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Dario Gamboni, *Paul Gauguin: The Mysterious Centre of Thought*. London: Reaktion Books, 2014. Translated by Chris Miller. First published in French as *Paul Gauguin au "centre mystérieux de la pensée,"* 2013. 464 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. £35 (hb). ISBN 978-1-78023-368-0.

Review by Linda Goddard, University of St Andrews.

The title of Dario Gamboni's monograph immediately raises two central propositions about this much-discussed, but often misunderstood, artist. First, that he was an intellectual. This is a quality that scholars tend to resist seeing in any artist, but perhaps especially in one who was a self-declared "savage," and who rejected the "instruction of literary men."^[1] Second, that his art is mysterious—meaning, for Gamboni, that it is ambiguous or polysemic. Typically, writers on Gauguin have found the theorising in his correspondence and writings to be a blight on the intuitive visual power of his art, and unconnected to it. His interest in mystery, meanwhile, is taken for granted as part of his reputation as a symbolist painter, but it has proven remarkably difficult to resist neutralising it by attributing precise meanings to recurring symbols in his work.^[2] The great value of Gamboni's book is that it avoids these false directions. His two points of emphasis—patterns of thought, on the one hand, and visual ambiguity, on the other—connect in that Gauguin's intelligence is shown to be a material, as much as a verbal, one: the "mysterious centre of thought" in his art lies, in part, in the properties of media employed and is conveyed visually in the form of double or potential images.

The idea of the polyvalent image, and the viewer's role in the creation of meaning—addressed particularly in chapters one, "Seeing Double," and three, "You are what you see"—has been treated before by Gamboni in his book *Potential Images*.^[3] The earlier work's case study of Gauguin's *Above the Abyss*, 1888 (fig.58), in which the author finds a hidden self-portrait profile in the outline where the cliff edge abuts the sea, is satisfyingly developed here to include further evidence of the interest in the reversibility of figure and ground, and in the romantic projection of the self in nature, shared by the artist and his contemporaries. Crucially, Gamboni's analysis of such double images (he uncovers several fascinating examples over the course of the book) goes well beyond detective work. He embeds Gauguin's practice in a range of visual and intellectual sources, from the late nineteenth-century vogue for "picture puzzles" (in the vein of the rabbit-duck illusion made famous by Wittgenstein) and "natural" or "accidental" images (for instance, the way in which Gauguin allows the original form of a piece of wood to suggest the appearance of the object he is carving in his sculptures recalls the minimal adjustments made in prehistoric anthropomorphic "figure stones"), to contemporary theories of the psychology of vision, including the phenomenon of mistaken vision, and dream images.

Gamboni's argument relies on the reader's concurring, in the case of *Above the Abyss*, that the landscape *is* a self-portrait, that the oscillation between cliff face and facial profile is not just the fanciful whim of an individual observer. This could seem dogmatic. Happily, however, the effect in practice is not to fix the interpretation of the painting, but to open it out to myriad interconnections with different fields—literary, anthropological, artistic or scientific. This open-ended engagement with a variety of disciplines is entirely germane to Gauguin's own working practice. The thread that connects his various double images, as well as the cultural traditions to which he turns for inspiration, is an interest in

anthropomorphism or biomorphism, and in the relation between animate and inanimate forms. Gamboni convincingly grounds the *visual* bistability of Gauguin's artworks in the interest in duality and universalism that permeates the artist's writings as well as some of the artistic traditions (particularly Moche and Marquesan) with which he was most engaged. He demonstrates, through chapters on dreams and visions, on ceramics and sculptures in wood, on the theme of childhood, and on natural metaphors for creativity, how this duality informs Gauguin's use of materials, his primitivism, and his artistic identity.

Where previous monographs on Gauguin have tended to prioritise his painting, or else to deliver dedicated studies of, say, his sculpture or his prints, Gamboni--again, like Gauguin himself--extends his focus to a variety of media, and in particular gives fresh attention to the artist's fantastical pots and vases, exploring their connections with the themes and forms of the Peruvian pre-Hispanic ceramics that Gauguin associated with his "savage" childhood in Lima. He also unites the French and Polynesian periods, which are often treated separately. By employing a structure that is more thematic than chronological, Gamboni is able to insist upon the consistency of Gauguin's commitment to an art of the imagination, counteracting the typical division of his work into an Impressionist phase in France and a symbolist one in Polynesia. It is also worth noting that this is probably the only recent study of Gauguin to be published, essentially simultaneously, in both French and English, in Chris Miller's elegant translation. Another significant attraction of the book is therefore its comprehensive coverage: it takes a holistic approach to Gauguin's career without being predominantly biographical.[4]

It is significant that "the mysterious centre of thought" is Gauguin's own phrase, from a passage in his manuscript *Diverses choses (Various Things)* of 1896-98. There, he identifies it as an alternative focus to that adopted by the Impressionists, who concentrated their efforts "around the eye" and were therefore bound by the "shackles of verisimilitude" (p. 7). The fact that Gauguin's own words constitute the book's title is indicative of Gamboni's refreshing attitude to the artist's writing. He takes it seriously, without seeing it as programmatic or explanatory. For instance, the "parabolic" function of his art, in which surface appearances conceal hidden images perceptible to those who know how to look, is strengthened by reference to Gauguin's citation of biblical parables and the interest in dual-level communication expressed in his writings. Gamboni cites the original manuscripts, or reliable editions, and not, as is unfortunately standard practice, the heavily edited and reordered versions in the out-dated anthology of Gauguin's writings by Daniel Guérin.[5]

Of particular interest is the attention that he pays to the artist's use of titles and inscriptions. Drawing on research by Hiriata Millaud, he makes the case that Gauguin had a better understanding of the Tahitian language than has previously been assumed, and that he was attuned to its essential "ambiguity and polysemy" (p. 108).[6] Writing remains, in Gamboni's study, fundamentally a source of information about Gauguin's theoretical and cultural interests rather than an integral part of his artistic practice. His observation that Gauguin was interested in the material and visual qualities of language (p. 19) does not extend to a fuller consideration of the physical qualities of the manuscripts themselves, or their literary style. But then, it is the "'thinking in form' constituted by his works" (p. 56) that is Gamboni's declared focus. He demonstrates this concept of a visual intelligence at work with an intriguing series of paintings by Nabi artists that seem to pick up on the double images in Gauguin's art that went unnoticed by critics (pp. 156-62).

The reader will not necessarily gain from Gamboni's book a clear sense of the ways in which Gauguin scholarship has developed over the past three decades, or of the author's position in relation to feminist and postcolonial critiques of the artist. Classic revisionist accounts from the late 1980s and early 1990s by Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Griselda Pollock are not included in the bibliography.[7] Gamboni's general approach is more in line with the view of Gauguin as a "critical primitivist" first proposed by Stephen Eisenman.[8] He shows that Gauguin valorised aspects of Polynesian culture that the colonial rhetoric condemned as backward or naive, such as the belief in idols or the unity of spirit and matter (p.

257). To a greater extent than most previous studies, he traces the formal and thematic connections between Gauguin's ceramics and sculptures in wood, and the art of pre-Hispanic Peru and the Marquesas Islands, arguing that Gauguin's attitude to non-European cultures was both "remarkably open-minded and profoundly interested, in either sense" (p.10).

Towards the end of the book, he quotes a passage from the French writer Victor Segalen's unfinished novel *Le Maître-du-Jour*. The protagonist, a European artist called Gauguin, asks a group of Tahitians what they see when they look at a stretch of land that juts out into the sea. Stammering, they manage to remember the official term, "promontory." But the "Master" is angry. He urges them to forget the lessons they have been taught, and instead to perceive, as they would have been able to do before the arrival of the colonisers, how the outline resembles the head and spine of a drinking animal. He then brings this alive himself by drawing an image in the sand. The problematic nature of this scenario, in which the white man teaches the indigenous community how to see, and how to value their own cultural traditions, is not addressed. Gamboni prefers to interpret the episode as offering an "extraordinary lesson in vision" (p. 351). Segalen's scene does, of course, fit perfectly with Gamboni's emphasis on Gauguin as a perceptive viewer, and creator, of hidden images, and as an artist deeply interested in anthropomorphism. Citation, association and suggestion are central to Gauguin's art. By accruing the instances in which other artists and writers pick up on and reiterate Gauguin's "parabolic" way of seeing, Gamboni allows the centrality of "imaginative perception" in his work to emerge in a manner that befits the methods of the artist himself.

NOTES

[1] Paul Gauguin, letter of October 1902 to George-Daniel de Monfreid, in Annie Joly-Ségalen ed., *Lettres de Paul Gauguin à George-Daniel de Monfreid* (Paris: G. Falaize, 1950), p. 192.

[2] This was the approach of Henri Dorra, *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica and the Great Dilemmas of Humanity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), p. xv, who argued that "when a symbol appears to have a specific meaning in the context of one work, perhaps determined with the help of a comment written by the artist or an appropriate analogy, and the same symbol introduces the same meaning in another work [...] the symbol can be considered a 'good fit,' with universal relevance for the artist's work."

[3] Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).

[4] Dorra 2007 is also broad in scope, but his method is more biographical than Gamboni's.

[5] Paul Gauguin, *Oviri: écrits d'un sauvage*, ed. Daniel Guérin (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

[6] Gamboni refers to Hiriata Millaud, "Les Titres tahitiens de Gauguin," in *Ia Orana Gauguin*, exh. cat., Musée de Tahiti et des Iles - Te Fare Manaha, Puna'auia, Tahiti (Paris, 2003), pp. 81-90.

[7] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native," *Art in America* (July 1989): 119-128; 161; Griselda Pollock, *Avant-garde Gambits 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of Art History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993).

[8] Stephen F. Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), p. 201.

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