

Pygmalion and the Sphinx

Robert Desnos

Translated, annotated and introduced by Simon Baker

Base-Metal Materialism (Translator's Introduction)

Robert Desnos's short essay 'Pygmalion and the Sphinx' appeared in the first issue of *Documents*' second year, 1930. By this point, the magazine had already succumbed to the upended logic of its own 'critical dictionary,' so that Georges Bataille's materialist meditations on 'The Language of Flowers' and 'The Big Toe' had been published alongside serious scholarly articles on Norwegian archaeology and French prehistoric rock art. In this context it is tempting to read Desnos's poetic critique of late-nineteenth-century monuments as just another flea in the ear of the magazine's scholarly credentials.

'Pygmalion and the Sphinx,' however, deals with material that had been the subject of almost perpetual scrutiny by men of letters since before the Great War: the incredible proliferation of statues in Paris, or 'statuemanía' as the phenomenon was known at the time.ⁱ Desnos, for his part, avoids the predictable bourgeois lament over the style and placing of these 'poisonous mushrooms of the Parisian fauna,' as one critic described statues that seemed to 'pop up' overnight.ⁱⁱ Instead, doubtless inspired by Bataille's seductive theory of 'base materialism,' he produces a brilliant account of the material shortcomings of statuary as a representational form. In an age when, as René Bazin remarked, bronze 'flowed like ink,' filling the Parisian streets with half-remembered celebrities and unheeded rhetorical gestures, Desnos's response (which blends his distinct journalistic and poetic skills) concentrates on the earth-bound nature of the city's bronze inhabitants.ⁱⁱⁱ It is this approach that links 'Pygmalion and the Sphinx' to essays like Bataille's 'Language of Flowers' – concerned, as it is, with the *weight* of statues, their lumpen subservience to gravity, and the ludicrous (if charming) gambits by which sculptors attempted to bypass this condition: balloons of bronze, dust-clouds of stone, veins of marble, universally supported by the specious sophistry of the pedestal. Like *Documents* itself, Desnos's text bears out surrealist concerns (expressed both on statuary and monumental forms at various times by Louis Aragon, André Breton and Paul Eluard) yet cleaves resolutely to Bataille's distinct philosophical posture.^{iv}

While Desnos's text is remarkable in its own right, the five Jacques-André Boiffard photographs – which add to rather than simply illustrate Desnos's ideas – have involuntary, marvellous qualities of their own. Strangest to the modern eye are the photographs of two bronze monuments that have long since ceased to occupy the sites specified in the captions: Bartholdi's monument to the 1870 defence of Paris (at the place des Ternes) and Farcy's statue of Chappe, inventor of the aerial telegraph (at



the junction of Boulevards Raspail and Saint-Germain). Both were victims of the German occupation of Paris during the Second World War, when many of the most expendable (usually politically divisive or aesthetically questionable) statues were melted down to satisfy the need for reusable metals. In common with the statue of Etienne Dolet immortalised in Breton's *Nadja*, these are monuments whose posterity was guaranteed by the back-handed compliment of association with a Boiffard commission.

The translation that follows is intended to offer the contemporary reader a deeper engagement with Desnos's essay by explaining some of the more obscure and impenetrable references, and by offering supplementary images to the photographs that originally accompanied the article. These textual and visual references are intended to confirm 'Pygmalion and the Sphinx' as ranking among the most sophisticated surrealist critiques of medium specificity: to sculpture perhaps, what Aragon's 'Challenge to Painting' is to collage. In practical terms, because Desnos used notes in his article, these appear as footnotes while editorial annotations and supplementary illustrations appear as endnotes; annotations to Desnos's footnotes appear at the end of the endnotes.

Sincere thanks are due to Jacques Fraenkel and Editions Gallimard for granting permission to publish Desnos's text. Thanks also to Caroline Hancock and Charlie Miller for assistance with the translation, and Mark Rawlinson for shooting the Pigeons.

* * *

Pygmalion and the Sphinx

M. de la Palisse himself would agree with me, at least I hope so, if I say that sculpture, which is so idealistic in its aims, is controlled by the terrestrial laws of matter, and above all by the law of gravity.^v Whether it's a matter of the pyramid, or better the cone that expresses its triumph (doesn't the light of a star, which is considered terrestrially as a point, form a cone as it falls to earth!), or the spindle that escapes it, gravity makes its mark on all material creations, by which I mean those situated in space.

This presence of the earth is manifest with greatest power in the branch of sculpture known as statuary. To the weight of bronze, marble or granite is added the weight of the corpse that a statue purportedly perpetuates, or the burden of the rotten brains of allegory.

Nothing, in fact, is more contrary to the idea of divinity than this kind of sham. The best example, I recall, was the use Eisenstein made of a crude crucifix in the 'Battleship Potemkin.'^{vi} But nothing is more loaded with mystery, underhand power and activity than this. Because it is in the earth considered as a whole (earth, water, air) that geniuses must be sought. And statues are somewhat like clothes abandoned in a forest: the first vagabond to come along puts them on, the first genius to come along embodies them... if he's not too 'tight.'^{vii} This mysterious humanisation of fakes illustrates, better than any other means, the fate of statues.



Who can explain to me why the Jules Simon of the Madeleine, the Musset of the Porte-Maillot and the Louis XIV of the Place des Victoires are moving?^{viii} Why the Napoleon of the Vendôme Column is endowed with a peculiar life?^{ix} Why the Etienne Dolet of the Place Maub' is a con, while the chevalier de la Barre at Montmartre is endowed with the powers usually given to dangerous symbols.^x

Then there is the question of the pedestal. These walls enclosed at their summit, this shut shack, plays a greater role that you think in the style (the way of life) of statues. The François Coppée of the boulevard Montparnasse is a famous chap, contrary to the dust which bears his name. He is not, or not quite, of the pedestal, he is light-footed, he is alive.^{xi}

And as such then, it is easy to understand that the only statues destined to perpetuate the life of a man are those taking refuge in the Musée Grévin.^{xii} But what can be said about shop-window mannequins? These anonymous statues don't always look at us kindly. There is enchantment beneath their sweating brows and porcelain eyes.^{xiii}

If I was a councillor, a town planner (don't laugh, eventually everyone dreams that they're mad) I wouldn't put these dangerous rascals in everyone's reach.^{xiv}



Monument de la Défense Nationale, par A. Bartholdi (Porte des Ternes). — Photo J.-A. Boiffard.

Monument to the National Defense by A. Bartholdi (Porte des Ternes). – Photo J.-A. Boiffard.

¹ There is a tangible difference between the statues of stone or metal and the effigies of coloured wax, equal to that which separates silent films from films with sound and these from films with sound, colour and relief. For you can ignore the very relative immortality conferred on bronze and marble.^{xxi}





Monument à Léon Serpollet, 1858-1907, (Place Saint-Ferdinand). — Photo J.-A. Boiffard.

Monument to Léon Serpollet, 1858-1907, (Place Saint-Ferdinand). – Photo J.-A. Boiffard.



And equally, if I admitted that concern for the perpetuation of someone's memory is praiseworthy, I would not go about it that way.

No dedication, no name, no pedestal.

Leaning on the parapet of the Ile Saint-Louis, you would encounter a bronze gentleman who could be Baudelaire; Fortune, on her wheel, could roll down the road to the carrefour Haussman; Courbet, with motionless footfall, would turn his back on the column, and come back up the rue de la Paix without moving, smiling at the pretty women...^{xv}

In this context, the tomb of M. and Mme. Pigeon in Montparnasse cemetery is a success. These venerable old folk of bronze and cast-iron enjoy an exceptional prolongation of reality in their metal sheets... but they don't smell as bad as they did in real life.^{xvi}

It must be acknowledged however, that it is necessary to make a distinction between the allegory and the portrait. Erecting a likeness of a being who was alive onto a pedestal is equivalent to raising him to the rank of god, and these days this kind of enterprise is less legitimate than ever. While the allegory of bronze situates itself on the plane of metaphor, as image, as poetic fiction.

The Carpeaux fountain in the Luxembourg is a poem, 'Paris during the war' at the Carrousel the height of stupidity, Mickiewicz at the place de l'Alma an unfunny joke.^{xvii}

Why must it be that advertising, which furnishes the modern world with so many strange creatures, has not yet entered the domain of statuary? Advertising, whose hoardings give such grandeur to landscapes and whose presence accentuates the majesty of mountains, moors and the sea.

I would love a porphyry Cadum baby getting out of a marble bath, the waiters of the café Saint-Raphael appearing suddenly at a bend in the road, the little girl from Meunier chocolate in granite and bone, leaning against the walls.^{xviii}

Don't these fetishes of today deserve at last to have their shadows in the sun more than some poet, general or scholar?²

Certainly Pygmalion is dead, if he ever existed. But the example of this Narcissus of art is not about to tempt us. What we love is life with its cortege of strange manifestations, miracles, profound gazes, abuses, hot embraces! It's not beauty that we love, she leaves us as cold as she is. What we love is the shudder of a left breast at heart's height, the heat of a body, the beating of eyelids, the richness of a voice.

² I regret equally that there have never been statues raised to certain everyday instruments, like the casserole, the bottle, the wheel, the wheelbarrow etc...that speak convincingly of the amazing object which would consist of the marble effigy of a train, gas light, ball bearings, or the Vaucluse fountain!

Figural sculpture has in fact, everything to gain from enterprises quite so perfectly idiotic, in the proper sense of the term.

And when we raise a statue to X-rays, we will force the sculptor to discover a correct and unexpected mode of expression.^{xxii}



As regards statues, they should be only supplements in the exegesis of life, which unfolds perpetually in rhythmic paragraphs in the imaginations of men. They would be thankful to be able to carve on their own plinths two names surrounded by a heart and pierced by an arrow. And once again charm, spell, enchantment lay their sturdy sculptor's hands, hands with enormous thumbs, on the effigies, and remind us of the danger of figuring nature and the appearance of things.

Pygmalion was probably just a clumsy magician who, wanting to bring himself love, fell in love with his own copy.

We would not want statues to be anything other than supplements...



Statue par E. Christophe, 1876 (Jardin des Tuileries). — Photo J.-A. Boiffard.

Statue by E. Christophe, 1876 (Tuileries Gardens). - Photo J.-A. Boiffard.



But are marble, porphyry, granite and bronze insensible? Don't they enjoy any life?

Bronze is sonorous. The veins of marble are real veins....

We would not want statues to be anything other... That phrase redounds on the author of these lines.

The nature of matter is once again called into question, and faced with such a question we can only fall silent... O radium, vibrant and inhuman matter!^{xix}

Who knows if a hurricane will not one day sweep away the dust-cloud of the car-crash at the place Saint-Ferdinand, if the bronze balloon of the porte des Ternes won't take formidable flight, at daybreak, in an upset sky?^{3xx} Listen. The ropes sing, the metal pigeons coo, the cheers leave the throats of bronze with a sound like a tocsin, the fountains of the Concorde, lit this evening like a fairyland, are troubled by the sirens' tails beating impatiently...

From the point of view of the absolute, platinum is heavier than hydrogen.

And the author of this article stops at this precise point. Because everything must be started afresh, must be contradicted, redone to start again, contradict, redo anew. The great cycle ends and recommences. Perhaps it never existed?

But in spite of everything, the eyes exist, they shine, they rule, they overcome – the living eyes of our best loved.

Robert DESNOS

³ I draw attention to, as one of the most baroque and admirable enterprises, the two statues that attempt to depict something which is less than figurable: the dust when the wind sweeps it, a balloon when it tries to rise in spite of constraints.^{xxiii}





Statue de Chappe, par G. Farcy, 1893 (Carrefour du boulevard Raspail et du boulevard Saint-Germain). — Photo J.-A. Boiffard.

Statue of Chappe by G. Farcy (Junction of the boulevard Raspail and the boulevard Saint-Germain). — Photo J.-A. Boiffard.





Statue de Louis XIV, par Coysevox (Place des Victoires). — Photo J.-A. Boiffard.

Statue of Louis XIV, by Coysevox (Place des Victoires). – Photo J.-A. Boiffard.



Translator's Endnotes

ⁱ For a full account of the phenomenon of statuomania in the context of surrealism, and a critical account of 'Pygmalion and the Sphinx,' see Simon Baker, 'Surrealism in the Bronze Age: Statuephobia and the efficacy of metaphorical iconoclasm,' in Stacy Boldrick and Richard Clay (eds), *Iconoclasm: Contested Objects, Contested Terms*, Ashgate Press: Aldershot, 2007. On statuomania in general see Maurice Agulhon, 'La statuomanie et l'histoire,' in *Histoire Vagabonde I: Ethnologie et politique dans la France contemporaine*, Gallimard: Paris, 1988, 137-185; June Hargrove, *The Statues of Paris, an open air pantheon: the history of statues to great men*, Vendome Press: New York & Paris, 1989, 254-306; Sergiusz Michalski, *Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage 1870-1997*, Reaktion: London, 1998, 13-55.

ⁱⁱ R. Strauss in Gustave Pessard, *Statuomanie Parisienne – etude critique sur l'abus des statues*, Paris, 1911, 61.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Bazin as quoted in Hargrove, *The Statues of Paris*, 255.

^{iv} Louis Aragon, 'The Statue's speech' in *Paris Peasant*, (trans. S. W. Taylor), Exact Change: Boston, 1994, 152, and in *Treatise on Style*, (trans. A. Waters), University of Nebraska Press: Nebraska, 1991, 7-10; André Breton on Etienne Dolet in *Nadja*, (trans. R. Howard), Grove Press: New York, 24; Paul Eluard's postscript to 'Sur certaines possibilités d'embellissement irrationnel d'une ville,' *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* 6, May 1933, 22-23.

^v The 'M. de la Palisse' to whom Desnos refers here is the man who gave his name to the French phrase 'un lapalissade,' a modern conflation of 'une vérité de la Palice,' which explains the apparent misspelling. Meaning literally, 'something so obvious as to be unworthy of mention' the phrase was reputedly coined when a soldier said of the recently deceased M. de la Palice, 'fifteen minutes before he died he was still alive': see Claude Augé (ed.), *Nouveau Petit Larousse Illustré*, Paris 1935, entry on Jacques de Chabannes, seigneur de la Palice, 1483. Desnos's introduction of this black humour at the meeting point between life and death is appositely directed at statues whose 'lifelike' qualities are also their most patently ridiculous feature. I am grateful to Marie-Claire Dumas for suggesting the relevance of M. de la Palice in this context.

^{vi} The scene in Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin* to which Desnos refers occurs during a mutiny that breaks out on the ship, where the sailors are resisted by, among others, the clerics on board. At one point a priest wields his heavy metal crucifix menacingly, pounding it club-like into his hand. During the melee the crucifix flies from his grip becoming embedded in the deck of the ship, like an axe in a chopping block. Eisenstein thus reveals the religious 'symbol' for what he believes it to be: a weapon of violence used to intimidate and oppress the people.

^{vii} The phrase here 's'il n'est pas gênée aux entournures' means literally 'if the armpits of his jacket aren't too tight,' a French reference to miserliness, the closest English version of which would be the concept of being 'tight' with money.

^{viii} There was a long tradition of the idea of moving statues in the city of Paris, not helped by the fact that some monuments were indeed moved around from one location to another. In fact, the 'Jules Simon of the Madeleine' that Desnos mentions here was moved from one corner of the site to another, several years after its inauguration (see Hargrove, *The Statues of Paris*, 187-8). The high point of imaginative responses to the phenomenon was Marcel Sauvage's 1932 novel *La Fin de Paris ou le Révolte des Statues*, Denoël et Steele: Paris, 1932. Sauvage, at one time a fellow-traveller of the Paris Dada group, and editor of the journal *Action*, drew on current ideas about statuomania, and specific surrealist ideas raised in different contexts by both Aragon and Desnos, to imagine a rebellion of the statues in the city which come to life and hold the inhabitants of the capital to ransom. The novel also contains 'photos' by someone named Constantinesco (possibly a pseudonym). Fig. 1, below, shows (the statue of) 'Marshal Ney coming down the Champs-Élysées' using a very subtle montage technique to uproot Ney from his proper place: the *photo-monteur* cleverly adding a shadow to the figure to securely ground him in the new location. Fig. 2, 'The first attack column coming from the Louvre' shows Ney leading a crowd of statues including writers as diverse as Voltaire and Paul Déroulède over a bridge across the Seine.





Fig. 1: Constantinesco, 'Marshal Ney coming down the Champs-Élysées,' M. Sauvage, *La Fin de Paris*, Denoël et Steele: Paris, 1932.



Fig. 2: Constantinesco, 'The first attack column coming from the Louvre,' M. Sauvage, *La Fin de Paris*, Denoël et Steele: Paris, 1932.



^{ix} In this case of course, Desnos is uncannily accurate, the Napoléon on the Vendôme column having enjoyed a very peculiar life, or rather series of incarnations, of which Desnos's was only the most recent. The first, by Chaudet was erected in 1810 on top of the emperor's tribute to the glory of the Grande Armée and depicted Napoléon in Roman garb complete with tunic and laurel wreath. This statue was then removed under the restoration in 1814 and replaced by a monarchical fleur-de-lys. In 1833 the bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Phillipe arranged for a more contemporary Bonaparte, dressed in a frock-coat to occupy the top of the column but then in 1863 Napoleon III replaced this with a copy of the first version of his uncle in Roman dress: it was this figure that the communards brought crashing down under Courbet's supervision in 1871; the present-day toga-wearing Napoléon replaced the former version at Courbet's expense in 1873. See R.D.E. Burton, *Blood in the City: Violence and Revelation in Paris, 1789-1945*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 2001, 72-89; and Michel Poisson, *The Monuments of Paris*, I.B.Tauris: New York and London, 1999, 37.

^x The reference to Etienne Dolet (a sixteenth-century publisher burned at the stake by the Church) may reflect André Breton's discussion of the monument as 'inducing unbearable discomfort' in *Nadja*. The singling out of Armand Bloch's statue of the chevalier de la Barre is also interesting. The young nobleman, tortured and also burned at the stake in 1766 for refusing to salute a religious procession, was a *cause célèbre* for Voltaire whose words were used on the plinth of the statue. It was however the original location of the monument, immediately outside the Basilica of Sacré Coeur [fig. 3] which as Desnos rightly points out, gave it a dangerous symbolic power. It was erected in 1905 by an anticlerical 'league of free-thinkers' as a deliberate affront to the authorities that had succeeded in provocatively building the basilica allegedly 'in expiation' for the so-called 'crimes' of the Commune on the very site where many fervently anti-religious Communards were supposed to have died. In 1926, the monument, which succeeded in offending visitors to the basilica, was moved to a less prominent location in what is now the place Nadar. The original bronze figure was destroyed during the Second World War and later replaced by a cheery and presumably less offensive version on the original plinth. For a full account of the politics of this site see David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, Routledge: New York and London, 2003, 311-340.

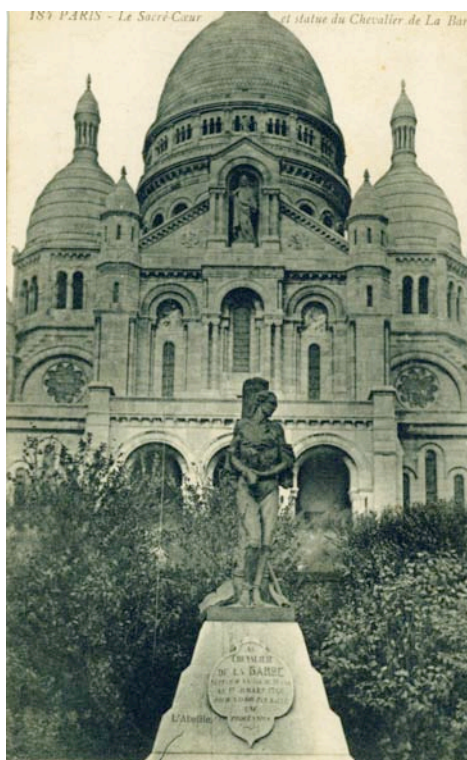


Fig. 3. Anon., 'Postcard 184 Paris – The Sacré Coeur and the statue of the chevalier de la Barre,' Imprimerie 'L'Abeille,' Paris, n.d. (pre-1926)



^{xi} François Coppée's statue, long-since replaced by a smaller monument with a bas-relief portrait, originally showed the poet in a relaxed 'strolling' pose, complete with nonchalantly held cigarette.

^{xii} The Musée Grévin is the Parisian waxwork museum equivalent to Madame Tussaud's in London, displaying wax replicas of famous and infamous celebrities and historical figures.

^{xiii} The link here between shop-window mannequins and the historic wax-works in the Musée Grévin is interesting in relation to the critique of forms of realism elsewhere in Desnos' essay.

^{xiv} In the Paris of the French Third Republic, the Municipal Council was the body with authority over the placement of statues in the city. It was therefore blamed by 'statuephobes' with having failed to stop the onset of statuomania. In fact, however, the municipal council had little control over prestigious sites controlled by the state (the President, Senate etc.) and even in areas where they were nominally in charge, they were theoretically responsible for 'finding sites' as opposed to deciding whether the statues were a) necessary, or b) aesthetically adequate. See Agulhon, 'La statuomanie et l'histoire,' and Pessard, *Statuomanie Parisienne*.

^{xv} Gustave Courbet's association with the demolition of the Vendôme Column during the commune is well known, primarily as a result of his being forced to pay punitively for the reconstruction of the monument after the fall of the commune and establishment of Thiers' 'conservative' Third Republic. Less well known, however, and more tantalizing in the context of Desnos's materialist critique of statuary, are Courbet's ideas about the column that he was alleged to have hated so much. According to Frank Jellinek, 'Courbet enthusiastically demanded its *déboulonnement*, a word of his own invention, which appears to mean that he wanted to deflate it like a balloon, as he believed it was hollow.' F. Jellinek, *The Paris Commune of 1871*, Victor Gollancz: London, 1937, 283.

^{xvi} Fig. 4 shows the quite incredible funeral monument of the 'Famille Charles Pigeon' in Montparnasse cemetery. The tomb itself is constructed in the form of a life-size bedstead complete with gothic gravestone headboards in which the Pigeons have been laid to rest. The top of the monument consists of life-sized bronze sculptures of the couple in bed; Mrs. Pigeon laid out fully clothed under the sheets, staring heavenwards, and Mr. Pigeon sitting up in bed, pausing to contemplate the contents of the book he has been reading.



Fig. 4: Tomb of the family of Charles Pigeon, Montparnasse cemetery, Paris. Photograph Mark Rawlinson, 2006.



^{xvii} The references here are to a series of monuments that, in contrast to the idea of portrait-based statuary, epitomise attempts to transform poetic concepts or ideals into sculptural form. The Carpeaux fountain mentioned in the Luxembourg Gardens is the Observatoire fountain which includes the well-known sculpture *The Four Corners of the World*, depicting allegorical female representatives of Europe, Asia, America and Africa holding up a hollow globe. But it is not this kind of 'poetry' that seems to annoy Desnos as much as monuments that attempt to blend allegory and portraiture. It is harder to say what Desnos means by 'Paris pendant la Guerre' at the Carrousel, although the parentheses suggest that it is a nickname. In the light of the context of the idea of allegory, and the description of it as the 'height of stupidity' it could be Paul Aubé's giant (and lofty) *Monument to Léon Gambetta* which occupied much of the Carrousel at the time. It featured the hero of the siege of Paris with allegories of Strength and Truth either side at the base of a ziggurat crowned by a 'triumph of democracy' riding a winged lion and enjoyed renewed popularity during the First World War as a site for nationalist wreath-laying. The 'Mickiewicz at the place de l'Alma' is the monument to the Polish poet and patriot Adam Mickiewicz whose 'totem-Polish' monument (designed by Antoine Bourdelle and inaugurated in 1929) depicts its hero as the 'pilgrim of liberty' at the top of a column that also features an avenging angel (symbolizing Poland) which bisects it two thirds of the way up. For illustrations see Hargrove, *The Statues of Paris*, 106-109 and 280-285.

^{xviii} Fig. 5 shows the construction along the Boulevard Haussman in 1926, and gives a good sense of the towering presence of the Cadum baby to which Desnos refers. See A. Warnod, *Visages de Paris*, Firmin-Didot: Paris, 1930, 322.



Fig. 5: Harlingue, 'The new construction of the Boulevard Haussman. View of the grands boulevards during the works (1926),' taken from André Warnod, *Visages de Paris*, Firmin-Didot: Paris, 1930, 322.

^{xix} Radium was discovered by Marie and Pierre Curie in France in 1898, and then isolated by Marie Curie in 1911. Later the source of luminescent paint for glow-in-the-dark numbers on watch faces,



radium is brilliant white in its natural state but blackens on exposure to air: a process of oxidization linking it to bronze statues that often turn green.

^{xx} Marcel Sauvage's novel *La Fin de Paris* (discussed in note 8 above) took Desnos's suggestion a step further, illustrating it with a photomontage [fig. 6]. Sauvage begins his novel with a detailed account of the balloon floating away, as he puts it, 'coming free of its moorings and gently rising, loping from side to side above the crowds, the traffic and the houses. Two tons of stone, like a child's balloon in the Paris sky.' Sauvage, *La Fin de Paris*, 12. It is interesting to note here that Sauvage (who had, like Desnos, clearly seen the monument first hand), specifically describes the balloon as stone rather than bronze.



Fig. 6: Constantinesco, 'The stone balloon goes...', M. Sauvage, *La Fin de Paris*, Denoël et Steele: Paris, 1932.

^{xxi} The introduction of the first Hollywood 'talkies' in 1929 was a landmark in the cinematic experience that greatly affected Desnos and other contributors to *Documents* including both Bataille and Michel Leiris. Stills from *The Broadway Melody* and *The Hollywood Review of 1929* (which also contained hand-coloured sections including a spectacular musical finale) were reproduced in *Documents* (in black and white) and Leiris contributed an entry on 'talkies' to the critical dictionary. Although the analogy at work here (between bronze sculptures and waxworks) is very effective, quite what Desnos meant by films 'with relief' is hard to imagine.

^{xxii} In this note on the suitable subject-matter for future street sculptures (undoubtedly drawing on Duchamp's readymades and surrealist objects) Desnos pre-echoes the work of Claes Oldenburg. Best known for his giant gallery-based soft sculptures of the 1960s such as *Floorburger* (1962), *Soft Pay Telephone* (1963) and *Soft Switches* (1964), Oldenburg later produced monumental outdoor civic sculptures of everyday objects of the sort described by Desnos, including *Clothespin* (1976),



Binoculars (1991), *Corridor Pin, Blue* (1999) and *Trowel* (2001). It is remarkable that as with his references to the imaginary monument to the Cadum baby in its marble bath, Desnos alludes here to the conjunction or disjunction of symbolism and material (marble trains, gas lights and fountains). The idea of a statue to x-rays (invisible to the naked eye) takes this meditation to the same impossible degree as the subsequent evocation of radium as an ideally 'vibrant' sculptural component.

^{xxiii} Desnos's admiration for the 'less than figurable' aspect of Bartholdi's Monument to the National Defence at the porte des Ternes is perhaps more obviously explained by Boiffard's photograph than his reference to 'dust when the wind sweeps it.' Here Desnos is referring to what he calls the 'car crash' (the Monument to Leon Serpollet) at the Place Saint-Ferdinand. Serpollet, a pioneer of the motor industry in France, invented the steam-tricycle and his monument, a substantial affair in the centre of a modest circular *place*, attempts to depict its subject on an early precursor of the motor-car from which clouds of steam billow in all directions (a material contradiction emphasized by the flocks of pigeons that perch on it). The idea of the car-crash derives from a figure facing Serpollet from the front of the vehicle who looks very much as if he has been struck by it.

Simon Baker is Lecturer in Art History at the University of Nottingham. In 2006 he co-curated *Undercover Surrealism: Picasso, Miró, Masson and the Vision of Georges Bataille* at the Hayward Gallery in London. He has published widely on the relationship between surrealist representations and revolutionary politics, including the book *Surrealism, History and Revolution*, Peter Lang, 2007. He has also published on the legacies of surrealism in contemporary art, including the artists Melissa McGill and Jake and Dinos Chapman. His new research focuses on the photography of the devastation of France in the aftermath of the Great War.

