

Race Theory and Literature

Race Theory and Literature:

*Dissemination, Criticism,
Intersections*

Edited by

Pauline Moret-Jankus and Adam J. Toth

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INTRODUCTION

PAULINE MORET-JANKUS AND ADAM J. TOTH

The present volume, *Race Theory and Literature: Dissemination, Criticism, Intersections*, is based on the primary assumption that literature and racial theories have a peculiar, if not unique, interplay.

However, as Michael Banton pointed out, any reflection on “race” or “racial theories” encounters, from the very beginning, an obstacle: the co-existence of two modes of discourse. “One is the practical language of everyday life, employing what are sometimes called folk concepts. The other is a theoretical language in which scientists employ analytical concepts to designate things that the public know under other names.”¹ Colette Guillaumin also spoke of “theoretical uses” versus “banal uses”.² Indeed, “race” as a word is not endorsed by the scientific world anymore – although, following the latest research on DNA, recent debates and discussions have questioned this.³ The word is nonetheless still very common in everyday discourse, particularly in English.

The present volume seeks to explore how literature engages with the theoretical constructions of race. But what is a racial theory? And can we

¹ Michael Banton, *Racial Theories*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 3.

² Colette Guillaumin, « Usages théoriques et usages banals du terme *race* », in : *Mots* 33, 1992, p. 59-65.

³ See for instance the reactions to David Reich’s article “How Genetics Is Changing Our Understanding of ‘Race’”, *The New York Times*, 23rd March 2018. With the help of DNA sequencing technology, he argues, “we are learning that while race may be a social construct, differences in genetic ancestry that happen to correlate to many of today’s racial constructs are real.” URL:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/23/opinion/sunday/genetics-race.html>.

In France, the proposed removal of the word “race” in the Constitution sparked a series of debates too. See for instance Nancy Huston et Michel Raymond, “Sexes et races, deux réalités”, *Le Monde*, 17/05/2013; Alexis Jenni, “Sexes et races, deux illusions”, *Le Monde*, 24/05/2013; Stéphane Foucart, “Les “races humaines” existent ? Alors énumérez-les !”, *Le Monde*, 3/06/2013. The word has been effectively removed in 2018.

really speak of a “race theory” in the singular form? Certainly not. With Claude-Olivier Doron, we believe that “There is no unique matrix of race, just as there is no unique idea of race, and not even one unique *modern* idea of race”.⁴ Monogenism, polygenism, exclusion, racism, inequality...the expression of “race theory” is highly heterogeneous. Which one is the focus of this volume? We could, for instance, have chosen to focus on the polygenic theories in literature. We rather have decided to focus on all conscious construction efforts, all those that present themselves as “theories”, as scientific constructions—even if it may be very different from one each other.

We do not claim to give an exhaustive overview of the many issues at stake in racial theories in general, such as the postcolonial, or racism, nor to present a historiography of the links between race and literature, but rather seek to explore the very specific way in which literature and conceptions dealing with race interact. As has already been emphasized, “race” and “racial theory” are very labile concepts. Their definition varies, as well as their reception. Any study of any text needs, as a result, a thorough reassessment and redefinition of what race means. We could maybe even go as far as to say that there is as many race theories as there are texts. It would be, therefore, impossible—and to no avail—to make a list, a catalogue, of the different concepts of race for each author, book, literary phenomenon or movement. Not only would such a catalogue be endless, it would also miss the key point, which is, we argue, to find in which way literature and race theories specifically dialogue one with each other. We believe that literature is not a simple mediation for scientific or pseudo-scientific concepts; literature has its specific dynamics. We hope this serves our readers as a springboard into an exciting topic with untapped potential for scholarly conversation across languages, cultures, traditions, and fields of study.

Recent scholarship has started to examine the relationship between race theories and literature. Most of these studies, however, focus either solely on a specific literature, or on a specific period, or belong more to historiography than to an aesthetic analysis. Because our aim is to understand the general issues at stake regarding race theory and literature, it was for us logical to present a volume spanning several literary traditions; and this is a specificity of the present volume that extends from the eighteenth century into the twentieth. These literary traditions differ from a geographical and cultural point of view (French, British, German, and French-Lithuanian literatures),

⁴ “Il n’y a pas plus une unique matrice de la race qu’il n’y a une seule idée de race, pas même une seule idée *moderne* de race.” Claude-Olivier Doron, “Histoire épistémologique et histoire politique de la race”, *Archives de philosophie* 8, vol. 81, 2018, p. 488. This is our own translation.

but also from the perspective of their genre (prose fiction, poetry, ethnographic literature, and essays).

While presenting the specific potential of literature in the conception and dialogue around race, each chapter of this volume accounts for the *dissemination* of theories on race, the role and modalities of the literary texts in the diffusion and transformation of racial theories, for the *criticism* of these theories through literary texts that urge readers to read imaginatively, and for the *intersections* between the literary and other fields, especially when and where theories of race are cultivated and flourish within creative projects.

Émile Bordeleau-Pitre's "A "Childlike or *Savage* Way of Seeing": Rethinking the Avant-Garde Through Racial Discourse in *Documents* (1929-1930)" questions the status of one literary phenomenon: the ethnographical revue *Documents*, edited by Georges Bataille, and which has until now systematically been described as avant-gardist. Thanks to his analysis of the racial theories that appear in it, Bordeleau-Pitre redefines this alleged avant-gardism by proposing to rather conceive it in terms of oppositional discourse. This allows us to understand how a work can be both aesthetically avant-gardist (*Documents* as a vibrant literary laboratory and a protest against institutional realism) and ideologically arrièrè-gardist (the racial ideology it perpetuates).

Chen Tzoref-Ashkenazi's chapter, "Language and Race in Schlegel and Coleridge," examines how, within one literary movement (namely European Romanticism), the racial constructs can greatly differ. He focuses on the views of races of Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). Tzoref-Ashkenazi argues that the Romantic philosopher disavowed race as a biologically determined construct and more linguistically determined and that traces of Schlegel's position can be found in the works of the Romantic poet. In his readings and comparison of Schlegel's *Lectures on Universal History* (1805-6) and *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* (1808), as well as Coleridge's assorted writings, Tzoref-Ashkenazi delves into the intricate ways that language played as a defining characteristic of theorizing and understanding racial difference in Romanticism.

Pauline Moret-Jankus's chapter, "The Aesthetics of Race in Oscar V. de L. Milosz: Mysticism and Politics," emphasizes the fact that an author's race theory is rarely only "one theory". First of all, thoughts regarding race are often scattered in various texts. The texts that Moret-Jankus presents to the reader are works of Oscar Vladislav de L. Milosz (1877-1939): *Les Zborowski* (1913), folk tales and essays, and the poem "Psaume de l'Étoile

du Matin” (1936). She underscores the evolution in Milosz’s race thinking, linked to the political status of Lithuania. Before Lithuania’s independence, Milosz racial theory is that of a Lithuanian-Slavic race. It then evolves into a Lithuanian-Aryan race, and finally into a Lithuanian-Iberian/Hebrew race. Milosz’s example shows further that both elements (race theory and literature) are strongly intertwined: the conception of race appears to be influenced by the literary form itself.

Both Sally Hatch Gray and Adam J. Toth’s chapters emphasize literature as a privileged space for the criticism of racial theories: philosophical constructs can be questioned by the potential of the fictional text. Toth’s “Gestus anstatt Geist: Kafka, Benjamin, and Brecht against Dialectical Race Theory” addresses the relationship between Austria-Hungarian author Franz Kafka’s (1883-1924) “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” (“The Great Wall of China,” 1917/1930) and “Ein altes Blatt,” (“An Old Manuscript,” 1919), both of which are set in China, with theories about the Chinese developed in Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel’s (1770-1831) *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (*Lectures on the Philosophy of History*), given within the last decade of Hegel’s life. Toth contends that, although Kafka may not have been fully aware of Hegel’s lectures and their content, a discourse against Hegel’s positions on the Chinese can be identified in the characterizations of the Chinese as portrayed by Kafka. Toth further postulates that this discourse can be used to reconcile some of the tension between postcolonial theory, which has increasingly deferred to neoliberal capitalism in its praxis, and cultural Marxism, which has within its own ranks, doubled-down on Eurocentric positions within theoretical praxis at large.

Gray’s chapter, “On Specialization and the Dead Eye: Kant’s Race Theory and the Problem of Perception Illustrated in Kleist’s ‘Betrothal in Santo Domingo’” cross examines the literary representations of ethnic otherness in the short story “Verlobung in St. Domingo” (1811) by Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) with Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) various writings on race, with particular attention to Kant’s essays on race and featured within the larger, philosophic work. Gray argues that Kleist’s depiction of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) in the short story is a response to Kant’s concept of “*Wahrnehmung*,” which for Kant is the process of making sense of an experience. Kleist, according to Gray, grappled with this concept and used the short story to shed light on viewpoints of Kant’s critical project. The static, anthropological bases for human differences in race, as understood within Kant’s philosophical work, gets acted out by Kleist’s characters, revealing the arbitrariness of these categories, as Gray argues. Incidentally, this thesis departs from the typical

separation of the Immanuel Kant, who taught anthropology by day from the one who wrote philosophy in his off time, ushering in German Idealism, to suggest that those two men are not only one and the same, but that the materials with which the former taught were actively employed in the latter's writings. Gray argues further that it is this philosophical potential of "fantasy" that, as she puts it, led Kleist to literature.

Virginie Yvernault's chapter, "Voltaire and Buffon: The Controversy on Race and 'Human Varieties'. Anthropologies, Politics and Enlightenment Historiography," looks at the concept of race in the late eighteenth century and, especially, the way in which historians highlighted the debate on race between Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-1788) and Voltaire (1694-1788). In this chapter, Yvernault takes the opportunity to define Buffon's and Voltaire's anthropologies and by extension their views on race or "human varieties" expressed in other texts that otherwise have different theses and ideological outcomes. This chapter additionally traces the origins of the debate between Buffon and Voltaire through second-hand accounts of historians on their disagreements. Yvernault demonstrates that the focus critics took on race in their interpretation of literary phenomena (here the Buffon-Voltaire controversy) is always already ideologically charged. Her chapter proves how the analyses of the nineteenth-century historians are a mirror of their own worries, rather than an "authentic" image of the so-called "controversy". Thus, she importantly emphasizes that studies of race and literature cannot be led without studies of reception.

As the issue of race continues to be frequently divisive and polarizing for those wishing to grapple with the topic, we wish for our readers to look towards this volume with the aspiration of addressing the tension that exists within the theorization of race and race's literary representations. To this end, we want to launch a dynamic discussion of these relations between philosophical understandings of race and literary representations of race. We hope that this project will generate further discussions of the topics presented in other academic fields, such as in Asian Studies and Latin American Studies.

CHAPTER ONE

A “CHILDLIKE OR *SAVAGE* WAY OF SEEING”: RETHINKING THE AVANT-GARDE THROUGH RACIAL DISCOURSE IN *DOCUMENTS* (1929-1930)

ÉMILE BORDELEAU-PITRE

Documents, the first journal edited by Georges Bataille, was a short-lived publication, spanning a mere two years (1929-1930) and comprising a total of fifteen issues. A marginal enterprise that reached only a limited readership at the time of its publication, the magnitude of its subsequent critical reception may at first seem surprising. “Almost everything has been said about *Documents*,” writes Jean Jamin, “and much has been written about the journal, for better or for worse.”¹ And yet, the remarkably numerous published works on the subject of *Documents* are somewhat paradoxical: while they are characterized by a multiplicity of perspectives, this is coupled with a relative discursive homogeneity. Indeed, though descriptions of *Documents* have ranged from “a laboratory, a melting pot [or] a rebellion [to] a ‘frenzy,’” scholars have nevertheless been unanimous in their classification of the periodical as “avant-garde.”² Both reading and writing about *Documents* generally involve perpetuating a critical tradition that has designated its object of study as “avant-garde,” as though this designation were self-evident and required no further examination.

The journal’s eventual categorization as avant-garde (despite the fact that none of its contributors claimed such an affiliation in the pages of the journal) appears to have had a profound impact on the various studies on the topic. It is worth noting that when referring to *Documents*, the term

¹ Jean Jamin, “*Documents* revue. La part maudite de l’ethnographie,” *L’Homme* 39, no. 151 (1999): 262. In this chapter, unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

² Jamin, “*Documents* revue,” 262.

“avant-garde” is rarely used in a purely aesthetic sense. Largely described in terms of “transgression,” “provocation” and “subversion,”³ the journal is seen by scholars as having championed certain political characteristics of the avant-garde, embracing the radical and progressive ideas that supposedly characterized earlier avant-garde movements.⁴ A “place where the spectacle of difference was documented in all its varied aspects,” *Documents* made it possible, “more than any other avant-garde journal, to gain perspective on and take a step back from Western society’s most ingrained prejudices, whether logocentrism, ethnocentrism or anthropomorphism.”⁵ The publication “celebrated the diversity of human communities, [...] rituals and practices”;⁶ it could also be a weapon “in defense of what society [chose] to exclude or oppress as ‘formless.’”⁷ For these scholars, *Documents* was a legitimate tool in the struggle against colonialism and racism.

Nevertheless, several epistemological problems arise from this qualitative leap from an aesthetic classification of *Documents* to a political one. I would argue that while the “avant-garde” classification does emphasize certain aspects of the journal (such as its close ties to surrealism, its break with tradition and its use of montage), it also results in others being overlooked, particularly its relationship to the dominant ideology and its ambiguous theorization on the concept of race. In this chapter, I will attempt to

³ See in particular Mary Drach McInnes, “Taboo and Transgression: The Subversive Aesthetics of Georges Bataille and *Documents*” (PhD diss., Boston University, 1994), and Eric Robertson, “‘A Shameless, Indecent Saintliness.’ *Documents* (1929-31); and *Acéphale* (1936-39),” in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 247.

⁴ The first seed of the avant-garde (in the modern sense of the word), namely neo-impressionism in 1886, was closely associated with the anarchist movement (David Cottington, *The Avant-Garde: A Very Short Introduction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 98). These origins have inevitably colored certain interpretations of the avant-garde, which continue to see it as a left-wing revolutionary movement; see in particular Philippe Sers, *L’Avant-garde radicale: Le Renouveau des valeurs dans l’art du XX^e siècle* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2004). However, this idea of a culturally and politically militant (and primarily progressive) avant-garde is in fact partial and biased, incomplete and partisan (David Cottington, *The Avant-Garde*, 99; Stephen C. Foster, “Dada and the Constitution of Culture: (Re-)Conceptualising the Avant-Garde,” in *European Avant-Garde: New Perspectives*, ed. Dietrich Scheunemann [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008], 64).

⁵ Catherine Maubon, “*Documents*: la part de l’ethnographie,” *Les Temps Modernes* 54, no. 605 (December 1998 - January-February 1999): 54.

⁶ Robertson, “‘A Shameless, Indecent Saintliness,’” 263.

⁷ Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Ethnics of Surrealism,” *Transition*, no. 78 (1998): 110.

demonstrate how *arrière-garde* (rearguard) and *avant-garde* are not necessarily opposing categories. Moving beyond the “temporal” interpretation to which these concepts are often confined, I propose instead a political, sociological and materialist interpretation of the *avant-garde* and *arrière-garde* categories. Central to this interpretation is the issue of race relations, and it is through this lens that we can shed light on the paradoxical *arrière-gardism* of a literary *avant-garde*.

***Documents* and the Break with Surrealism**

From the beginning, the original subheading of *Documents*—“Doctrines Archéologie Beaux-Arts Ethnographie”⁸—served as an indication of the publication’s particular eclecticism, which made it difficult to classify the journal according to conventional categories. Featuring texts by contributors from both cultural circles (for the most part dissident surrealists) and academia (archeologists, ethnographers, musicologists, numismatists and more), the journal was dedicated to contemporary art as well as recent archeological and ethnographical discoveries. Essays on popular culture were also published as of the fourth issue.

Documents emerged during a period of intense activity among modernist and art journals. In his study of Parisian art journals between 1905 and 1940, Yves Chevrefils Desbiolles writes that “the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s were [...] a time of exceptional editorial creativity in which journals of all aesthetic and ideological leanings played an essential role.”⁹ In his view, these journals “were both the trigger that brought about the aesthetic shift of our time and the authority that validated the underlying values of this revolution.”¹⁰ During this period, surrealism became one of the dominant *avant-garde* positions, championed by those such as André Breton in the journals *Littérature* (1919-1924), *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924-1929) and *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (1930-1933).¹¹ By contrast, the *Nouvelle Revue française* (1909-1943) shifted its editorial approach to straddle classic and contemporary, acknowledging surrealist ideas while

⁸ As of the fourth issue, “Doctrines” was replaced by “Variété.”

⁹ Yves Chevrefils Desbiolles, *Les Revues d’art à Paris 1905-1940* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 2014), 25.

¹⁰ Chevrefils Desbiolles, 25.

¹¹ Raymond Spiteri, “‘What Can the Surrealists Do?’ *Littérature* (1919-24); *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924-9); and *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (1930-3)” in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 243.

also attempting to downplay their significance.¹² However, as Breton's brand of surrealism threatened to become a club governed by strict rules of admission, and expulsion followed expulsion, another type of dissidence emerged from the surrealist avant-garde itself. In these turbulent times, change rarely came about harmoniously or incrementally,¹³ and it was amid a tumultuous break with surrealism that *Documents* first appeared on the journal scene.

Documents was financed by Georges Wildenstein, who was already the editor of *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. Wildenstein likely saw the publication's initial mandate in rather institutional terms: the newly-founded journal would be a version of the *Gazette* which would incorporate primitive art and assign it economic value. Presumably, it would also compete with Christian Zervos' *Cahiers d'art*, a highly successful journal at the time.¹⁴ Wildenstein, who owned one of the foremost commercial galleries in Paris, intended the *Gazette* to be an intersection between learning and commerce, art dealers and academics; it is highly likely that he harbored similar aims when he agreed to provide the necessary funds to establish *Documents*.¹⁵ The journal's original editorial board was comprised mainly of museum professionals, including Jean Babelon (Cabinet des Médailles at the Bibliothèque Nationale), Georges Contenau (Musée du Louvre), Georges Henri Rivière (Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris) and Paul Rivet (described as a professor at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle). Also included in the list of contributors were three art historians and recognized members of the establishment, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl and Pietro Toesca, although they did not in fact contribute any articles to the journal.¹⁶

The gulf between these hypothetical commercial ambitions and the reality of *Documents*, however, was rapidly made apparent by the contrast between the journal's content and advertising. At the end of each issue, an

¹² Anne-Rachel Hermetet, "Modern Classicism. *La Nouvelle Revue française* (1909-43) and *Commerce* (1924-32)," in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 109-110.

¹³ Peter Brooker, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. by Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 30.

¹⁴ Dawn Ades, *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), 229.

¹⁵ Dawn Ades, "Beaux-Arts," in *Undercover Surrealism*, ed. Dawn Ades and Simon Baker (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 52.

¹⁶ *Documents* 1, no. 2 (Paris: Jean-Michel-Place, 1991), not paginated.

entire page was devoted to promoting a collection “dedicated to the Great Artists and Great Art Schools of France” and directed by the journal’s financier. When this advertisement is read in the context of the journal, it cannot help but highlight (likely despite its creators’ intentions) the extent of the rift that had emerged between Georges Wildenstein—specifically his cultural nationalism and reverence for “great” art—and what the *Documents* project eventually became: a journal at war not only with classical aestheticism, but with idealism as well. And yet, our knowledge of the nature of the project is entirely second-hand. In what is probably the letter most frequently cited by historians to define *Documents*, Pierre d’Espezel¹⁷ wrote to Georges Bataille on 15 April 1929:

From what I have seen so far, the title you have chosen for the journal hardly seems justified, except in the sense that it “Documents” your state of mind. That is a lot, but it is not quite enough. We really must return to the spirit that inspired the initial project for the journal, when you and I spoke about it to Mr. Wildenstein.¹⁸

This letter has influenced many an interpretation of *Documents*; if the journal is indeed the sum of many “documents” on Georges Bataille’s state of mind, it becomes tempting to see it as the work of Bataille alone, rather than that of a community of contributors. And yet, to understand the complexity of the tensions within *Documents*, it is important to emphasize the collective nature of the publication and to identify its various breaks: a break with a certain idea of the “art establishment,” as exemplified by the dispute between Bataille and Wildenstein; a break with two avant-garde artistic movements, surrealism (in which Michel Leiris, Robert Desnos, Jacques-André Boiffard, Roger Vitrac and Jacques Baron were all involved to varying degrees) and—to a lesser extent—German expressionism (Carl Einstein);¹⁹ and a break with many contributors’ fields of study, including archeology (Georges Bataille studied numismatics at l’École des chartes), art history (Carl Einstein received classical training as an art historian under

¹⁷ One of Georges Bataille’s colleagues at the Cabinet des Médailles, d’Espezel was himself the editor of several specialized journals (all institutional in form) including *Aréthuse* and *Cahiers de la république des lettres*, in which Bataille’s first articles were published. It was also d’Espezel who put Georges Bataille and Georges Wildenstein in contact and served as an intermediary between them.

¹⁸ Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes I. Premiers écrits 1922-1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 648.

¹⁹ For a nuanced look at German expressionism as avant-garde and its limits, see Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde. Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Heinrich Wölfflin) and ethnography (such as Marcel Griaule, André Schaeffner, Georges Henri Rivière and Michel Leiris, who were critical of the aestheticizing side of the discipline as it was defined at the turn of the century).

There are very few primary sources that describe the journal's daily operations or division of labor, a fact which contributes to the mystery—if I may say so—surrounding *Documents*, as well as to speculation about the relationships between contributors and the extent of their contributions to the publication. Various journal entries written by Michel Leiris and published years later provide his personal perspective on the concerns surrounding the organization of the periodical;²⁰ however, his article paying tribute to Bataille—and published more than thirty years after the journal's final issue—paints an even more explicit portrait of *Documents* and the tensions between its contributors:

The contributors came from many different backgrounds, with writers of the avant-garde—most of them ex-surrealists gathered around Bataille—rubbing shoulders with representatives from a variety of disciplines (art history, musicology, archeology, ethnology, etc.), some of them members of the Institut de France or high-level professionals in museums or libraries. It was a truly “impossible” mixture, less because of the diversity of the disciplines—and of the *indisciplines*—than because of the contrast between the men themselves, some of them very conservative-minded [...], while the others [...] strove to use the journal as a war machine against received ideas.²¹

***Documents* and the Limits of Its Avant-Garde Status**

Since the publication of *Documents*, scholars have generally classified the journal as “avant-garde,” although none of its creators ever described it as such. In her study examining the network of literary periodicals in immediate post-war Belgium, Daphné de Marneffe refers to this phenomenon as “*clichage*” (“stereotyping”).²² Through critical consensus, *Documents*, a periodical of “ruptures,” has become known as an “avant-garde” publication; and yet, with its specific and distinct temporality, it is

²⁰ See in particular Michel Leiris, *Journal 1922-1989* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 142, 188-189 and 200.

²¹ Michel Leiris, “De Bataille l'impossible à l'impossible *Documents*,” in *Brisées* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 293.

²² Daphné de Marneffe, “Entre modernisme et avant-garde: Le réseau des revues littéraires de l'immédiat après-guerre en Belgique (1919-1922)” (PhD diss., Université de Liège, 2007), 27-29.

difficult to reduce a journal to a single encompassing characteristic, vague though it may be. Periodicals “evolve at every level,” both as a “textual reality” (with regard to its format, page count, and publishing frequency, “based on its relationship to the public and to current events”) and “in terms of its content” (“conception, development, and the removal of sections, based on the interests it displays and the way in which it positions itself vis-à-vis different cultural and political spheres”).²³ In contrast to this constant evolution, *clichage* describes the phenomenon whereby researchers classify “a journal in terms of ‘external’ criteria, such as aesthetic orientation or political leanings, which places the journal in artistic (or literary) and political spheres from the outset.”²⁴ Often the “object of a retrospective illusion,” the avant-gardism of a publication can be read as a synecdoche whereby a part is used to represent the whole, preserving “the journal in a state that is frequently only temporary [and] eternalizing either the starting point or the culmination of a process.”²⁵ This would appear to be the approach used by the majority of scholars to categorize *Documents*.

Attributing *Documents* as a “work”—either explicitly or implicitly—to the “young avant-garde writer Bataille of 1930”²⁶ and reducing his motives to a struggle between idealism and materialism ignores the collective reality of the journal and the heterogeneity of its contents.²⁷ Furthermore, it imposes an artificial coherence on the periodical, a coherence which has made the avant-garde *clichage* of *Documents* possible for researchers, starting with James Clifford’s 1981 article on “ethnographic surrealism” in *Documents*.²⁸ However, *Documents* is neither exclusively the work of Bataille, nor a unified work; rather, it maintains a complex relationship to the avant-garde through its skillfully sustained dialogism (in the Bakhtinian sense of the word), which is magnified by its very medium, the journal. Like the novel, which Bakhtin sees as a system organized by an author in which various types of speech collide and multiple voices are informed by one another,²⁹ *Documents* as a journal is the *literal* product of converging voices of multiple authors (often with diverging viewpoints) and the juxtaposition

²³ Marneffe, “Entre modernisme et avant-garde,” 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁶ Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris: Macula, 1995), 203.

²⁷ Robertson, ““A Shameless, Indecent Saintliness,”” 245.

²⁸ James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (October 1981).

²⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981), 371.

of paintings and photographs by multiple artists (without regard to consistency of period, genre or movement). It is impossible to get a sense of *Documents* as a whole by studying individual fragments of discourse and the way in which each one articulates its own voice, or the manner in which a subjective belief system or general opinion is diverted.³⁰ Instead, the sense of *Documents* as a whole arises from the tensions—and even open conflicts—between texts and images, which reveal a wide variety of scenes of enunciation and paradoxically demonstrate a kind of unity through juxtaposition. *Documents* provided an opportunity to bring together—to quote Leiris once more—this “truly ‘impossible’ mixture”; as a journal, it was a stage that united, through the “contrast between the men themselves,” this unlikely “diversity of disciplines—and of *indisciplines*.”³¹

Has the characterization of *Documents* as avant-garde made it difficult to assess certain aspects of the journal? Has it led to certain characteristics, contradictions or paradoxes being overlooked? Most importantly, is *Documents* truly an avant-garde journal? Under what conditions is it possible to classify it as such? When one considers the numerous papers that have been written about the publication, it is difficult to provide a satisfactory response to these questions, at least without reiterating commonly accepted assumptions. Almost none of the studies on *Documents* address the concept of avant-garde from a theoretical standpoint, nor do they examine the relationship between avant-garde theorization and the journal. Aside from examining the publication’s origins (the men behind *Documents* were mainly dissident surrealists) and its use of specific techniques (such as montage), the rare studies that do touch on the concept of avant-garde do not provide a systematic analysis of *Documents*, instead adopting a partial perspective and addressing a specific aspect of the journal.³² Most significantly, they do not propose to question—or at least problematize—the category itself.

Nevertheless, this type of interpretation, which focuses solely on the idea of rupture, has many weaknesses; after all, as Rosalind E. Krauss argues, innovation and repetition are interdependent in art, or even the condition for

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 305.

³¹ Michel Leiris, “De Bataille l’impossible,” 293.

³² See Rosalind E. Krauss, “No More Play,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986); Mara de Gennaro, “The World ‘Outside of Fiction’: Georges Bataille and Surrealist Photography Sculpture,” in *European Avant-Garde: New Perspectives*, ed. Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008).

one another.³³ The antagonistic stance of *Documents*' avant-garde towards tradition and the public,³⁴ its "oppositional discourse"³⁵ and its "aesthetic extremism," all embodied by its "artistic negativism,"³⁶ unfolded within a framework shaped—rather paradoxically—by conformism. The journal was, after all, financed by Georges Wildenstein, quintessential heir to a historical artistic tradition. In this respect, *Documents* differed greatly from previous surrealist and abstract art journals, which were largely self-financed.³⁷ Pierre d'Espezel's letter to Bataille has often been used as evidence of a break with this model, and yet scholars frequently neglect to examine the ways that *Documents* served commercial and institutional interests.³⁸ Yve-Alain Bois describes the unoriginal manner in which *Documents* embodies the "modernist paradigm"; in his view, the "most immediate" and "institutional" explanation is that "regardless of the journal's radicality, and despite its financial backer Wildenstein's indulgence of its whims, art still remained an exclusive domain in *Documents* (and it was art that kept the journal going)."³⁹ A peculiar cabinet of curiosities, *Documents* was to some extent heir to a periodical tradition that predates the modernist movement with which *Documents* is generally associated. Indeed, the encyclopedic convergence of international scientific, literary and artistic knowledge in periodicals goes back to the Enlightenment.⁴⁰ The advertisements, which announced the publication of *Documents* ("Truly

³³ Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 166.

³⁴ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 30.

³⁵ Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, 49-73.

³⁶ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 116-120 and 140.

³⁷ Chevretil Desbiolles, *Les Revues d'art à Paris*, 96 and 115-116.

³⁸ "One only needs to flip through the *Documents* collection in chronological order to see that after a cautious start, emphasis was placed on articles that appeared to demonstrate the original open-mindedness of a publication which, for the most part, was not able to avoid the usual expectations of an art journal." (Michel Leiris, "De Bataille l'impossible," 294).

³⁹ Yve-Alain Bois, "Kitsch," in *L'Informe: Mode d'emploi*, ed. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996), 108.

⁴⁰ *Le Magazin encyclopédique* (1795-1816), which covered "Letters, Science and Art," was "the repository for all discoveries made in France and abroad"; the *Nouvelles de la République des lettres et des arts* (1778-1788) sought to "make all scientific, literary and artistic objects known in countries with which it is possible to build a relationship," welcoming submissions "in German, English, Spanish, Italian, Latin and French" (Chevretil Desbiolles, *Les Revues d'art à Paris*, 31).

irritating works of art that have not yet been classified, and some eclectic productions overlooked until now”),⁴¹ as well as the heterogeneous nature of the works featured in the journal, also bear a strong resemblance to another journal, *Cabinet de l'amateur et de l'antiquaire*, from the nineteenth century:

amid items of all kinds and qualities—the only requirement being that they must be different from those of our time and country—take pleasure in inhaling the faint historical or ethnographic scent that they emit, collect enamels and ivories from the Middle Ages, Voltaire’s walking sticks and the [...] weapons of American savages.⁴²

This interest in the “relationship between art, science and primitive art” was already present in Gabriel Mourey’s *Les Arts de la Vie* as well.⁴³ While ethnography was not a feature of the journal, the “renewal of art” through science echoes the texts of *Documents* in many respects. Closer in time to *Documents*, *La Révolution surréaliste* (first published in 1924, and inspired by Éditions Masson’s *La Nature*) had already seized upon the idea of a so-called avant-garde journal mimicking the austere editorial structure of scientific journals.⁴⁴ It is also interesting to note that the editorial board of *Documents* included several museum curators. While the Georges-Henri Rivière and Paul Rivet’s work at the Musée du Trocadéro (and subsequently at the Musée de l’Homme) admittedly allowed for fewer freedoms than other contemporary exhibitions, the fact remains that these *Documents* contributors pursued commercial and rationalistic aims and promoted the ideology of dominant groups at the former museum; most notably, they successfully laid claim to “the monopoly of genuine discourse over the objects of Others.”⁴⁵

This leads us to a closer examination of the publication’s relationship to the dominant ideology, which raises questions about its oppositional discourse. Studying *Documents* as a monograph or through the lens of individual contributors (examining texts by Bataille, Leiris or Einstein in insolation, for example) results in a fundamental aspect of the journal being

⁴¹ Michel Leiris, “De Bataille l’impossible,” 293.

⁴² Chevretil Desbiolles, *Les Revues d’art à Paris*, 40.

⁴³ Catherine Méneux, “*Les Arts de la Vie* de Gabriel Mourey ou l’illusion d’un art moderne et social,” in *Les Revues d’art: Formes, stratégies et réseaux au XX^e siècle*, ed. Rossella Froissart Pezone and Yves Chevretil Desbiolles (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2011), 61.

⁴⁴ Chevretil Desbiolles, *Les Revues d’art à Paris*, 92.

⁴⁵ Benoît de l’Estoile, *Le Goût des Autres: De l’Exposition coloniale aux Arts premiers* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), 266.

overlooked: the collective behind it. When the collective is overlooked, a more in-depth examination of its interests becomes impossible. And yet, numerous examples from art history demonstrate that the interests of a group of producers are highly relevant for researchers, perhaps even more so in the case of so-called avant-garde groups, whose breaks with tradition often receive more scholarly attention than their conservatism.⁴⁶ In this respect, *Documents* serves as a case in point. Studies on subject of *Documents* tend to focus on its anticonformism, overlooking the fact that the group behind it occupied a triply dominant position due to its members' class, sex and race. The homogeneity of the group is not unusual: "the objective affinity that unconsciously unites the practices of one group and pits them against those of another can be explained [...] by the fact that the affinity of habitus between agents is, in practice, the basic principle behind groups."⁴⁷ What is more surprising is the near-absence of reflexivity among scholars on the topic of this triple domination as it relates to the journal's avant-garde status. In the following sections, I will specifically examine the issue of race relations in *Documents* before proposing another way of looking at the relationship between avant-garde and arrière-garde in the publication.

Intratextual and Extratextual Racial Discourse

Although this fact has largely been overlooked by scholars, *Documents* was a scene of enunciation for one race in particular: the White race.⁴⁸ While more than one contributor seems to have subscribed to the idea of

⁴⁶ One example is the case of the New York School and abstract expressionists. In *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), art historian Ann Gibson shows how these artists contributed to universalizing—through their work and through interpretations of it—"a single identity position": "white male heterosexuality." According to Gibson, this consisted in "subsum[ing] other identities" (of women and so-called primitive societies) within their "single transcendent one."

⁴⁷ Anna Boschetti, *Sartre et "Les Temps Modernes"* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), 199.

⁴⁸ In this chapter, I use the term "race" as defined by Colette Guillaumin in *L'idéologie raciste* (Paris: Mouton et Co, 1972). I am not interested in establishing the existence of physical race or not, as society's "perception of race does not give it any importance: it creates this reality unconsciously to the same extent that it does consciously" (Guillaumin, *L'idéologie raciste*, 8). I am more concerned with the sociological perspective on race, specifically the way in which it divides society into groups and establishes power relationships between them. Race is thus the product of racialization in the same way that the man/woman binary is a product of "sexing": see Monique Wittig, *La Pensée straight* (Paris: Amsterdam, 2013).

Documents as an anticolonial enterprise⁴⁹—as have many of those who have studied it—the assertion that the journal would go so far as to attack the interests of its own racial group is an overly generous one. In addition to their work on *Documents*, several of the journal’s contributors were involved in organizing the Mission Dakar-Djibouti, notably funded by the Ministère des Colonies.⁵⁰ The organizers of the expedition—which was announced with much fanfare in a text written by Michel Leiris for the journal’s seventh issue⁵¹—made no secret of being very much in line with the spirit of the 1931 Colonial Exhibition.⁵² In his “Summary Instructions for Collectors of Ethnographic Objects,” written shortly before the expedition, Leiris paints a humanist portrait of colonization and places ethnography at the service of the colonial enterprise:

Not only is ethnography invaluable for studying prehistoric man—recreating his environment—as well as modern man, it makes a vital contribution to colonial methods, informing legislators, government officials and settlers about the customs, beliefs, laws and techniques of the indigenous populations, making a more fruitful and humane collaboration with the latter group possible, and bringing about a more rational exploitation of natural resources.⁵³

This was echoed in the pages of *Documents*, where the contributors’ views on issues of race were much more ambiguous than they claimed. Perpetuating the illusion of a savage vision of the world, a “way of seeing” shared by “primitives” and children,⁵⁴ these individuals saw ethnography as

⁴⁹ See for example Marcel Griaule, “Un coup de fusil,” in *Documents* 2, no. 1 (Paris: Jean-Michel-Place, 1991), 405-414.

⁵⁰ Anonymous, “Communiqué de presse,” in *Cahier Dakar-Djibouti*, ed. Éric Jolly and Marianne Lemaire (Paris: Les Cahiers, 2015), 82.

⁵¹ Michel Leiris, “L’œil de l’ethnographe,” in *Documents* 2, no. 1 (Paris: Jean-Michel-Place, 1991), 405-414.

⁵² Anonymous, “Communiqué de presse,” 82.

⁵³ Anonymous, “Instructions sommaires pour les collecteurs d’objets ethnographiques,” in *Cahier Dakar-Djibouti*, ed. Éric Jolly and Marianne Lemaire (Paris: Les Cahiers, 2015), 173. Although these instructions were written anonymously, Georges Henri Rivière’s correspondence reveals that Michel Leiris was indeed the author. See Anonymous, “Instructions sommaires pour les collecteurs d’objets ethnographiques,” 169.

⁵⁴ Georges Bataille, “Cheminée d’usine,” in *Documents* 1, no. 6 (Paris: Jean-Michel-Place, 1991), 332.

the savior of heterogeneity.⁵⁵ Denis Hollier describes a meeting between *Documents* contributor Marcel Griaule and a painter of Ethiopian origin who was studying painting in Paris, Agnagnahou Engeda.⁵⁶ While this painter seems to have inspired the future ethnographer's passion for studying Ethiopian society, his work never appeared in *Documents*, as it was most likely incompatible with the journal's exaltation of difference and the *informe* (formless). Nor were the men behind *Documents* interested in the perspective of the societies being studied⁵⁷; they were much more concerned with primitivism and its "job" as a weapon against idealism and humanism in Western society, in a philosophical sense.⁵⁸ In my view, we must also study this largely neglected aspect of the publication in order to examine the group behind *Documents* and their break with the surrealism of André Breton, whose anticolonial views—particularly through his staunch opposition to the 1931 Colonial Exhibition—were much more clearly articulated.

The conformist nature of this racial discourse has not prevented certain scholars from arguing that the rhizome of surrealists and ethnologists behind *Documents* came together "to denounce ethnocentrism, racism and colonialism."⁵⁹ Brent Hayes Edwards has also revealed the way in which certain critical readings repeat these ideas involuntarily, using the categories associated with primitivism in *Documents*.⁶⁰ The scholars who become so familiar with the texts they study often come to emulate the writers they so admire, sometimes even consciously. This is particularly true of articles about Georges Bataille's work on *Documents*. In particular, John Westbrook calls attention to the attitudes of several self-proclaimed postmodernist and poststructuralist theorists, who argue that it is only

⁵⁵ Denis Hollier, "The Question of Lay Ethnography," in *Undercover Surrealism*, ed. Dawn Ades and Simon Baker (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 63.

⁵⁶ Hollier, "Ethiopia," in *Undercover Surrealism*, ed. Dawn Ades and Simon Baker (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 140-141.

⁵⁷ Simon Baker, "Variety (Civilizing 'Race')," in *Undercover Surrealism*, ed. Dawn Ades and Simon Baker (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 67.

⁵⁸ Krauss, "No More Play," 64.

⁵⁹ Jacques Meunier, "Les pois sauteurs du Mexique," in *Écrits d'ailleurs: Georges Bataille et les ethnologues*, ed. Dominique Lecoq and Jean-Luc Lory (Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1987), 209. The author also makes the mistake of likening the dissident group behind *Documents* to André Breton's movement, claiming that its members called for the colonies to be evacuated during the Colonial Exhibition. As we have seen previously, the texts of *Documents* were actually in line with the aims of the 1931 Colonial Exhibition, as revealed by plans for the Mission Dakar-Djibouti.

⁶⁰ Edwards, "The Ethics of Surrealism," 110-111.

possible to read Bataille with Bataille and write about Bataille in his own words—using his own categories.⁶¹

In light of the “objective facts” mentioned previously, one can understand the epistemological inconsistencies of these interpretations, most of them stemming from the unnuanced qualitative leap from aesthetic avant-garde to political avant-garde. One of the major issues raised by such interpretations of *Documents* is the failure to problematize the category at issue. Evoking as it does a “language of rupture”⁶² with particularly “antagonistic” methods in cultural and academic circles,⁶³ the avant-garde is seen by literary critics—certainly since the latter half of the twentieth century—as an artistic category that encompasses “all the new schools” and whose aesthetic agenda is defined “by [its] rejection of the past and by the cult of the new.”⁶⁴ Even now, it is rare to examine the concept of the artistic avant-garde as distinct from the political avant-garde.⁶⁵ It is thus clear that in texts that herald *Documents* as a tool to combat racism and ethnocentrism, the term “avant-garde” is never clearly defined; at most, it is described according to characteristics traditionally associated with historical avant-garde movements (such as the use of montage or resistance to the norm). And yet, both the racial discourse present in *Documents* and the scholarly texts that proclaim its “progressivism” demonstrate the need for a common aesthetic and political base on which to define the concept of “avant-garde.” To do so, I suggest that we consider the avant-garde not in terms of time (or newness), but in terms of how it relates to different sites of struggle. In short, I propose that we consider the avant-garde in terms of its oppositional discourse.

Avant-Garde and Oppositional Discourse

In order to appreciate the ambiguity of *Documents*’ avant-gardism, particularly given the inconsistencies of its racial discourse, two steps are necessary. First, we must nuance the polarization between avant-garde and

⁶¹ John Westbrook, “Reinventions of the Literary Avant-garde in Interwar France: *Documents* Between Surrealism and Ethnography” (PhD diss., New York University, 2001), 69-70.

⁶² Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁶³ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 30-40.

⁶⁴ Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 117.

⁶⁵ See in particular Vincent Kaufmann, “L’arrière-garde vue de l’avant,” in *Les Arrière-gardes au XX^e siècle: L’autre face de la modernité esthétique*, ed. William Marx (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2004), 23-35.

arrière-garde, as William Marx invites us to do;⁶⁶ after all, according to its original military usage, the avant-garde (vanguard) and arrière-garde (rearguard) worked in partnership within the same army. Using this original definition as a starting point, I propose to shed light on the common goals shared by these “factions” when they are no longer seen as diametrically opposed. Second, we must question a common preconceived notion about the avant-garde (and arrière-garde) that is rooted in the metaphorical sense of the term, which holds that avant-garde is synonymous with new. I suggest that we rethink the notions of avant-gardism and arrière-gardism: no longer should they primarily be framed in terms of the “problem of time,”⁶⁷ or the illusion of specific time (namely progress); nor should they invariably be seen as the “prelude to a future revolution in the arts”⁶⁸ or as a “literal origin, a beginning from ground zero [or] a birth.”⁶⁹ In other words, we should no longer think of avant-garde and arrière-garde according to the temporal concepts of prospection and retrospection.⁷⁰ I propose instead to decentre this idealistic reading (based on the artists’ notion of their place in an imaginary chronology) and move towards a more political reading (based on the struggles and conflicts at the heart of avant-garde and arrière-garde works and within their social context). Returning once more to the original military sense of the terms arrière-garde and avant-garde, which implicitly conveys the idea of a battle, we can infer that both arrière-garde and avant-garde works are “fighting” arts; this is as true of the first category as it is of the second. They share common aims and explore views, objectives and uncharted territory. We therefore shift from a “temporal value” to a “spatial value,” in contrast to the “orthodox narrative” of art history.⁷¹ I am therefore not so much interested in reflecting on time as I am in specifically examining the struggle for discursive legitimacy in various avant-garde theories, a struggle that revolves around the notion of oppositional discourse.

⁶⁶ William Marx, “Introduction. Penser les arrière-gardes,” in *Les Arrière-gardes au XX^e siècle: L’autre face de la modernité esthétique*, ed. William Marx (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2004), 9.

⁶⁷ Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 9.

⁶⁸ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 72.

⁶⁹ Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” 157.

⁷⁰ See in particular Laurent Mattiussi, “Rétrospection et prospection, de Mallarmé à Heidegger,” in *Les Arrière-gardes au XX^e siècle: L’autre face de la modernité esthétique*, ed. William Marx (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2004), 37-49.

⁷¹ Antoine Compagnon, *Les Cinq Paradoxes de la modernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 54.

If avant-garde works do indeed form oppositional discourses and seek to overthrow norms, then tradition should no longer be viewed as a relic of the past, but as the product of a power relationship between dominant and dominated groups. For example, the “institution art,” as conceptualized by Peter Bürger,⁷² is not simply a historical monument whose very foundations must be destroyed to make way for the “new”; rather, it is a site of struggle for aesthetic dominance. In this conceptualization, being part of the avant-garde—in other words, challenging an established and dominant norm—necessarily involves occupying a dominated position in a given field, a position which one seeks to change (although the situation is not necessarily one of total and unequivocal domination). On the other hand, being part of the arrière-garde—in other words, seeking to preserve an established and dominant norm—involves occupying a dominant position in a given field (again, this situation can be nuanced). The latter position is not a passive one; it is just as “active” as the avant-garde position, in that it is the product of a struggle and both perpetuates and reaps the benefits of its power relationship. For this reason, when analyzing *Documents*, I do not see the avant-garde as an explicit means to categorize itself as a group.⁷³ As mentioned previously, there is no manifesto or letter of intent in *Documents* that claims an affiliation with the avant-garde. It should also be noted that the avant-garde and arrière-garde positions are neither inherent nor given. Being avant-garde does not in itself entail embodying specific characteristics (such as experimentalism, the rejection of orthodoxy, or originality of approach); instead, its relationship to them evolves over time. Additionally, since power relationships play out in many different fields and on many different fronts, it is possible—and perhaps even probable—for a work to be both avant-garde (on one front) and arrière-garde (on another), and to occupy both a dominated position in one field and a dominant position in another.⁷⁴

⁷² Peter Bürger, *Théorie de l'avant-garde*, trans. Jean-Pierre Cometti (Paris: Questions théoriques, 2013).

⁷³ This mirrors Truffaut's article in which he describes “a certain tendency on the part of French cinema,” which made up the cinematic arrière-garde, to tacitly position itself as the avant-garde of French cinema. See Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, “Arrière-gardes et Nouvelle Vague: Le cinéma ‘qualité France,’” in *Les Arrière-gardes au XX^e siècle: L'autre face de la modernité esthétique*, ed. William Marx (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2004).

⁷⁴ A field “can be defined as a network, or a configuration of objective relationships between positions. These positions are objectively defined in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their current and potential situations (situs) in the structure of the distribution of various types of power (or capital), the possession of which commands access to specific

When we consider the multiple perspectives and power relationships underlying the concepts of “tradition” and “rupture,” what seems to be a contradiction (being part of the avant-garde and arrière-garde simultaneously) is in fact entirely possible; an avant-garde discourse (against a dominant group in the aesthetic field, for example) can also be used to support an arrière-garde position (by reinforcing conformism in other fields where one occupies a dominant position, as in the case of racial discourse).⁷⁵ The classic avant-garde technique of photomontage can, for instance, support either liberal positions or fascist ones:

“Application” [of an avant-garde technique] is also a power structure and it should come as no surprise that the use of photomontage freely crossed political, aesthetic and ideological lines. It could equally serve Dada and the German liberal left, the utopian De Stijl artists, the “scientific communism” of the Russian constructivists, and subsequently, and in a way that entirely severed any relationships between photomontage in its defining purposes and in its application, the German and Italian Fascists.⁷⁶

When we examine *Documents* in terms of its racial discourse within the various avant-garde theories, it is possible to shed light on this particular dynamic, notably with regard to the publication’s relationship to realism. On one hand, by exposing traditional realism’s tendency to veil (specifically realism as it was understood in nineteenth-century literature), the writers behind *Documents* attempted to reveal its constructed nature. This is the main reason that the journal is associated with the surrealist movement: namely, its contribution to the attack on realism led by the so-called historical avant-gardes, an attack based on both technological evolution⁷⁷ (the invention of photography and cinema) and an ideological critique of

profits that are at play in the field, and, at the same time, by their objective relationships to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.)” (Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *Réponses* [Paris: Seuil, 1992], 72-73).

⁷⁵ The case of certain symbolist writers who railed against artistic institutions in “small journals” at the end of the 19th century, and yet still demonstrated considerable anti-Semitism when it came to the art market or collectors, is an example of this. See Françoise Lucbert, *Entre le voir et le dire: La critique d’art des écrivains dans la presse symboliste en France de 1822 à 1906* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2005), 107.

⁷⁶ Stephen C. Foster, “Dada and the Constitution of Culture,” 55.

⁷⁷ Dietrich Scheunemann, “On Photography and Painting: Prolegomena to a New Theory of the Avant-Garde,” in *European Avant-Garde: New Perspectives*, ed. Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 19.

the notion of reality.⁷⁸ On the other hand, however, it should be noted that the “anti-realism” of *Documents* was not only based on a strategy of rupture; in place of traditional realism, the publication proposed another, materialist realism⁷⁹—also referred to as aggressive realism⁸⁰—not unlike the notion of *Kinostil* promoted by expressionist writer Alfred Döblin. From an avant-garde point of view, the type of realism present in *Documents* was highly ambiguous. By adopting the same naturalness as traditional realism, *Documents* also reproduced the same hierarchies—often inadvertently. Many of the texts in *Documents* demonstrate the way in which the journal’s form of realism took advantage of the “work” of dominated groups, primarily from so-called primitive societies. Relegated to a secondary role, these groups were used to highlight the *informe* side of man, without ever enjoying the privilege of being classified as human beings themselves. Moreover, the particular realism of *Documents*—at once aggressively realist (materialist) and anti-realist (anti-idealist)—fails to provide any oppositional discourse to counter its own racial conformism. *Documents* is therefore an illustration of the way in which avant-garde and arrière-garde can co-exist organically: the journal’s avant-gardist aesthetic vision (attacking traditional realism) is used to serve an ideological arrière-garde (perpetuating racist ideology).

The opposite is also true: an arrière-garde discourse can support an avant-garde position.⁸¹ In order to understand a work’s joint avant- and arrière-gardism, it is not enough to subscribe to “the postmodernist program,” which invites us to “go against the grain of history and blur aesthetic boundaries,” reinterpreting historical avant-garde movements “ironically, in the same way as the arrière-garde.”⁸² Rather, we must focus on the elements that make up a work’s oppositional discourse, paying particular attention to what they are for and against. At the same time, we must avoid the temptation to use this as a basis for classifying the work

⁷⁸ Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, 270.

⁷⁹ See for example Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, “Giorgio de Chirico,” in *Documents* 2, no. 6 (Paris: Jean-Michel-Place, 1991), 337-338; Michel Leiris, “Toiles récentes de Picasso,” in *Documents* 2, no. 2 (Paris: Jean-Michel-Place, 1991), 64; and Robert Desnos, “La Femme 100 têtes, par Max Ernst,” in *Documents* 2, no. 2 (Paris: Jean-Michel-Place, 1991), 238.

⁸⁰ Vincent Debaene, “Les surréalistes et le musée d’ethnographie,” *Labyrinthe atelier interdisciplinaire*, no. 12 (2002): 79.

⁸¹ For example, see Michel Décaudin, “Avant-garde politique, arrière-garde poétique: Autour de *L’Effort libre*,” in *Les Arrière-gardes au XX^e siècle: L’autre face de la modernité esthétique*, ed. William Marx (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2004), 103-115.

⁸² William Marx, “Introduction,” 18.