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An Imperial Story: Paul Gauguin and the Idealised 'Primitive'

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This article examines the relationship between the French fin-de-siècle painter Paul Gauguin's (1848-1903) anti-modernism and the ideology behind the colonial project. Setting out to refute the Western materialistic 'civilisation', Gauguin embraced the supposed savage, primitive, and pure 'Other'. In paintings such as 'Breton Calvary' (1889) and 'The Specter Watches Her' (1892), Gauguin uses Breton farmers and Tahitian women as formal embodiments of his imagined 'earthly paradise' and the primordial 'savage' character. However, as the postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) argues, there is always a relationship of power within a discourse. Through defining what is 'primitive' and what is 'civilised' from within a Western paradigm, Gauguin is testifying to a Western hegemony. Though Gauguin's idealisation of the 'primitive' essentially sought to criticise the Western colonial discourse, it essentially reinforces its main ideological justification: the hierarchical dichotomy between the 'primitive' and the 'civilised'.

This article will examine how the Symbolist and fin-de-siècle anti-modernism was part of an Imperialist discourse, in particular, the dichotomy between 'civil West' and 'primitive Other.' Focusing on Paul Gauguin's (1848-1903) time in Brittany and Tahiti, this article will examine *how* Gauguin embraced 'the Other' in order to refute Western civilisation and art, and how it, inevitably, reinforced the binary structure he was opposing. The article will also discuss how the Symbolist discourse, in particular the critic Albert Aurier (1865-1892), celebrated Gauguin's ' essentially non-naturalistic primitivism', as its style was able to grasp deeper truths beyond the deceiving appearances of things.

When Gauguin, in 1886, left Paris for the 'artist colony' that had emerged in Pont-Aven, Brittany, it was in search for a pre-industrialised, non-modernised society. He found in Brittany the antidote to what he considered a materialistic, decaying civilisation. In Brittany and the Bretons, Gauguin considered himself to have found 'the savage, the primitive.'[1]

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[1] G. Perry, 'Chapter 1: Primitivism and the 'Modern'' in C. Harrison, F. Frascina & G. Perry (eds.), *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century* (London, 1993.), 8.

To leave urban civilisation can be seen as a crucial feature of late nineteenth-century avant-gardism, rooted in the assumption that the artist's role is to re-discover and advocate a more direct and 'primitive' mode of expression.[2] It was an aspiration for a lost authenticity both in art and in civilisation, a longing for a geographical and spiritual 'elsewhere'.[3]

During his years in Brittany, Gauguin fully developed his Synthetist aesthetic, demonstrated in 'Vision After the Sermon', *(figure 1)*. Influenced by Émile Bernard's Cloisonnism and its flat colour fields combined with broad outlines, the Synthetist simplification and exaggeration in line, colour and form, was considered a sufficiently 'primitive' style needed in order to translate his experience of a 'primitive' setting into painting.[4]

For Gauguin and his friends in Pont-Aven, the 'primitive' aesthetics was an antithesis of conventional Western painting, Impressionism and illusionistic Naturalism. Though the diversity of artistic sources, namely, local religious art, Japanese prints, images d'Épinal (popular nineteenth-century prints showing idealised scenes of French life) had little in common apart from *not* being official academic art. Hence, it was considered the 'Other'.[5]

Through the supposedly 'primitive' subject matter of religious peasants, primarily women, and the 'primitivised' technique of Synthetism, Gauguin sought to translate a particular Breton 'essence'. The formal simplification was *itself* a symbol of 'primitive' culture inhabited with 'savages'. In 'Breton Calvary' as well as 'Yellow Christ', *(figures 2 and3)*, 'primitivism' of the rural landscape, religious superstition and female peasants are synthesised through a simplified, exaggerated aesthetic.[6]

However, the image of 'Brittany' that Gauguin portrays is not a documentary one. Rather, it was a popular myth of Brittany as the region in France where old traditions

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[2] N. Lübbren, *Rural artists' colonies in Europe: 1870-1910* (Manchester, 2001.), 57-58.

[3] J. F. Staszak, 'Primitivism and the other: History of art and cultural geography' (2004) 60:1 *GeoJournal* 354.

[4] V. Jirat-Wasiutynski, *Paul Gauguin in the context of Symbolism* (New York, 1978.), 75.

[5] J. F. Knapp, 'Primitivism and Empire: John Synge and Paul Gauguin' (1989) 41:1 *Comparative Literature* 56.

[6] Perry, 'Chapter 1: Primitivism and the 'Modern'', 19.

were still vital, articulated in literature and painting, *(figure 4)*. This was further dramatised in an exhibition at the, then newly opened, Ethnographic Museum in Paris around 1885. The room dedicated to 'Europe' presented a reconstruction of a Breton house and peasants in traditional clothing. In a letter to Vincent van Gogh after having painted 'The Vision after the Sermon', Gauguin wrote: 'I have achieved a great rustic and superstitious simplicity in my figures'.[7]

In reality, the social/economic reality in Brittany at the time was one of industrialisation and modernisation. The rural idyll and the 'primitive' Breton essence was imagined by Gauguin: a construction to satisfy his 'earthly paradise'.[8]

In his 1891 article 'Symbolism en Painture: Paul Gauguin' (published in Symbolist art journal *Mercure de France*), the Symbolist art critic Albert Aurier hailed Gauguin, and in particular 'The Vision after the Sermon', as evidence of new, Symbolist art. The synthethist technique 'cannot be the direct representation of objects: the end purpose is to express Ideas as it translates them into a special language'. This is where Aurier considered conventional Western art to fail: in the requirement of transforming objects into signifiers of Ideas (in a Platonic sense).[9]

Aurier's emphasis on the essentially non-naturalistic decorative stylisation as expressive core in Symbolist art extended the Symbolist ornamentalism into an interest in the so-called 'primitive' as a signifier of primordial artistic creativity and its expressive state of being.[10] Aurier argued that 'in primitive societies, the first pictorial efforts could only be decorative' and that Symbolist and Ideist art is 'fundamentally identical with primitive art, to art as it was divined by the instinctive geniuses of the first ages of humanity'.[11]

Aurirer's claims therefore testifies and supports a longing to go back to the origin of art and to project this ideal on a certain historical period or a contemporary 'earthly

[7] V. Gille. 'The Last Orientalist: Portrait of the Artist as Mohican' in B. Thomson (ed.), *Gauguin: Maker of the Myth* (London, 2010), 50.

[8] Knapp, 'Primitivism and Empire: John Synge and Paul Gauguin', 56.

[9] H. Dorra, *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: erotica, exotica and the great dilemmas of humanity* (Berkeley, 2007), 114.

[10] J. Simpson, 'Symbolist Aesthetics and the Decorative Image/Text' (2000) 25:2 *French Forum* 186-187.

[11] A. G. Aurier, 'Symbolism in Painting' in C. Harrison, P. Wood & J. Gaiger (eds.), *Art in Theory: 1815-1900: an anthology of changing ideas* (Oxford, 2007), 1028.

paradise'. Free of Western pictorial and narrative conventions, the 'primitive' was able to grasp deeper truth beyond the deceiving appearances of Naturalism.[12]

However, 'primitvism' has little to do with direct inspiration from non-Western art. It lies closer to the French Enlightenment philosopher Rousseau's 'good savage' and the Orientalism in pantings by Ingres and Romanticists. It is a Western definition and testifies of a Western hegemony. Hence, it also has a complex relation to colonialism.[13] The colonial project was built on the notion of a division between the 'civilised' West and the 'primitive' Other: a supposed racial hierarchy that *justified* a structural exploitation as a 'civilising assimilation project'.

A key theory was Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) as its linear development gave a new meaning to the term 'primitive'. In a colonial discourse, the 'explored' cultures were evaluated in terms of this development and seen as closer to 'the beginnings of civilisation' and Western civilisation at top of the ladder. Equating cultural developments with Darwin's biological developments, it was uncritically assumed that inhabitants in so-called 'primitive' societies also had less developed, childish minds. A book on the drawing of children from 1904 describes, characteristically of the time, that 'the development of a child mirrors the development of the race […] our children follow the same path taken by our forbearers, and which the primitive people today still tread'.[14]

At the Universal Exposition in Paris, 1889, where Gauguin and his friends held the iconic secessionist Volpini Exhibition, this dichotomy between the 'civil' and the 'primitive' was formally dramatised in the installations of 'primitive cultures'. For Gauguin, these installations represented a new 'elsewhere', a new escape from Western civilisation. However, the displays of colonial artefacts as exotic and less cultivated of the Western art was not a factual image. Rather it was a decoy and a perverse invention to, again, project the colonised countries as 'primitive', aiming to *justify* the colonial project.[15]

With similar motivation to his 'going away' to Brittany in 1886, Gauguin left Paris for

[12] Simpson, 'Symbolist Aesthetics and the Decorative Image/Text', 187.
[13] Staszak, 'Primitivism and the other: History of art and cultural geography', 354-353.
[14] E.H. Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive.* (London, 2002), 199-200.
[15] V. Gille, 'The Last Orientalist: Portrait of the Artist as Mohican', 52-53.

the French colony of Tahiti in 1891. Refuting the Modern project of the West, by embracing the 'Other', the 'primitive' and the uncivilised, Gauguin sought his 'earthly paradise'. However, being colonised in 1880, Tahiti was in the process of Westernisation. The Tahiti Gauguin encountered when arriving in the capital, Pape'ete, was far away from the spiritual and mystical tropical paradise of his imagination.[16]

In early paintings from Tahiti, Gauguin can be seen as depicting this 'assimilation process'. In 'Tahitian Women' *(figure 5)*, Gauguin is depicting two natives, one is wearing traditional Tahitian clothing, however, the other is wearing a typical Christian missionary dress. The traditional female clothing was, by the colonists, considered too revealing and was eventually banned, instead, the moral, covering missionary dress was preferred. This can be seen as a critical reflection of what Gauguin considered the damaging civilisation and the invasion of modernity, ruining his imagined tropical paradise.[17]

However, soon Gauguin would completely emerge himself in a more fictional myth of the Tahitian landscape and its inhabitants as 'savage'. This was not only articulated in his paintings, but also in 'Noa Noa', his fictional travel writings, portraying Tahiti as the unspoiled exotic, sensual paradise of his imagination. Similar to the synthetist aesthethics, the deliberately fragmented style was designed to echo the 'primitive' qualities that he attributed to Tahiti and to juxtapose the Western convention of linear, cohesive narrative. The sources for Gauguin's fictional myth were diverse (oral myths, colonial fictions etc.), suggesting the arbitrary notion of 'primitive' as everything but the current Western convention. Further, the collage synthesis of painting, text and Gauguin's constructed self-image as a 'savage', can be seen as an expression of the contemporary ideal of the 'total work of art', *(figure 6)*.[18]

In painting, the synthetist aesthetic, as in Brittany, became a representation of the 'primitive'. The purity of primary colours symbolised the supposedly 'untainted' primitive character, contrary to the pale, smoothness of academic painting. Gauguin's perceived opposition between 'civilised' and 'savage' colour schemes is evident in

[16] P. Dagen, 'Gauguin's Politics' in B. Thomson (ed.), *Gauguin: Maker of the Myth* (London, 2010), 40.
[17] P. ten-Doesschate Chu, *Nineteenth-Century European Art*, 2nd Edition (New Jersey, 2006), 479.
[18] L. Goddard, 'Following the Moon: Gauguin's Writing and Myth of the 'Primitive'' in B. Thomson (ed.), *Gauguin: Maker of the Myth* (London, 2010), 32-35.

'Woman with a Flower' *(figure 7)*. The bold, simplified colours and forms echo the 'primitive' character portrayed. The non-naturalistic decorative element is also emphasised through the flowers that unite the surface.[19]

The myth of the 'primitive' Tahitians, especially women, as one with the luscious nature is articulated in 'Near The Sea' *(figure 8)*. The richly coloured, opulent nature embracing the nude women shows equilibrium between nature and the 'primitive'. In a synthetist manner, the manipulation of line, colour and form create an over-all abstract pattern of arabesque forms suggesting the expressive potential of the 'primitive'.[20]

Similar to his practice in Brittany, Gauguin merged his vision of a 'primitive' society with his vision of a 'primitive' technique, developed from various so-called 'primitive' sources. In 'Breton Calvary' and 'Yellow Christ', it is the rural landscape, female peasants and local religious objects that suggest the spirituality Gauguin saw in the primitive. In Tahiti, Gauguin performs a similar junction of imaginatively inserting superstitious objects into settings.[21]

One example is 'The Specter Watches Her' *(figure 9)*, where Gauguin lets a naked, young Tahitian woman, supposedly his lover, embody the childish, pure 'primitive'. In the background we can see a mystic, statue-like spirit. In 'Noa Noa', the origin of this painting is described as the young woman being 'terrified out of her mind' by the 'specter' and the vision of the spirit. This suggests that she is ruled by emotion and mysticism rather than rational thought, a key distinction in the colonial project.[22]

The fact that Gauguin primarily uses women to represent his 'primitive' imagination is evident in both his Tahitian and Brittany paintings. This suggests that the dichotomy is not only 'racial' but also gendered between the civil, rational masculine and the emotional, spiritual female 'Other'. Hence, the colonial ideology also reflects the structural misogyny of the time as the same defining attributes are given to the 'female'

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[19] Ibid, 37.

[20] P. ten-Doesschate Chu, *Nineteenth-Century European Art,* 479.

[21] B. Thomson, 'Landscape and Rural Narrative' in B. Thomson (ed.), *Gauguin: Maker of the Myth* (London, 2010), 113.

[22] L. Nochlin, 'Symbolism and the Dialectics of Retreat' in S. F. Eisenman (ed.), *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History,* 3rd Edition (London, 2007), 432.

as to the colonised, racial 'Other.'[23]

Though Gauguin in his preference for the 'primitive' essentially sought to criticise the Western, colonial structure, he is inevitably stuck in a Western paradigm. As the post-modern philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) argued, there will always be relationship of power within a discourse. To paint, analyse or reproduce a view of the 'primitive', from a point inside the Western world, is still to be in power of what is to be defines as 'primitive'. It testifies to a Western hegemony. By applying this structuralist perspective, Gauguin's own initial intentions and self-understanding are played down in favour of the broader, political discourse of colonialism.[24]

Gauguin used different geographical areas and their inhabitants, first Brittany and later Tahiti, as the representational projection area for his imagined 'earthly paradise', as the primordial 'primitive' character opposed to the modern 'civil' Westerner. Celebrated by Symbolist critic Aurier for disregarding the Western illusionistic conventions, Gauguin's non-naturalistic, decorative stylisation, in subject matter and in technique, was hailed as a more expressive, 'archaic' state, able to translate non-material Ideas into painting.

However, by using the constructed dichotomy that the colonial project rests upon, Gauguin inevitably reinforced the colonial stereotype of non-Western societies as the 'primitive Other.'[25]

[23] Perry, 24.
[24] Staszak, 'Primitivism and the other: History of art and cultural geography', 358.
[25] Simpson, 'Symbolist Aesthetics and the Decorative Image/Text', 186-187.

APPENDIX

Figure 1: Paul Gauguin. 'Vision after the Sermon'. Oil on canvas. 1888. Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh. Available: <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-z/g/artist/paul-gauguin/object/vision-of-the-sermon-jacob-wrestling-with-the-angel-ng-1643>

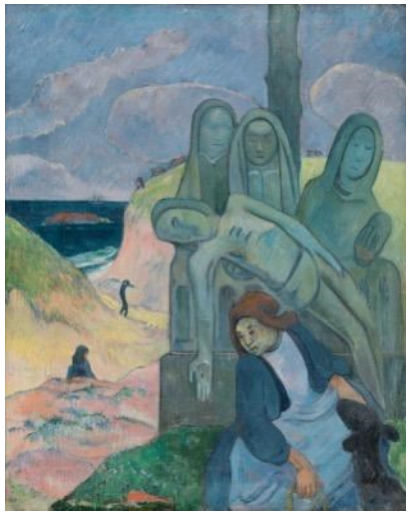

Figure 2: Paul Gauguin. 'Breton Calvary'. Oil on canvas. 1889. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels. Available: <http://www.fine-arts-museum.be/uploads/museums/images/RVB_72dpi_Gauguin_4416dig_small_large@2x.jpg,

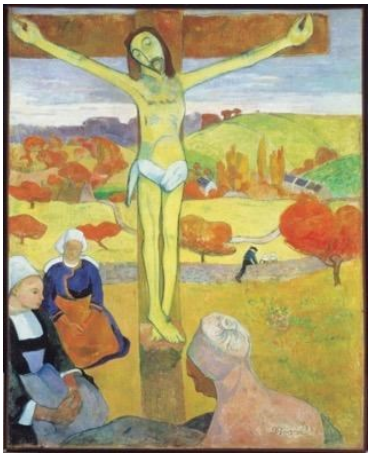

Figure 3: Paul Gauguin. 'Yellow Christ'. Oil on canvas. 1889. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Available: <http://www.albrightknox.org/collection/collection-highlights/piece:gauguin-yellow-christ/>

Figure 4: Pascal Dagnan-Bouvert. 'Les Bretonnes au Pardon'. Oil on canvas. 1887. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Museum, Lisbon. Available: http://museu.gulbenkian.pt/prjdir/gulbenkian/images/mediaRep/museu/colecao/pintura/Inv._206__tratada__copy.294_24_986_955.jpg

Figure 5: Paul Gauguin. 'Tahitian Women'. Oil on canvas. 1891. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Available: <http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/painting.html?no_cache=1&zoom=1&tx_damzoom_pi1%5BshowUid%5D=115065>

Figure 6: Paul Gauguin. 'Noa Noa'. Page 119. Musée de Louvre, Paris. Available: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3Gauguin_Album_Noa_Noa_119.jpg

Figure 7: Paul Gauguin. 'Woman with a Flower'. Oil on canvas. 1891. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. Available: <http://www.glyptoteket.com/explore/the-collections/artwork/paul-gauguin-tahitian-woman-flower>

Figure 8: Paul Gauguin. 'Near The Sea'. Oil on canvas. 1892. National Gallery of Art, Washington. Available: <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.46624.html>

Figure 9: Paul Gauguin. 'The Specter Watches Her'. Oil on canvas. 1892. Albright-nox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Available: <http://www.wga.hu/html_m/g/gauguin/04/tahiti12.html>

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