

***HERVÉ
TÉLÉMAQUE***

***A HOPSCOTCH
OF THE MIND***

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**PAINTING BETWEEN TWO DEATHS,
'LA MORT EN CRÉOLE, C'EST AUSSI LE PARADIS'
C.C. McKee**

Hervé Télémaque's is a transitory, recursive painting practice that traverses the Haitian diaspora, the pictorial discourses of figuration and abstraction, and the lack or fullness of psychoanalytic subjectivity between life and death. In Anne Tronche's formalist terms, his work – which spans Cubism, Surrealism, Pop and Narrative Figuration – 'retakes the visual principle of floating forms traversing pictorial space in a state of weightlessness'.¹ In Richard J. Powell's reflection on the artist's career, Télémaque's 'fractious' artistic practices 'harken back to [Édouard] Glissant's theories of an insurgent créolité and produce uncharted, creative passageways in concert with his fellow "fishermen" and wayfarers throughout the greater African diaspora'.² Threaded between these two approaches to his work, the artist's investment in psychoanalytic thought opens a third mode of analytic possibility to explore the distinctly Haitian continuity between life and death as it manifests visually and materially in his oeuvre. Following one line of pictorial strategies that are steeped in both psychoanalysis and Haitian epistemology, Télémaque's paintings conceptualise death not as an expiratory finality, but rather as a site of return.

The indeterminate ontological state between life and death points to the psychoanalytic inflections that Télémaque interleaves within his painterly exploration of Haitian-ness in the Atlantic world. This engagement began in 1957, when he relocated to New York City to study at the Art Students League after the totalitarian president François Duvalier took power in Haiti. He began analysis with Georges Devereux – the founder of ethnopschoanalysis, who sought to develop a universal approach to human culture by bridging psychology and anthropology.³ Drawing from other franco-phone Caribbean engagements, chief among them the Martinican analyst Frantz Fanon, Télémaque's oeuvre visually and materially engages psychoanalysis from the perspective of the African diaspora. Works like *Histoire*

sexuelle (*Sexual History*) (1960), *Portrait de famille* (*Family Portrait*) (1963) [p.92] and *Bannière* (*Les Noms du père*) (1980) emblematises Télémaque's often Lacanian painterly psychoanalysis of the stark racism he first experienced in the US and then in France during the 1960s and 1970s⁴ – a period punctuated by the movement of Négritude, independence in West Africa, *départementalisation* in the Caribbean and La Réunion, and migration from the colonial 'peripheries' to metropolitan France.⁵



Histoire sexuelle, 1960

This essay's title lays bare its aim of weaving a Lacanian conceptualisation of death into Télémaque's engagement with a Haitian funerary poetics. Focusing on the entwined approaches to death in voodoo and psychoanalysis woven throughout the artist's career furnishes a ground to explore his ability to mobilise Haitian epistemology in his critique of (neo-)colonial occidental modernity. *Al l'en Guinée* (*Going to Guinea*) [p.122], the title of a 2019 work, evokes a Kreyol (Creole) expression translated as the 'Return to Guinea' that colloquially expresses the Haitian belief in the soul's final homecoming to West Africa in life after death. The expression reveals the diasporic connections that, in Glissantian terms, reconfigure the flows of the triangular trade that drove the enslavement of Africans and plantation agriculture in the Caribbean.⁶ Just as the Martinican theorist productively drew out the friction between psychoanalysis and the *longue durée* of racialised identity in the Atlantic world, Télémaque's engagement with a Haitian Thanatos puts pressure on Lacan's theorisation of 'being between two deaths'. Developed in relation to Antigone's punishment of entombment, being 'suspended in the zone between life and death', for burying her dishonoured brother in Sophocles' tragedy, the Lacanian concept magnifies the interstices of Freud's death drive (*Todestrieb*).⁷ A correlate to the sexual or life instincts, the death drive is associated with the ego and contrapuntally answers the Darwinian evolutionary 'struggle for existence' with a coterminous destructive aggression towards the external world.⁸ In Lacan's hands, the libidinal counter to this push and pull between life and death is complicated with the third position of 'being-for-death' that embraces autonomous subjectivity as inherently ruptured; it lies in the sublime pleasure within and beyond the limitations of the describable world.⁹ Without indulging the fiction of unitary resolution, Télémaque's paintings examine 'the fragility of being and of existence' in the planetary interstices of the African diaspora.¹⁰

Spanning nearly ten metres, *Al l'en Guinée* is simultaneously dense and weightless, a distilled and distended space that dwells 'between two deaths'. The painting seems to move horizontally, a procession of figures, landscapes, partial and whole things that waver between abstraction and

figuration, a perceptual schema reinforced by Télémaque's description of the painting as 'a hike through life [*une randonnée sur la vie*]'.¹¹ However, the 'hike' staged by the painting refuses linearity in favour of an ambling journey across space and time, life and death. The work's Creole title is rare in Télémaque's oeuvre and reflects the artist's recurring incorporation of Haitian aesthetics and epistemologies into avant-garde painting practices in the Global North. The adage 'Al l'en Guinée' originated with the capture of Africans on the west coast of the continent, their violent transport across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage, and their enslavement on the island before Haitian independence in 1804. Fulfilling the wandering desire to return to Africa, *Al l'en Guinée* aphoristically combats what Orlando Patterson calls the 'social death' experienced by enslaved Afro-Caribbeans who were ontologically alienated from humanity, but held at its margins to shore up the colonial fiction of white supremacy.¹²



Baron Cimetière, 1962

On various occasions throughout his career, Télémaque has evoked the Guede (*Gede*) and Baron (*Bawon*) – the voodoo family of trickster *Iwa* (or spirits) associated with cycles of death and fertility – to grapple with the Creole phrase, where 'death in creole is also paradise'.¹³ Painted shortly after his arrival in Paris, *Baron Cimetière* (*Graveyard Baron*) (1962) emblematises the artist's deft ability to weave voodoo epistememes of death into modernist aesthetics. The work develops a painterly language that straddles figuration and abstraction and engages in a symbolic commentary on contemporary politics. Within the voodoo pantheon, the Guede family of spirits is known for bridging the gap between death, birth, and the pleasures of life with ribald humour cloaked in finery. Donald J. Cosentino characterises

the relationship between the Guede and the Barons as 'Upstairs/downstairs: The Gedes always laugh but the Bawons never do. Bawon kills but the Gedes heal. Bawon is a skeleton but the Gedes are suppurating flesh'.¹⁴ Télémaque's *Baron Cimetière* (*Bawon Simityè*) seems to dispense with his sombre role as the guardian of the cemetery in favour of its jocular and indecorous antipode. As Cosentino remarks, the distinctions between the Baron and Gede are not always clear: 'Names get conflated as do attributes'.¹⁵ Yawning mouths attached to anthropomorphic spheres of grey and green – a common trope in his painting from this period – gape in pleasure and pain, or emerge from the canvas itself ready to bite an insectoid form and digest it in the intestinal lasso that appears in the lower half of the composition. Although executed early in his career, *Baron Cimetière* plays with the political iconicity that would become central to Télémaque's Pop-informed Narrative Figuration in works like *Banania I* (1964) [p.78] and *Mère-Afrique* (1982) [p.82]. A cartoonish skull is framed by a circular black

abyss. The white linear marks that appear on the mass of black strokes dividing the composition are reminiscent of the *vévés* drawn on the ground in flour or cornmeal to evoke the *Iwa* during a voodoo ceremony. Although he would not return to his natal isle until 1973, Télémaque's evocation of Baron Cimetièrè also comments on contemporary Haitian politics. Painted one year after François Duvalier was re-elected president in a sham election where he was the only candidate, Télémaque metaphorically addresses the extrajudicial murders of his regime by referring to the voodoo spirit upon whom Duvalier based his own *noiriste* public image. The dictator was known for donning Baron Samedi's black top hat, tailcoat and dark glasses. In the otherworldly gravity of the canvas, life and death, the lack of desire and the voracious pleasure of *jouissance* commingle in the horror of violence and the promise of return.¹⁶

Baron Samedi, often considered the leader of the Gede, appears in *Le Voyage d'Hector Hyppolite en Afrique (The Voyage of Hector Hyppolite in Africa)* (2000) [p.88], an homage to Hector Hyppolite, the father of modern Haitian painting affiliated with the Centre d'Art and admired by the Surrealists André Breton and Wifredo Lam.¹⁷ The larger-than-life figure of Baron Samedi takes centre stage on a ground of large geometric forms in shades of teal, turquoise and aquatic blues. His body is divided between black and white at the waist; his suit is marked with linear *vévé*-esque patterning and resonant with the names of African and diasporic dictators recorded in the upper-right quadrant. This split captures the duality of the *Iwa* between life and death as the Baron points out to sea, sending an abstracted corpse rendered in red on its journey back to Africa marked by a trinity of black crosses. These dualisms are not only cultural or spiritual for Télémaque, but the innovation of Haitian painting also posits aesthetic and formal lineages for his own work. In a 1990 interview, he describes 'a duality in Haitian naive art. To one side, the representational models of an occidental type ...[that] produce all sorts of terrestrial paradises. To the other side, with all that touches sculpture, appears the conceptual sector of Haitian art which has a commanding presence today'.¹⁸ One can glimpse these lineages in the flattened treatment of space and form that would typically be folded into a modernist schema. Gérard Durozoi similarly draws out the thematic and formal trajectory from the earlier *Baron Cimetièrè* to this work by making connections across the artist's career and his trip to Benin in 1999, pointing to 'his habitual engagement as an undertaker: from the effervescence of the 1962 canvas to the calm imposed on that from 2001'. Comparing the two, 'one can measure, alongside an evolution of his painting, the route of a "subject" that is as much the painting as its motif'.¹⁹ Durozoi's observation of subjectivity's entanglement with painting itself in this work returns us to Télémaque's psychoanalytic and Haitian engagement

with death. Curiously, the painting seems to flip the assumed direction of the *Al l'en Guinée* if we presume the journey travels from west to east across the Atlantic Ocean. Baron Samedi and his black crosses move in the opposite direction, from left to right, disorienting the spatial logic of the African diaspora. He serves as a charonic guide to traverse the gaps between life, death and being-for-death that Lacan considers 'a barrier to the Other-thing that lies beyond'.²⁰

While the Baron is not figured in *Al l'en Guinée*, the work picks up his ethos and formally captures a non-linear flux and flow between death and paradise, Africa and the diaspora, with the rectangular blue form that bisects the canvas. Two triangular vectors – one a rich blue, the other a red ground scumbled with a flurry of superimposed grey strokes – are reflected across this permeable boundary, momentarily holding the eye at the heart of the composition before rippling across it again. Alexia Guggémos interprets this form as a 'blue door, central frame and separation' that 'erects a passage ... from one universe to another, abolishing time'.²¹ The right half of the composition progressively dissolves the material universe of the living as it moves from the blue-grey Tuareg figure, who both looks on and leads the procession, to a landscape vignette that conflates the mountainous mesas of Haiti with crater lake Toba of Indonesia, and finally to the piecemeal assemblage of what the artist



Gustave Courbet, *Un enterrement à Ornans*, 1849-50

characterises as 'a dancing or suffering body' composed of a man's vest, a woman's leg and pursed hot pink lips.²² Like the directionless mourners assembled before an open grave in Courbet's *Un enterrement à Ornans* (*Burial at Ornans*) (1849-50), these representational passages swirl before the threshold in Télémaque's own monumental painterly rumination on death.

Departing from Courbet's vision constrained to the material world, Télémaque's Narrative Figuration, inflected by Surrealism and Pop, emerges opposite the 'door'. This is the realm of the mythic return to Guinea in death as a continuity of life announced with the inscription of '*Al l'en Guinée*' in the negative space of primed canvas between two forms that vacillate between boulders and topographical renderings of South Africa's desiccated lakes. A suspended dice – its shade of pink echoed in the donkey who recurs in Télémaque's lexicon as symbolic of the Haitian traveller – throws the viewer towards the Barons at the margins of Port-au-Prince's Grand Cimetière, where death and luck mingle on the gaming table.²³ The cohabitation of life and afterlife through the Haitian lens of African diasporic return are reinforced with Télémaque's

characteristic cheek by two other inscriptions on the canvas. 'The big nothing' announces the first phrase that appears like graffiti on the side of a weightless stone. The second is a maths equation, '5-5=0', that begins to slide off the picture plane before the zero comes full circle. These linguistic additions all point to nothingness and the abyssal lack of the psychoanalytic subject across life and death, veiled by the illusory autonomy and fullness constructed in relation to the Other. While the rectilinear portal at the centre of the canvas ostensibly affirms this Lacanian split self that results from desire for the Other, Télémaque slyly undermines the distinction on the left-hand side of the composition by inscribing '*fin mort*' on top of a nail, an object deployed throughout the artist's painted and sculpted oeuvre and freighted with signifying ambivalences.

This nail in the coffin, as it were, furnishes an alternative painterly and Haitian understanding of being between two deaths that departs from the psychoanalytic model. For Lacan, access to the death drive is mediated by knowledge of 'the signifier in its most radical form, insofar as the subject articulates a signifying chain that he comes up against: the fact that he may disappear from the chain of what he is'.²⁴ Where the representational evocation of the Baron in *Baron Cimetière* and *Le Voyage d'Hector Hyppolite en Afrique* served to articulate the continuity of life in death, *Al l'en Guinée* transforms the Creole expression into a material manifestation of the interstice. Here, the Haitian subject always understood his proximity to the Other in the signifying chains that bound African diasporic peoples to enslavement, but gaps in the links promise an eventual return where being-for-death relativises the distinction between two deaths. Télémaque formally engages the potential renewal of being in-between at the 'end' of this weightless conglomeration. Rapidly hatched strokes of baby blue float atop a mass of loosely brushed dusty pink. This columnar element faces its geometricised counter in the undulating and sharply delineated field of yellow shaded with black wash that pushes against the edge of the picture plane. This formal relationship frames the negative space of the canvas as a third element, subtly evoked by the breast-like form and its flesh tone that permeates the space between. The vertical interval dissolves the dialectical distinction between negative and positive space and disrupts the horizontal procession of the canvas, catching the seafaring souls on their tortuous journey, where death is also paradise.

1

Anne Tronche, *Hervé Télémaque* (Paris: Flammarion, 2003), p. 49.

2

Richard J. Powell, 'The Brown Paper Bag Test: Hervé Télémaque's Exploded Discourse', *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, vol. 42-43, November 2018, p. 236.

3

Georges Devereux, *Reality and Dream: Psychotherapy of a Plains Indian*, second edition (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 39; Alessandra Cerea, 'Culture and psychism: the ethnopsychanalysis of Georges Devereux', *History of Psychiatry*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2018, p. 301.

4

Télémaque has often commented on the connection between his experience of American anti-Black racism and the limitations he felt as a mixed-race artist in New York. See Tronche, *Op. cit.*, pp. 25-34; Alexia Guggémos, *Confidence d'Hervé Télémaque: entretiens avec Alexia Guggémos* (Paris: Somogy, 2015), p. 27.

5

For further reading on the status of francophone Africans in metropolitan France during and after the struggle for independence see: Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga, 'Paint It "Black": How Africans and Afro-Caribbeans Became "Black" in France', in *Black France / France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, Trica Danielle Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Tyler Stovall (ed.) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Tyler Stovall, 'Race and the Making of the Nation: Blacks in Modern France', in *Diasporic Africa: A Reader*, Michael A. Gomez (ed.) (New York: New York University Press, 2006). My thanks to Emily Leifer for her assistance in compiling this bibliography.

6

Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990); John E. Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

7

Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-60: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, Dennis Porter (trans.) (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 280.

8

Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 'The Ego and the Id', 'Civilization and Its Discontents', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, James Strachey, vol. XVIII, XIX, XXI (London: Hogarth Press, 1955, 1961).

9

Lacan, *Op. cit.*, pp. 306-309.

10

Christian Briend, *Hervé Télémaque* (Paris: Somogy, 2015), p. 43.

11

Alexia Guggémos, ' "Al l'en Guinée", la Grande Randonnée d'Hervé Télémaque', *UNik*, 5 April 2019, <https://unik-artmag.com/herve-telemaque-al-len-guinee-la-grande-randonnee/>.

12

Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 35-76.

13

Hervé Télémaque, *Écrits, entretiens* (Paris: Beaux-Arts de Paris Éditions, 2015), p. 165; see also the interview with Paul Coulon included in this volume.

14

Donald J. Cosentino, 'Gede Rising', in *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-Century Haitian Art* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum, 2012), p. 29.

15

Ibid.

16

Néstor A. Braunstein, 'Desire and Jouissance in the teachings of Lacan', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, Jean-Michel Rabaté (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 102-115. Braunstein, synthesising Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, contends that desire and *jouissance* are antinomic poles. 'If desire is fundamentally lack, lack in being, *jouissance* is positivity, it is a "something" lived by a body when pleasure stops being pleasure. It is a plus, a sensation that is beyond pleasure.' (*Ibid.*, p. 104.

17

André Breton, *Surrealisme et la peinture* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1965), p. 311; Michel-Philippe Lerebours, *Haïti et ses peintres: Souffrances et Espoirs d'un Peuple* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimeur II, 1989), p. 309; Selden Rodman, *Renaissance in Haiti: Popular Painters in the Black Republic* (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948).

18

Jacques Gourgue, 'Entretien de Jacques Gourgue avec Hervé Télémaque, peintre', in *Écrits, entretiens: Hervé Télémaque*, Pascal Le Thorel (ed.) (Paris: Beaux-Arts de Paris Éditions, 2015), p. 192.

19

Guggémos, *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

20

Lacan, *Op. cit.*, p. 298.

21

Guggémos, "Al l'en Guinée", la Grande Randonnée d'Hervé Télémaque, *Op. cit.*

22

Ibid.

23

Karen McCarthy Brown, 'The "Veve" of Haitian Vodou: A Structural Analysis of Visual Imagery', PhD dissertation, Temple University, Philadelphia, 1976, p. 10. Dice are also associated with astragalomancy, practices derived from divination with bones. The dice also appears in Kerry James Marshall's *When Frustration Threatens Desire* (1990), one of the artist's canvases that incorporates Afro-Atlantic spiritual imagery.

24

Lacan, *Op. cit.*, p. 303.