the body, extending its powers and binding it to its lack. These shoes imply feet and all the ambiguous humanity feet possess. This painting is called *La philosophie dans le boudoir*, a title Magritte derived from de Sade; the image shows how this sacrifice of these almost parts of the body is a sacred act and the heterogeneous product of the appropriation that typifies philosophy. In the boudoir, where body and object are joined not as eater and eaten but in an embrace of equals, the strict categories of philosophy fall away. This erasing of the self is the intoxication that the surrealists were seeking, the loss of the self while walking through crowded city streets.

What we see here is evidence that the surrealists’ attitude towards objects of everyday life was a complex one, contrary to Foster’s view. He insists that in modern art and theory there was a “restrictive advocacy of resistance or acceleration” of technological interaction with the body, and furthermore that this strict dilemma “marks a structural limitation of both formations” (Foster 110). But if we see shoes as primitive, originary technologies, inanimate objects that are joined to the body to extend its activities, then we see that surrealist art acknowledges both sides of the double logic of the prosthesis. In some of their work, particularly collages and the series of *cadavre exquis*, the body may seem to be suffering the depredations of machines. But I am trying to show that the surrealists were fundamentally comfortable with the idea of oneness between the human body and the world of objects, which must include machines, and so it would be excessive to characterize them as taking a stance that is entirely anxious with
regard to technology’s effects on the body. If surrealist art portrays tortured, manipulated bodies it is partly to express concern for the state of the body in modern life, but it is more importantly an effort to achieve the informe. If bodies in surrealist art are severed into parts, it is partly to express alienation, but it is more precisely a way of reaching the sacred intoxication of self-mutilation.

And of course, the surrealists’ aims were fundamentally intellectual, social and political, not psychological. They were certainly influenced by Freud, but they used his ideas as tools to further their social program, not to work out their own neuroses. Telling the dream of the modern world was one way of waking up from it. Benjamin says in the introduction to his Arcades project that the eighteenth century “was incapable of responding to the new technological possibilities with a new social order” and thus it left “the last word…to the errant negotiator between old and new who are at the heart of these phantasmagorias” (26). The failure to incorporate technology and the body in a harmonious relation is not a psychological one or a cultural one or even an aesthetic one; it is a social problem, and as such it has a social solution. Bataille would say that modern society is too homogeneous; the greatest threat to its members is becoming machines in the Marxist sense of being cogs in the machine of mass production than of being physically overcome by technologies. The solution, or actually the inevitable result, will be the ultimate purging of society’s heterogeneous elements; in a word, revolution.

So Foster’s claim that the surrealists took a stance against technology does not acknowledge the fundamental intellectual and social goals of the movement, which were to bring about intoxication and the informe as a way of hastening revolution. Their anxiety about the body was founded more on the dualistic ideals that we tend to apply to
it than to fears that it had or would suffer some trauma inflicted by machines (although the traumas of World War I were certainly fresh in their minds). When they make images of prostheses, or the body seeming to struggle with inorganic objects, they often have a sense of humor to them, just as Bataille’s headless Acephalus “makes me laugh” when I see him, because I meet him outside myself. These images of bodies morphing or being substituted with objects convey the idea of freedom from the categories of homogeneity. And when, as with Bellmer’s dolls, these images are more horrifying than funny, this is also an escape from the self (some of Bellmer’s images are humorous, though it’s a dark humor). The self in Bellmer’s images is fractured and broken, and its shoes contribute to this, but this is just the kind of intoxication the surrealists were after. Far from being opposed to technology, to inorganic objects becoming prostheses of the body, the surrealists were seeking precisely for this loss of subjectivity in intoxication.
Conclusion

I have been arguing that images of feet and shoes in surrealist art can be seen as instances of *bassesse*, which is a mechanism proposed by Bataille for flattening hierarchical structure in thought. These observations provide a framework in which to read the images, but they also demonstrate the complexity of the surrealist project that has perhaps been overlooked by figures like Foster and Jameson. Foster, for instance, sees surrealism as one of a number of reactions to the enhanced role of technology as a prosthesis for the body in the modern world, a reaction that simply sees these prostheses as dangerous intrusions. I have tried to show that in the shoe, the surreалиsts found a primitive technology that became one with the body and allow for the loss of the subject. This disproves the idea of a categorical surrealist aversion to technology.

Jameson views surrealism as firmly committed to a high modernist Freudian depth model, concerned primarily with liberating the unconscious and thereby preserving the modernist vision of a monad-like subject. But what we see in Bataille’s ideas about the *informe* is a fairly fully developed post-structuralist philosophy that seeks to flatten all hierarchies in the loss of all categories of thought, and the foot gives us a fractured and ambiguous idea of the human subject, and the shoe figures the loss of the subject in a perpetual act of self-mutilation. Both Jameson and Foster are engaged in large narratives, tracking the development of postmodernism and discussing modern views of the relationship between the human body and technology respectively, and any phenomenon loses some of its detail when we step back to look at it from a distance. Restoring some of this detail through a close analysis can help us locate surrealism more accurately in the space of transition from modernism to postmodernism.
We can see in surrealist images of feet and shoes several tendencies that they share with postmodernism. The nature of shoes as a commodity is an aspect of these images I chose not to discuss in this project, but it is an important aspect of surrealist art in general and of images of shoes in particular that links surrealism to postmodernism. The boundaries between subject and object begin to break down in these images, especially in Magritte’s paintings of shoe-feet, and this is evidence of the surrealists’ tendency to flatten hierarchies and depth models in a way that presages postmodernism. The surrealists did hold on to their political and social motives, and thus they retained an element of the Utopian character of modern art and thought, so it would be inaccurate to characterize their production as fully postmodern, at least in Jameson’s view of the postmodern. But further study could uncover the ways that shoes operated in mass culture and commodity production at this time as well as the numerous and profound links between surrealism and the fashion industry. In this way, we could begin to understand more about how these early 20th century artists are precursors of an “implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today,” since such a stance is implied in “every position on postmodernism in culture,” according to Jameson (3).  

3 How can a period of which we can say that its “whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world” also be a period whose cultural production lacks any Utopian motivation, any ideological underpinnings (Jameson 5)? If any position on postmodernism is also “and necessarily…a political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today,” then how can postmodernism also be drained of political content? Perhaps this is the Lacanian schizophrenia of postmodernity, or perhaps it is the paradox of a commentary about a system that itself belongs to that system. At any rate, it seems likely that even surrealism’s political agenda might not be sufficient as a bright line between it and postmodernism.
We can see in these surrealist images of feet and shoes nascent treatments of what will become important issues for the diverse productions of postmodern culture. Further study could investigate the status of shoes as commodities during the early 20th century in western Europe as well as the deep links between the surrealist movement and the fashion industry, showing how both their textual production focused heavily on magazines. The status of shoes as commodities that are literally intimately bound to the human body calls up questions of deep links between cultural production and late capitalism; the closeness of the relation between foot and shoe furthermore suggests the postmodern notion of space and the collapse of distance, the “perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed,” also links them to postmodern conceptions of space, including “Lefebvre’s concept of abstract space as what is simultaneously homogeneous and fragmented” (Bellmer’s dolls come to mind; Jameson 413).

Images of feet in surrealist art perform the function of radically rotating the vertical axis of the human body and thereby challenge basic notions of morality and of the existence of ideals such as elevated and base, good and evil. Images of shoes also dissolve a boundary, this time the boundary drawn by traditional philosophy that separates the rational, perceiving subject from the world of objects. These members of the surrealist system of images have for some reason been neglected, both by the surrealists themselves and by commentators on their products. Further study could reveal the economic implications of shoes; the relationship between the surrealist movement and the fashion industry is rich and full of possibilities for understanding better the exchange of images between “high” surrealist art and “low” commercial art. I chose to gloss over
the sexual and Freudian implications of feet and shoes, but more could be said on this topic. In short, feet and shoes rest on very fertile ground that has yet to be tilled.

In an unpublished preface to his novel *Le mort* Bataille wrote about a real experience that he reproduced in the novel (see Boiffard’s illustration, fig. 4.1). He was in Normandy in 1942, recovering from a bout of tuberculosis, and out in the street one day he saw a German plane go down. Approaching the wreckage he saw the bodies of the dead German pilots:

The foot of one of the Germans was bared [dénudé], the sole of the shoe having been torn away. The heads of the dead, it seems to me, were shapeless. The flames must have touched them; this foot alone was intact. It was the only human thing belonging to a body, and its nakedness, having become earthen, was inhuman…in the upper with no sole of the shoe, it was diabolical: but no, it was unreal, stripped naked [dénudé], indecent to the highest degree. I remained motionless for a long time that day, for this naked foot was looking at me. (qtd. in Finas 1-2)

The foot is the most human part of the body, for Bataille; the only thing that can make it more human, more ambiguous, more troubled, is a shoe. And the final indecency, the final fall from the skies, is to remove the shoe when the body is dead, revealing what should have remained hidden: the fact that the foot, synecdoche for the whole human body, is made of dust. Modern philosophy and science “has only one face: that of a violent denial” of death in favor the mask of that which is visible, rational, knowable (Finas 2). The naked foot of a dead body is the challenge to this system of thought because it upends its order.
Works Cited


