

MENTAL STRUCTURES, MILITARY MUSIC: *l'enfant phare* and the *Jura-Paris* road

We can hear an echo of Marcel Duchamp's 1912 journey to Étival in the title of Andre Breton's 1936 essay *Phare de la Mariée* and then read about it, more specifically, in monographs and interviews of the 1950s and 60s.ⁱ Information is sparse. Nevertheless, these commentaries agree that the journey had been a catalyst for later developments in Duchamp's practice. His writing that followed seems to indicate a future project, which did not materialise. His early interpreters, for want of anything more substantial, rely on quotations drawn from Duchamp's own elliptical notes on the subject. Consequently, we came to recognise his *dramatis personae* and the rhythms and repetitions of his language but learned little more from the strange textual fragments that survive. Duchamp's utterances on the subject were economical at best. When asked by Pierre Cabanne about the journey in his 1967 *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp*, he avoids the question altogether and with this it becomes clear that explanations concerning *la route Jura-Paris* will not come easily.ⁱⁱ

After Breton's visionary reading, Linda Dalrymple Henderson was the first to hold a more brilliant light over the darkness of the road with her scientific analysis in 'Duchamp in Context' (1998).ⁱⁱⁱ Henderson also develops a view of the episode as a 'hilarious' flight across France in the company of his bohemian friends, Francis Picabia, Guillaume Apollinaire and Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia. The recreational habits of this group suggest that the journey would have had its high points and be supplemented with the adequate stimulants necessary to keep eyes open-wide, while neutralising its particular discomforts and *longeurs*.^{iv} This interpretation imagines the journey as the resource for a succession of word games and punning vocalizations between the tourists that leads eventually to Duchamp's enthusiasm for the linguistic *double entendres* that began to appear in his work, an example of which will be discussed in this paper.

Henderson's attractive hypothesis reflects the literary enthusiasms of the group and of course this stimulating atmosphere would have been evident for a time. However an assessment of the particular conditions of the journey, the terrible weather, the certainty of breakdown and puncture, the extreme range for a motor journey at that time, the limited period for recovery and repair before the return with the probability of enduring the same conditions all over again, all encourage a revision of this view. The severity of the experience elicits, I think, a more sober reading of the notes and I think I

a darker, more obsessive compulsion emerges from them. They give the impression of being overshadowed by external events.

Duchamp's notes are known, generically, as *la route Jura-Paris* and the first of these was published in a miscellany of other facsimile notes for his major work *La Mariée mise à nu par ses Célibataires, même*. They were collected and assembled into identical collections of *la Boite Verte* (1934), which Duchamp distributed in 300 copies amongst a circle of friends and collectors. Twenty years later, in 1958, they were published in an edition of Duchamp's writings called *Duchamp du Signe* and this publication made the strange details of the journey available to a general readership.^v

The note in *the Green Box*, describes a situation where the travellers communicate through a form of mutual telepathy that initiates them into a testing sequence of coordinated manoeuvres. The route is defined as a topographical abstraction, which ignores the cultural landmarks that might attract more conventional tourists. Instead of an account of a wet and windy journey in an open car, we find Duchamp speculating on the advantages of a networked capability that connects the four protagonists; configuring them efficiently so that a sequence of operational manoeuvres can be achieved. The objectives are not clear, although the aim appears to be simple; to secure and subjugate the Jura-Paris road. To this end, his tourists, their vehicle, the road as well as the actual terrain of France, between the Jura and Paris become hybridised into one reciprocal operating system. Duchamp describes *la route Jura-Paris* as if viewed on a screen across which the salient features of the route are sensed, analysed, engaged and overcome. *La route Jura-Paris* relates to another note by Duchamp, from the same pre-war period, where he recommends the potential of battlefield *téléphonique* communication systems as a macabre way of reviving the limbs of maimed and mutilated soldiers.^{vi} Within this *téléphonique* network he proposes ways of reconfiguring severed limbs and organs into serviceable units in order to stabilise troop numbers, thus eliminating the need for compulsory military service – which, in actuality Duchamp bitterly resents and opposes^{vii}. This macabre note is called *Éloignement* and conveys, along with *la route Jura-Paris*, an inventory of Duchamp's preoccupations concerning the military that range from the personal to the general and in each case he recommends a singular course of action.

As with the majority of children, who grew up in this period, Marcel Duchamp's schooling and early life would be infused with *revanchiste* ideals and the military aspirations that accompanied them. His two elder brothers began their national service in 1895 and 1897 – but unlike Duchamp, of whom no photographs exist in infantry uniform, the two brothers frequently appear as soldiers and used this military experience in artistic subject matter that patriotically affirms their military obligation.

If this lack of photographic evidence serves to illustrate Duchamp's *éloignement* from military service in 1905 it was not so in 1895 when as an eight-year old he readily dresses-up at family gatherings in made-up military costumes. His earliest recorded childhood drawings are also of soldiers, perhaps of his brothers. One, a cavalryman, is seen astride a horse, another sounding the fanfare and a third shows them in a file of determined men. These were made in the first year of the Dreyfus affair. It has not been established whether or not the internecine hostilities of the *affaire* affected life at home, nevertheless, they would automatically bring into relief the prestige and honour of the army in which the two brothers, so identifiably served. Duchamp's military service coincided exactly with the travesty of Dreyfus' second trial at Rennes, his reconviction, eventual exoneration and humiliating re-assimilation into the army at reduced rank. In this context, it is unsurprising that Duchamp was determined to find ways to end his military service. As long as Duchamp continued as a corporal in the reserves he would remain morbidly attuned to the army's operational shortcomings.^{viii} With his ongoing campaign to avoid military service very much on his mind, perhaps we can see a context for the brooding, themes of territorial occupation, colonial conquest and military and religious fundamentalism that make their appearance in different forms across the notes of the *Jura-Paris road*.

It is clear from Duchamp's comments, however that, as with his observations on the potential of *téléphonique* communications; measures to train troops into military preparedness lagged some way behind his own hypothetical formulations. His hybrid entities that sought to 'dominate' the Jura-Paris road were reliant on the potential of mental cohesion and subtle collaboration that was somewhat in advance of military thinking and capability. His principles of attuned surveillance and mobile, interconnected campaigning might conceivably be in development in some occult and paranoid department of the Pentagon today, but came too early to come into effect in French army of 1912.

Perceptions about the *Jura-Paris road* begin to change in 1983 with the publication of a new body of notes discovered soon after Duchamp's death in 1968. The new collection was edited by Alexina Duchamp's son Paul Matisse and is now referred to, more familiarly as the *Matisse Notes*^{ix}. Included are three new entries on the Jura-Paris road and these are in marked contrast to the original note. We see in them the same sense of order with machine analogies and a similar constellation of characters that appear in *The Green Box*. Missing from the *Matisse notes*, however, is the fixation on topology and fluctuating dimension that create the hallucinatory twist in *the Green Box*. In place of this, we find the application of Christian iconography to the language of occupation and somehow caught up amongst these, possibly even leading the way is the radiant, mystical aura of *l'enfant phare*.

The identity of the *enfant phare* turns on its punning association with the phrase *en fanfare*, a musical term that is associated with marching formations of military bandsmen who epitomise co-ordinated efficiency. The transformation of *l'enfant phare* into the anglophone 'headlight child' ignores this relationship. It takes the essential concept of a co-ordinated group of like-minded individuals, and replaces the sophisticated network they represent – erroneously in my view – with the solitary condition of the *headlight child*.^x The mechanically determined concept of the vehicle headlight, emblemising a pre-adolescent deity leads inevitably to the elevation of *l'enfant phare* as a figurehead and so on to Duchamp himself. If we think of Duchamp at the time we must recognise the improbability of this elevation. He was 25 and the youngest member on the Jura trip. Today he might conceivably be thought of as an *enfant phare*, whose influence stretches forward into the century as a car headlight might purposefully do. Few would deny the long trajectory of Duchamp's reputation or its phenomenal effect on the course of 20th /21st century art, but in 1912 his position in the art world was more tenuous with many in his peer group viewing him with suspicion, even disdain. Unless he was more upbeat about his credentials than he had actual cause to feel, the status of the *enfant phare* as surrogate for Duchamp falls rather flat in this motor vehicle with its complement of competing egos and recognisable artistic achievements. Duchamp's own sense of self-preservation would have vetoed *headlight child* as a reckless hubris.

The term *phare* did not have the probing connotations that ‘headlight’ has today. Surely, the term *phare* was closer in 1912 to the idea of a flare, or a luminance of some kind, even a halo? The lines in note 109 of Matisse affirm their mystical significance when he states: *Cette machine à 5 cœurs devra enfanter le phare. Ce phare sera l’enfant-Dieu, rappelant assez le Jésus des primitifs*, in later description he is *rayonner de gloire* and so the luminous *phare* accrues the glorious radiance surrounding the Christ child. The term *phare* inhabits the softer corolla of acetylene lighting, rather than the harsh electro-mechanical headlights, which were, in any case unavailable for production cars in 1912. Picabia’s vehicle would be fitted with acetylene lights, which, in truth were only sufficient to indicate a vehicle’s presence on the dark road, and not intended as an attachment to illuminate the way. So if this reading is accepted the *enfant phare*’s headlights are dimmed to escape the burdens of the precocious *child* presented for others to see and follow.

And so how is *l’enfant phare* to be interpreted in terms of the military connotations of *en fanfare*? The journey was taken at the end of October. The period coincided with the end of the military manoeuvres conducted by the army at this time as part of its annual exercises. The hardening international animosity would expose the partisan differences between the tourists on the journey when set against this crossing terrain of troop formations along the roads with files of soldiers on the move and maintaining their right of way over civilian traffic. The grand military migration that saw the close of the autumn manoeuvres and the return to barracks, across northern France in 1912, coincides with the time of this journey and gives a clue to the expeditionary context and implacable language in the notes.

In October 1912 the sound of *le fanfare*, projecting forwards at the head of columns of marching men begin to prevail over the probing technical determinism of the *headlight child*. Regimental bands preceded military units on the move, setting the pace and creating added panache where needed. France was on a war footing, and this military posturing provoked Duchamp to define an anti-militarism of which the *Jura-Paris Road* and its embedded *fanfare*, as well as the *Éloignement* note and its macabre suggestion are, in fact, key examples. Within these notes, Duchamp posits a theory of distributed mind as an agent of relief in extremis. Nevertheless, the marching soldiers passing Picabia’s vehicle, on the side of the road, would not be unduly troubled by their deficiencies in this theoretical advantage. While keeping in step and developing the mental strategies that would neutralise their own discomforts and *longeurs* and without

recourse to the recreational stimulants that might otherwise be used, the passing troops would remain in tune with their comrades in the file as well as with *le fanfare* ahead of them; moving in much the same fashion as that conceived by the 25 year old tourist on the wayside – without actually thinking very much of it. As an expeditionary force, bent on subjugating the road and mastering its fluctuations and dimensional uncertainties they merge into a connected intelligence that adjusts to the business of determining the change in an unpredictable terrain. Even if their objectives are unclear to them, their actions nevertheless demonstrate intentional behaviour and a proprioceptive ability to adjust. The army prided itself, with good reason, on the endurance of its marching soldiers but Duchamp seems to suggest with *la route Jura-Paris* that it would need more than these straightforward attainments in order to prevail in the technological conflict ahead.

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ⁱⁱ CABANNE, P. 1971. *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*. London: Thames and Hudson. p. 36

ⁱⁱⁱ HENDERSON, L, D. 1998. *Duchamp in Context: Science and Technology in the 'Large Glass' and Related Works*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. pp 37-39

^{iv} CABANNE, P. *ibid.* p 32.

^v DUCHAMP, M. 1973. *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand du sel)*. SANOUILLET, M. ed. & PETERSON, E. trans. New York: Oxford University Press. Reprinted as *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*. 1989. New York: Da Capo Press. pp26-27

^{vi} DUCHAMP, M. 1973. *Ibid.* p23.

^{vii} It is pertinent that the *Éloignement* note was written while the general staff were still negotiating the funding of field telephones for its regiments in July 1914.

^{viii} See Kieran Lyons' doctoral thesis: 'Conscripting the Jura-Paris road: military themes in the work of Marcel Duchamp' 2008. University of Wales, Newport.

^{ix} DUCHAMP, M. 1983. *Marcel Duchamp, Notes*. MATISSE, P. ed/ trans. Boston: G.K Hall & Co. Notes 109-111 (unpaginated).

^x George Heard Hamilton translated the Duchamp's notes for the Sanouillet's edition, arriving at the modern interpretation of the noun '*le phare*' and attributing this mechanistic term to Duchamp's more nuanced conception.