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Automata and *Bêtise*: Contamination Anxieties in Late Nineteenth-Century French Mime

A complex relationship to gestural expression can be discerned through a close reading of the writings of late nineteenth-century Parisian mime artists and critics. The textual examination that I conduct in this article illuminates anxieties over the ideological construct of the “natural” body as it was positioned against the constructs of socialisation and civilisation in the late nineteenth century and identified with concepts of gross materiality (such as bodily fluids) and the organic (the living, breathing body set against the cold corpse). I argue that late nineteenth-century nostalgia for and simultaneous disgust with a “natural” Pierrot influenced the development of techniques of mime based on minimalist movement. Minimalist here refers to small and contained bodily movements that are discernible only at close proximity, a mechanised performance style marked by rapid, rigid movements associated with the automaton—set against the “natural” body as identified with the fluid and organic. Dr Laura Purcell-Gates is Senior Lecturer (Drama) at Bath Spa University, United Kingdom.

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My analysis of the emergence of minimalism within mime practice, through analysis of the language used in the writings of practitioners and late nineteenth-century pantomime scripts, focuses on its simultaneous links with “natural” gestures and with empty/mechanical movement vocabularies. Mime artists and critics of the era, including Georges Wague and Paul Hugounet, increasingly viewed emotional expressivity conveyed via the physical body as suspect. I consider the ways in which this contested site of late nineteenth-century mime practice performatively theorised anxieties around racial, class-based and gendered hybridity, specifically around the idea of contamination. To do this I examine the language used to describe both gestural style and Pierrot’s physical body in late nineteenth-century French pantomimes in order to position the performed figure of Pierrot as a site through which a process of what I call “contamination anxieties” played out. I use this term to refer to anxieties related to maintaining the purity of the white, upper class body of the artist-*flâneur*. For instance, Pierrot’s skin is famously plaster-white and many pantomimes of the era such as Fernand Desnoyers’s *Le bras noir* [The black arm] (1856)¹ and Paul Margueritte’s *Pierrot assassin de sa femme* [Pierrot assassin of his wife] (1888)² link this whiteness with both purity and sterility and blackness with *bêtise*³ and the overflowing of corporeality, a duality that suggests anxieties over the intrusion of racial difference into the white body. Contamination anxieties also link to class, as pantomime artists in the late nineteenth century increasingly sought to distance themselves from the working-class audiences that frequented the more popular pantomime venues, such as the Théâtre des Funambules, earlier in the century, as evidenced in *Souvenirs des Funambules* (1859) by Jules-Francis-Félix Husson, popularly known as Champfleury.⁴ Additionally, minimalist mime styles described in language suspicious of emotionality and the body in favour of reason and cerebral activity, as in Margueritte’s linking of female flesh to terrifying animality (1888), suggests anxieties over the gendered body.

Minimalism in late nineteenth-century mime

In his 1889 historical exploration *Mimes et pierrots: notes et documents inédits pour servir à l'histoire de la pantomime* [Mimes and pierrots: notes and unpublished documents to be used in the history of the pantomime],⁵ Hugounet describes a mid-century split of Pierrot into *Pierrot-cerveau* [Pierrot-brain] and *Pierrot-ventre* [Pierrot-stomach] using racialised terminology: “Will Pierrot be white, or will he be black? Stomach or brain?”⁶ Hugounet here divides Pierrot both racially and into body parts representing, respectively, vulgar appetite and elevated reason. This is a telling division during a time when mime artists advocated a gestural style based on minimalist movement and centered on the subtle

expressivity of the face, the *cerveau* section of the body. These words appear in a section on late-century Pierrot performers including Kalpestri; Hugounet spends several pages expressing his disapproval of Kalpestri's performance style, which he viewed as base and grotesque, over-exaggerating movements. He contrasts this to the style performed by prominent nineteenth-century French mime artists Jean-Gaspard Deburau and his son Charles (commonly referred to as Deburau- *fils*): “[Kalpestri] stressing unnecessarily that which Charles had indicated with a glance, that which Gaspard [Deburau] had conveyed with a smile.”⁷ Hugounet here expresses the common late nineteenth-century valuing of minimalist gestures over heightened physicality.

Hugounet also identifies Deburau *fils*'s body with that of a puppet: “the puppet interpretation of Pierrot by Charles Deburau had a pleasant colic; that of Kalpestri was naturalist, dirty.”⁸ Here a clear division can be discerned between the supposed purity of the mind (*cerveau*) and the contamination of the body (*ventre*), as Hugounet removes Deburau *fils* from the realm of the “natural,” the fallible and “dirty” corporeal body, due to his puppet-like movements. Associations of mime performers' bodies with automata and puppets were common in late nineteenth-century France, a popularity that I position alongside the works of Heinrich von Kleist (1810)⁹ and Edward Gordon Craig (1908)¹⁰ on the performing marionette, as well as the emergence of *automatisme* in French psychology, a term I examine in greater detail later in this article.

A mime style based on small gestures and a concurrent increased emphasis on expressing thought and subtle emotions represented one outcome of the shifting understanding of what constituted “natural” performance and the resulting decline in popularity of the gestural mime style based on large set poses. This style developed in the late nineteenth century within increasingly elite and exclusive theatres. Robert Storey documents how Pierrot performers in the 1880s and 1890s performed in increasingly small venues for increasingly select audiences.¹¹ Performances sponsored by the Cercle Funambulesque, a group founded in Paris the spring of 1888 to re-invent pantomime in response to a decline of general interest in the form that had occurred after Jean-Gaspard Deburau's death in 1846, were often limited to three performers inside a salon, contrasting with the large music halls where pantomimes were also performed.¹² As this elite interest in Pierrot developed, so too did a mime technique based on minimalist movement, as critics increasingly regarded the earlier mime style based on set poses as artificial. Subtlety of gesture had been praised as far back as Deburau; the subtleties attributed to Najac and other late-century Pierrots were likely informed by the smaller size of some of these performing spaces—spaces that could be more easily controlled and could exclude unpredictable or chaotic elements.¹³ This careful control of the interior of the theatrical space parallels a similar obsession with controlling the interior of the body that can be discerned in the descriptions of Pierrots and other mime performers by both critics and playwrights, in which their bodies are described as empty and cold.¹⁴ This emptiness and coldness could be read as a form

of sterility and positions the idealised Pierrot body as a mechanical one, set against a “natural” body of warmth, corporeality and fecundity.

In 1920 a small mime piece titled *Mains et masques* [Hands and masks] opened at L'Olympia Paris, written by and starring the famous *fin de siècle* Pierrot performer Séverin who had first published the text in 1914.¹⁵ In the pantomime, as later described by Rémy in *Georges Wague*, Pierrot appears as a spectral figure whose hands and face are the only visible parts of his body moving across the dark stage: “Pierrot, dressed entirely in black, melted into the black background leaving no more to see than his face and his hands.”¹⁶ Rémy ascribes this reduction in the visibility of the body to Wague’s mime technique.¹⁷ This style is evidenced in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pantomimes including Hennique’s *Le songe d’une nuit d’hiver* [A midwinter night’s dream] (1903) in which Pierrot is described with “sharp eye, wicked lip.”¹⁸ Colombine conveys disapproval of Arlequin through her face in Najac’s *Barbe-Bleuette* [Blue Beard] (1890) in which her face “takes on a wicked expression,” “has a malicious smile,” and conveys a plot point to the audience: “she ... gives a look to the closet that conveys to the audience that Pierrot will not be the last husband of Barbe-Bluette.”¹⁹ This “look” does not denote emotion, but intention—an example of gesture becoming increasingly tied to thought. A passage in Rouanet’s *Le ventre et le cœur de Pierrot* [The stomach and the heart of Pierrot] (1888) appears to describe Pierrot moving through a series of emotional poses reminiscent of the earlier nineteenth-century gestural style of striking attitudes, with the exception that it is his *face* striking the attitudes: “the face of Pierrot expresses in turn surprise, passion, rapture, ecstasy,”²⁰ a more subtle mode of expression than bodily gestures. In the following sections I examine the influence of notions of *sang-froid*, *automatisme*, and *bêtise* on late nineteenth-century French minimalist mime styles, and argue that these were tied to this idealisation of a mechanical Pierrot body alongside, in a seemingly contradictory duality, a push towards “natural” gestures that revealed thoughts and subtle emotions. I then take a closer look at language, revealing contamination anxieties that I suggest underlie this duality.

Sang-froid: From corporeal control to emptiness behind the mask

Mime critic Janin’s praise in 1832 of mime artist Deburau significantly included the term *sang-froid* [cold-blooded]: “Deburau found his *sang-froid* ... which gave him his superiority.”²¹ In Janin’s usage, *sang-froid* described that quality of flexible acting ability praised by Diderot, a quality held by the performer who could seamlessly shift from one held attitude to the next. Janin connected Deburau’s renowned *sang-froid* to his robust emotional power; the mime’s ability to transition quickly between fixed attitudes was understood, following Diderot, as a strength that allowed performative flexibility rather than a capitulation to the whims of momentary passions: “It is with *sang-froid* that one tempers the delirium of enthusiasm.”²² Writing in 1832 about a prominent mime artist of the day, Janin’s use of *sang-froid* as a term of praise resonated with a valuing of *sang-froid* as

impassivity that began to gain traction in the French mime world from the early nineteenth century. Practitioners lauded the ability of the artist to be un-moved and un-movable (as opposed to *sensibilité*, which denoted an ability to be affected or moved by feelings) as allowing the artist to occupy a privileged vantage point of objective vision.

Late nineteenth-century French pantomime texts reveal a further shift in gestural style from the *mime sautante* [leaping mime] of Deburau to a more subtle style marked by tiny movements. Hennique (1903) describes minute facial expressions of Pierrot: “sharp eye, nasty lip.”²³ Similarly, Colombine’s eyes become a focal point to represent her mood in Part III of Fernand Beissier’s *La Lune* [The Moon] (1890): “Colombine’s eyes are less severe than before.”²⁴ In the opening section of *Le Suicide de Pierrot* [The Suicide of Pierrot] (1897) Aubert describes subtle emotional gestures for Pierrot: “Little by little he softens, his face lengthens, his features become grimaces; he cries. Suddenly a clear decision shows in his eyes.”²⁵ The late nineteenth-century focus on minimalist gestural style is revealed in this increasing focus on the face in these pantomimes: the face elongating, lips curling, eyes revealing emotion or ideas.

One of the effects of shrinking the gestural mime style was a universalising one: by appearing to distance themselves from the passions that their bodies represented, mime performers in the minimalist style embodied the objective, “neutral” observer unencumbered by the idiosyncrasies that might reveal (racial, class, gendered) difference. The implications of this embodied practice correspond to language used to describe gesture, which took on a universalising tone.²⁶ The belief that gesture accessed a core of common humanity, bypassing the issues of spoken language comprehension, was an extension of the eighteenth-century tenet, which nineteenth-century French acting theory had inherited, that all human beings are born with a pre-existing natural morality. This tenet also included the notion of “human nature” which required reason to align actions with natural morality; those that were capable of this therefore behaved more “naturally.” While mime gestural techniques in early nineteenth-century France focused on conveying literal meaning due to the restriction on spoken language in the boulevard theatres, as mime became increasingly bourgeois in the late nineteenth century, focus turned to questions of authenticity of emotional expression.

This figuring of the mime as a transparent medium for emotion can be linked to an idea of universality that Jules Lemaître ascribed to Pierrot in 1890. In an article written about Margueritte’s 1888 pantomime *Pierrot assassin de sa femme* [Pierrot assassin of his wife], Lemaître expands on the artistic level of universality, linking the physical appearance of Pierrot’s face to the tradition of classical masks:

this simplified head, artificial, without hair, without modeling, this oblong moon where one sees nothing on the flat whiteness but the holes of the eyes and nostrils and the line of the eyebrows and mouth, this head is truly tragic ... In fact, *it is tragic in precisely the same manner* as other artificial heads, the

masks worn to cover the actors who performed the dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles and who certainly gave the ingenious Greeks no desire to laugh.²⁷

Lemaître's text both reveals assumptions about the universality of the mask form ("it is tragic in precisely the same manner") and describes Pierrot's face as a lifeless mask marked by whiteness, broken only by the dark, empty holes of the eyes and the nostrils. This image evokes the acrobatic Hanlon-Lee brothers (Figure 1). These Irish mimes used the English mime style based on frenetic movement, which was influential to French mime,²⁸ and performed Pierrot pantomimes in the 1870s and 1880s. This English style complicated the meaning of *sang-froid*, retaining universality but altering what gesture "revealed" about human nature and the ways in which the human body's interior was conceptualised. In Hanlon-Lee pantomimes that featured their violent, frenetic acrobatics, the figure of Pierrot became increasingly that of a cold-blooded murderer. *Sang-froid* had taken on a sinister quality, a sense of exposing the emptiness behind the mask.



Figure 1. Atelier Nadar, *Les frères Hanlon-Lees dans "Le Voyage en Suisse,"* 1879, photograph, 9.3 x 6 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Available from: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53080259j>

Automatisme: The 'idea of me'

In a section titled "La Pantomime" in his essay *Le naturalisme au théâtre* [Naturalism in the theatre] Émile Zola praised the Hanlon-Lees for their coldness: "The cruel observation, the fierce analysis of these grimacing men who expose with a gesture or with a wink all of the human beast."²⁹ Zola linked their violent pantomime techniques to larger philosophical themes of the emptiness of human

existence: “At the end is the negation of all, human nothingness.”³⁰ Critics explicitly connected the performance style of the Hanlon-Lees to mechanism, deploying the term “automatism” to describe their movements.³¹ This points to a possible link between concurrent ideas in French psychology and the emptiness behind the mask that marked the appearance and descriptions of the Hanlon-Lees. Late nineteenth-century French mime artists were increasingly obsessed with the automaton, the marionette, and *tableaux vivants*. This fascination in the mime world coincided with French psychology theorists’ interest in the idea of *automatisme*. In the latter part of the nineteenth century the field of French psychology was comprised of a combination of philosophy, spiritualism and physiology, with theorists in the latter camp attempting to tie together mental and physiological phenomena. In 1885 Théodule Ribot, a philosopher, and Charles Richet, a physiologist, founded the Société de Psychologie Physiologique in Paris with the intention of furthering the study of states such as hypnosis, hysteria and catalepsy, including the automatic movements that accompany these states, classed as *automatisme*. Ribot, Richet and many of their contemporaries advocated an idea of *automatisme* that positioned it as entirely mechanical, operating without consciousness; they disseminated many of these ideas through the monthly journal *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* [Philosophical review in France and abroad].³² This idea of automatic human actions such as convulsions—actions that the Hanlon-Lees incorporated into their mime style—performed without consciousness, resonates with the empty-eyed appearance of the Hanlon-Lees and the idea that the mask of their faces hid an inner emptiness, a lack of consciousness.

However, this idea of movement performed in the absence of consciousness was challenged in 1889 when Pierre Janet, a young psychological professor who was a member of the recently-formed society, published his thesis *L'Automatisme Psychologique: Essai de psychologie expérimentale sur le formes inférieures de l'activité humaine* [Psychological Automatism: Evaluation of experimental psychology on the lower forms of human activity]. In this thesis Janet reworks the prevalent theory of *automatisme* that defined it as an entirely mechanical act, arguing that a degree of consciousness is always involved. Janet begins by challenging this idea of *automatisme* as “purely mechanical and absolutely without conscience,” arguing that this is based on a misunderstanding of the full range of human consciousness which can include automatic elements:

This interpretation originated out of several confused notions, and many philosophers refuse to recognise an automatism in the human spirit, which is however real and without which many phenomena are inexplicable ... We believe that it's possible to recognise simultaneously both automatism and consciousness [...].³³

Janet proposes a different level of consciousness, the subconscious, which governs automatic actions. He separates the subconscious from the part of the consciousness that maintains the persona, the sense of self or “l'idée du moi.” To do this, he

redefines “moi” from a transcendent being to a collection of ideas, memories and habits that together constitute a sense of self:

The idea of me, in effect, is a complex psychological phenomenon which is made up of memories of past actions, the idea of our situation, of our power, of our body, even of our name, which, bringing together all of these disparate ideas, plays a large role in the knowledge of our personality.³⁴

What is significant about Janet’s theories is both his reworking of the self and consciousness, which prefigured Freud and an early twentieth-century interest in the “authentic” self that lies below consciousness. The wider theories of *automatisme* that he argued against, those which identified the human with the mechanical, resonate with practices in late nineteenth-century French mime that position the body as mechanical, flesh as rigid, and *sang-froid* as inner coldness.

Pantomimes of the era increasingly referenced statues, automata and puppets, and the movement styles of mimes became smaller, more rapid and “mechanical” or stiff. In *Pierrot sceptique* (1881), Colombine is compared to a statue: “She stands rigidly, without seeing, like a statue.”³⁵ In Louisa Jones’s examination of late nineteenth-century grotesque iconography in *Sad Clowns and Pale Pierrots: Literature and the Popular Comic Arts in 19th-Century France* (1984), she documents how the circus clown with a huge triangular head, often accompanied by a sinister smile, emerges for the first time in posters and circus costuming. Pierrot’s severed head appears with increasing frequency in grotesque iconography and his pantomime costume includes a white headband to extend the size of his forehead. Jones argues that large foreheads were a feature of the Romantic era as well, but then they were associated with richness of intellect, with interior multiple worlds. Now, however, the large head has become the seat of “cerebral eroticism,” associated with both power and illness—once again bodily imagery is extended into larger social realms, for it was during this time that Paul Verlaine described Paris as an enlarged head to insist on its overgrown importance, and cerebral medical terminology becomes increasingly associated with the mechanical, head-enlarged clown. Jones draws a connection between the mechanical movements of clowns and hysterical epilepsy in late nineteenth-century medical terminology: it is significant, for example, that the term “clonic spasm” (from the Greek *klonos*, violent motion) in mime discourse became *clownisme*. Critics and playwrights increasingly described Pierrot as mechanical, having a tic, a way of moving that suggests machinery—the clown’s growing association with puppetry.³⁶

I extend and complicate Jones’s analysis here by arguing that, paradoxically, the very automaton-like movements of late nineteenth-century mime are the gestural style of a “natural” Pierrot, a Pierrot whose minimalist gestures convey inner reality. In the next section I take up this question of the “natural” invading and disrupting the dispassionate *sang-froid* and mechanical body of late nineteenth-century mime, both as an intentional performance style (when small, rigid, precise movements drawn from the movements of automatons function explicitly as a new

“natural” mime technique) and as a performative working out of contamination anxieties, in which the “natural” (as animality, the visceral, *bêtise*) disrupts the automaton-like body. In other words, late nineteenth-century French mime was engaged in a complex and conflicting dialogue with the “natural” as a quality to be both sought after and feared.

The shift from bêtise to sang-froid

In the late nineteenth century, nostalgia for the early-century “popular Pierrot” positioned this figure as one who connected directly with *le peuple*. Writers described this figure as exemplifying *la bêtise*, a term often translated as “foolishness” or “stupidity” but whose associations with animality are significant, and which appeared frequently throughout the century in reference to fool figures of clowns and mimes. *La bêtise* is a potent term and needs unpacking in its relationship to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses on animality and the human-animal divide. In the eighteenth century René Descartes’ doctrine of the “*bête machine*” had posed the question of whether animals, if they were truly “machines,” had souls. The question came to mean “not that animals were pure automata devoid of sensation and self-awareness, but rather that the various manifestations of consciousness, instinct, sensibility, and even intelligence, all of which seemed empirically to typify animal behavior, ought to be explained exclusively in terms of the organic machine.”³⁷ Despite the apparent similarities between this doctrine and that of *l’homme machine* [man as machine] that Julien de la Mettrie (1748) later took up,³⁸ one key difference remained between *l’homme* [man] and *la bête* [beast]: unlike animals, humans had rational souls.

In the debate between mechanistic and vitalist acting theories that typified the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, *la bête* was privileged within the latter camp as conveying a more direct link to the passions, while mechanistic styles were praised for the ability to control the outer façade of the body, as in Banville’s praise of the Hanlon Lees’ automatism alongside their highly-skilled animalistic movements.³⁹ Later in the century George Henry Lewes placed expressivity at the center of the art of acting in *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (1875).⁴⁰ He believed that great actors had an “animal” physiology, “animalism,” a physical fluidity that allowed the organic expression of the passions.⁴¹ Janet’s theory of *automatisme* and Freud’s theory of the unconscious had cleaved the self into the self of conscious awareness and the more “authentic” self—tied to non-rational, instinctive forces—that resides in the space of the unconscious. In their pursuit of gestural honesty, of a mime technique that signified an inner state, late nineteenth-century mime theorists were therefore drawing on an understanding of the “authentic” self situated in the unconscious, defined as the space of non-rational and instinctive forces, and thereby supporting an idea of the actor’s “animalism.” When Lewes had advocated for the “weighty animalism” of the great actor, he had specified a fluidity of thought and movement: “a fluid interdependence of body and mind, muscle and imagination, including a physique free from muscular tension, rigidity, and superfluity of motion [...].”⁴²

Janin (1881) deploys *la bêtise* in a manner that demarcates appearance and reality, allowing him to both celebrate the quality, and distance the ideal mime body from it. Describing the superiority of lower-class theatre (“*l’art ignoble*”) for its vitality, Janin contrasts the elite Parisian theatres (“*l’art noble*”) with lower-class theatre using corporeal language: “The Théâtre Français, pale and hideous, flaunts its empty skeleton next to the corpulent Vaudeville [...]”⁴³ This positions the living, vital, corporeal body above the dispassionate, cold one; this is underscored by Janin’s frequent use of the term *bêtise* in reference to Deburau’s Pierrot. In Janin’s use of the term, however, *bêtise* is a charming outer façade that conceals an inner controlled intelligence: Deburau’s Pierrot is aloof, detached, his *bêtise* a dual identity that allows him to be the clumsy yet witty fool. In his biography of Deburau, a barely-discernible shift occurs: Deburau is still “on a level with all the *bêtises* of the time” but, in a move that connects Deburau with the self-image of the Romantic artist, he is *bêtise* only on the outside, in his performances; his interior self is distanced. In the same passage Janin explicitly celebrates Deburau’s *sang-froid*:

He has replaced petulance with *sang-froid*, enthusiasm with good sense; this is no longer the street clown who is tossed here and there, without reason and without purpose; this is a strong stoic who allows himself to mechanically explore all the impressions of the moment, an actor without passion [...].⁴⁴

Janin retains here the “impressions” that the *bêtise* performer explores and conveys to the audience, while altering the inner experience of the mime from emotionality (“petulance,” “enthusiasm,” “passion”) to dispassion, coldness, *sang-froid*—his gestures have no bearing on his actual inner state. Janin thus refigures *bêtise* as a performance that only affects the exterior of the body; interiority is protected and relegated to the objective distancing and neutrality of *sang-froid*. This understanding of *sang-froid* permeated late nineteenth-century mime theories, in which the calm, cold and often sinister mind controlled a body that shrank both in scope of movement and in actual on-stage visibility as Wague’s minimalist mime techniques came to the fore.

Contamination anxieties and the controlling of performed hybridity

Sterility and the shrinking of the body in minimalist mime technique connected with Wague, as discerned in stage directions about Pierrot, are particularly significant alongside the late nineteenth-century fascination with the automaton that affected mime styles such as those practiced by the Hanlon-Lees. If these techniques were meant to more authentically express emotions, why was the body so distanced from signifiers of the organic (fluid movements, full visibility of the body)? One answer, as I’ve suggested above, lies in the late nineteenth-century French mime’s body as performative site of contamination anxieties, anxieties tied to racial, class and gender-inflected discourses of animality. These anxieties can be discerned in pantomimes of the era in which Pierrot’s body is simultaneously mechanical and grotesque (corporeally-overflowing). Anxiety and ambivalence over

Pierrot's status as *fantoché* [puppet], for example, runs throughout Margueritte's *Pierrot assassin de sa femme* (1888). The Pierrot of this piece is painstakingly set apart from a human body of gross materiality—that body is represented by the undertaker's man who drags Pierrot in from the funeral of Pierrot's wife Columbine: the undertaker and Pierrot are described using corporeal and racial language, respectively as “the coarse living being and the specter ... black, white.”⁴⁵ The line between living bodies and dead objects is thin and porous: the crimson bed seems to breathe and Columbine—Pierrot's murdered wife—seems to laugh within the cadence of the music. After Pierrot has been left alone on stage to confess his crime to the audience—which he accomplishes through a reenactment of how he tickled Columbine to death as she lay in their bed—the bed itself awakens and its curtains appear to burst into flame. Columbine's hanging portrait comes to life, a portrait that has always held more of the flesh than Pierrot's own alabaster body, her image described at the beginning as “completely in her flesh, her breasts bare, laughing with beautiful teeth, *alive*.”⁴⁶ The gendered association of Columbine's body with flesh is significant: her naked body is both terrifying and organic (“*vivante*”), indicating ambivalence toward the “natural,” living body. When the terrified Pierrot touches the portrait—no longer distinguishable from the body of Columbine herself—he dies, the organic touch resulting in his body fully losing its organic status, becoming entirely a corpse.

Margueritte consistently presents Pierrot as far less grossly material than the dead-yet-alive objects in the room. A *Pierrot-cerveau* type (to draw on Hugounet's terminology) with an enlarged white forehead as specified in the pantomime's opening stage directions, his movements are marked by mechanical rigidity, his physical body by the trappings of the automaton: alabaster skin, lips of plaster, an inclination towards convulsive, maniacal laughter, the clonic spasm of his *clownisme*. He is described as “already dead” before he touches the portrait;⁴⁷ the touch turns a walking corpse into a fallen one. Yet the language Margueritte uses to describe Pierrot overflows with bodily material references. His Pierrot is a walking corpse, a plaster exterior encasing a void. A grossly material interior announces its existence and continually threatens to erupt. His body elicits anxiety over this eruption of an interior corpulent excess associated not with the mechanical, puppet-like *cerveau*, but with his counterpoint *Pierrot-ventre*.

Margueritte describes Pierrot's confession as a vomiting, of interior bodily excess erupting through a gaping hole: when Pierrot is left alone onstage to confront the audience he opens his mouth repeatedly, the confession that lies inside waiting to burst forth is described as coming “to his lips”; after several hesitations “his lips tremble and soon an invincible force wrenches from Pierrot the secret rising to his mouth.”⁴⁸ When the portrait begins to make its presence known, Pierrot mimes his fear by using his hand to indicate an interior accelerating heart beat. His eye peers out from its socket: “haggard, terrified, [it] gleams.”⁴⁹ The description of the eye's “gleam” stands in stark contrast to the dark, empty eye sockets popular among contemporaneous mime performers, such as the Hanlon-Lees, and announces corporeality to the spectral form. When he mimes the death throes of Columbine, his

body becomes hers in a transgression of cleanly-demarcated performed identity, and a significant blurring of gendered bodies that Palacio has noted marked the *fin de siècle* Pierrot.⁵⁰ Pierrot's death throes here are described in language of illness invading the body's interior: "a contagious and vengeful disease."⁵¹

Anxiety over mechanism intersects with racial anxiety in Desnoyers's 1856 pantomime *Le bras noir*. The black arm of the title belongs to the villainous moor Scapin, with whom Pierrot has a violent fight in which each pulls off one of the other's arms and proceeds to beat the other with it. Pierrot manages to beat Scapin to death with Scapin's own arm, then visits a doctor to have his arm put back on. But the doctor reattaches the wrong arm—with the bodily fluid saliva he sticks Scapin's black arm onto the white body of Pierrot. The evil black arm leads pure white Pierrot into a series of crimes that land him in prison, and when he attempts to escape, the jailor grabs his black arm and it comes off. As Pierrot flees, an enormous black arm rises up from the ground before him, a racially-charged image evocatively rendered by Gustave Courbet in 1856 to publicise the pantomime (Figure 2). Pierrot, terrified, turns to stone. Just as the *Pierrot-cerveau* as described by Hugounet escapes the charge of dirty and naturalist through his puppet-like movements, so the Pierrot of *Le bras noir* escapes defilement through exterior rigidity, turning to stone. When threatened by the arm that represents black defilement of white purity, Pierrot retains his purity by ceasing to be human. Purity leads to sterility.

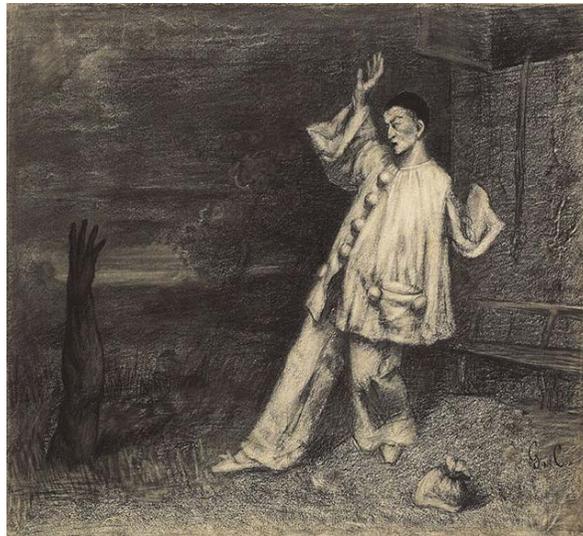


Figure 2. Gustave Courbet, *Le bras noir*. 1856, black pencil on vellum paper, 47.3 x 51.8 cm. Musée des beaux-arts du Canada. Available from: <https://www.beaux-arts.ca/fr/voir/collections/artwork.php?mkey=15489>

The frozen body of Pierrot is here threatened by the hybridity of the black arm reattaching itself. Racial hybridity was a contentious issue in late nineteenth-century anthropology struggling to absorb the Darwinian impact of the descent of man from animals. In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) Darwin had categorised human emotions as mental states connected specifically to

neurological functions and physical expressions that could also be observed in animals, blurring the human/animal distinction:

With mankind some expressions, such as the bristling of the hair under the influence of extreme terror, or the uncovering of the teeth under that of furious rage, can hardly be understood, except of the belief that man once existed in a much lower and animal-like condition.⁵²

As the demarcations between human and animal became more tenuous, so too did the clear lines between human races, producing sterile white bodies both celebrated (Pierrot's defilement cannot continue once he has frozen) and feared (the body can no longer reproduce, threatening the survival of the white race). That Pierrot's frozen, sterile body is threatened by hybridity performatively theorises this complex societal anxiety, the conflicting and contradictory relationship to contamination of the white French artists, critics and audiences of late nineteenth-century French mime.

Conclusion: Twentieth-century mime practitioners and the narrative of the nineteenth century

Energies associated with the “natural” flow through the “natural” Pierrot, what Hugounet terms *Pierrot-ventre*, in his corporeal overflowing, his identification with the working class and his gleeful participation in *la bêtise*—all qualities ascribed in the latter part of the century to the early Pierrot of Deburau, an idealisation based on nostalgia for the “natural” amid industrialisation. Racial, class and gender-inflected societal anxieties over contamination with the natural, with animality, find their expression in the automaton-like Pierrot, *Pierrot-cerveau*, who, as the century wore on, took on increasingly mechanised, spectral and sinister features, while simultaneously engaging in grotesque performance styles such as in Margueritte's *Pierrot assassin de sa femme*.

As the end of the century approached, performers and critics alike attempted to shift Pierrot back to an idealised earlier version of the “natural” Pierrot, the “popular Pierrot” of Deburau. This nostalgia paradoxically existed alongside a disgust for the mime techniques of such performers as Kalpestri and an uneasiness with markers of the organic in the performed body of Pierrot, a paradoxical layering that reveals conflicted feelings toward themes of corporeal contamination via markers of race, gender and class that continually erupted in late nineteenth-century France. These contestations produced a performing body in French mime tradition that was mechanistic in its identification of the body with *automatisme*, expressed through a minimalist gestural style, while simultaneously “natural” in its presumed gestural access to deep emotions and thought.

- ¹ Fernand Desnoyers, *Le Bras Noir, Pantomime En Vers* (Paris: Librairie Théâtrale, 1856).
- ² Paul Margueritte, *Pierrot Assassin De Sa Femme: Pantomime En Un Acte* (Paris: Paul Schmidt, 1882).
- ³ *Bêtise* is often translated as “foolishness” or “stupidity”.
- ⁴ Champfleury, *Souvenirs Des Funambules* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1859).
- ⁵ All translations of texts cited in the original French are mine.
- ⁶ Paul Hugounet, *Mimes Et Pierrots: Notes Et Documents Inédits Pour Servir à l'Histoire De La Pantomime* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1889), 206.
- ⁷ Hugounet, *Mimes Et Pierrots*, 179.
- ⁸ Hugounet, *Mimes Et Pierrots*, 181.
- ⁹ Heinrich von Kleist, “On the Marionette Theatre,” trans. Thomas Neumiller, *The Drama Review* 16:3 (1972): 22-6.
- ¹⁰ Edward Gordon Craig, “The Actor and the Über-Marionette,” *The Mask* 1:2 (1908): 3-15.
- ¹¹ Robert F. Storey, *Pierrots on the Stage of Desire: Nineteenth-Century French Literary Artists and the Comic Pantomime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 290.
- ¹² For more information on the spaces in which late nineteenth and early twentieth-century French pantomimes were performed, see Ariane Martinez, *La Pantomime, Théâtre en Mineur (1880-1945)* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2008).
- ¹³ In *Souvenirs des Funambules* Champfleury writes disparagingly of the working-class audiences in the Théâtre des Funambules, attributing base qualities to them using comparisons to nature and a white as purity/black as filth duality: “When the thugs applaud with their big hands, black like with wings of a raven, cracked like a ravine and strong as an ox horn, it sounds worse than a drum.” Champfleury, *Souvenirs*, 181.
- ¹⁴ See, for example, the description of Pierrot’s face as “une inondation glacée” [an icy flood], Léon Hennique, *Pierrot Sceptique: Pantomime* (Paris: Librairie ancienne et moderne, Édouard Rouveyre, 1881), 6; of Pierrot’s movements as “glacial et calme” [glacial and calm] and “froid” [cold], Jules Laforgue, *Oeuvres Complètes: Les Complaintes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1922), 2, 7); of his body as freezing: “Il a très froid” [He is very cold], Fernand Beissier, *La Lune, Fantaisie-Pantomime En Un Acte Et Trois Tableaux* (Paris: Chaudens fils, 1889), 6.
- ¹⁵ Storey, *Pierrots*, 309.
- ¹⁶ Tristan Rémy, *Georges Wague* (Paris: G. Girard, 1964), 153.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, 153-4.
- ¹⁸ Léon Hennique, *Le Songe d' Une Nuit d'Hiver, Pantomime Inédite* (Paris: A. Ferroud, 1903), 2.
- ¹⁹ Raoul de Najac, *Barbe-Bluette* (Paris: Hennuyer, 1890), 3-6.
- ²⁰ Léo Rouanet. *Le Ventre Et Le Coeur De Pierrot* (Paris: Parvillez, 1888), 3.
- ²¹ Jules Gabriel Janin, *Deburau: Histoire Du Théâtre à Quatre Sous* (Paris: Librairie des bibliophiles, 1881), 69.
- ²² Denis Diderot, *Paradoxe Sur Le Comédien* (Paris: Éditions Nord-Sud, 1949), 36.
- ²³ Hennique, *Le Songe*, 3.
- ²⁴ Beissier, *La Lune*, 2.
- ²⁵ Charles Aubert, “Le Suicide De Pierrot, Pantomime En Un Acte,” in *Pantomimes Modernes*, ed. Charles Aubert (Paris: Flammarion, 1895), 3-4.
- ²⁶ Louisa E. Jones, *Sad Clowns and Pale Pierrots: Literature and the Popular Comic Arts in 19th-Century France* (Lexington: French Forum, 1984), 168.
- ²⁷ Jules Lemaître, *Impressions de théâtre, Troisième série* (Paris: Sorbonne, 1889), 351.
- ²⁸ Charles Baudelaire, “De L'Essence du Rire: Et Généralement du Comique dans les Arts Plastiques,” in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1980), 690-701.
- ²⁹ Émile Zola, *Le Naturalisme Au Théâtre* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2003), 34.
- ³⁰ Zola, *Le Naturalisme*, 36.
- ³¹ Jones, *Sad Clowns*, 154.
- ³² Théodule Armand Ribot, ed., *Revue Philosophique De La France Et De L'Étranger* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1876).
- ³³ Pierre Janet, *L'Automatisme Psychologique: Essai De Psychologie Expérimentale Sur Les Formes Inférieures De L'Activité Humaine* (Paris: Germer-Baillière, Felix Alcan, 1889), 2.
- ³⁴ Janet, *L'Automatisme*, 39.

³⁵ Hennique, *Pierrot sceptique*, 23.

³⁶ Jones, *Sad Clowns*, 136.

For additional analysis on the links between Pierrot's movements and hysteria, see Arnaud Rykner, "Le Spectacle du Hors-Texte: La Pantomime et le Spectaculaire" in *Le Spectaculaire dans les Arts de la Scène du Romantisme à la Belle Époque*, eds. Isabelle Moindrot, Olivier Goetz, Sylvie Humbert-Mougin, Luigi Allegri (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2006) 253-261, and Arnaud Rykner, *Corps Obscènes. Pantomime, Tableau Vivant et Autres Images pas Sages Suivi de Note sur le Dispositif* (Paris: Éditions Orizons, 2014).

³⁷ Aram Vartanian, *Diderot and Descartes: A Study of Scientific Naturalism in the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 58.

³⁸ Julien Offray de la Mettrie, *L'Homme Machine* (Leyde: Elie Luzac, fils, 1748).

³⁹ Théodore de Banville, "Preface," in *Mémoires et Pantomimes des Frères Hanlon Lees, Rédigées par Richard Lesclide, Préface de Théodore de Banville, Gravures à l'Eau Forte de Frédéric Regamey* (Paris: Impr. Reverchon et Vollet, 1880).

⁴⁰ George Henry Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (New York: Grove Press, 1957).

⁴¹ Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (London: Associated University Presses, 1985), 184.

⁴² Roach, *The Player's Passion*, 184.

⁴³ Janin, *Deburau*, 178-181.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 68.

⁴⁵ Margueritte, *Pierrot assassin*, 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 8.

⁵⁰ Jean de Palacio, *Pierrot Fin de Siècle ou les Métamorphoses d'un Masque* (Paris: Librairie Séguier, 1990), 62-66.

⁵¹ Margueritte, *Pierrot assassin*, 9.

⁵² Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1899), 12.