

The Pier, the Bandstand and the Electric Picture Palace: Marcel Duchamp in 1913.

I wonder what Marcel Duchamp would have made of the offshore wind turbines on the horizon beyond the pier at Herne Bay? The artist who harnessed unorthodox systems to generate rotating devices would have been drawn by the distant installation out on the Kent Levels. Without the turbines, what would have occupied him when he came here? The postcards he sent give little away. He offers assurances of his sister's continued good spirits, but that's about all. Yvonne, at seventeen was his junior by about eight years and no doubt delighted to spend this time with the older brother. She had already sat for his portraits and, along with her sister Magdeleine, had been the subject of the more ambitious painting '*Yvonne et Magdeleine Dechequitée*'. This was painted on the family holiday in August, the previous year, at Veules-les Roses in Normandy. Perhaps more significantly, she (again with Magdeleine) had helped to instigate and perform one of the difficult vocal parts in his randomly atonal work '*Érratum Musical*' – Yvonne would, therefore, have had a, pretty sound, working understanding of the imperatives that drove her brother's very unconventional practice. By 1913, he had given up painting and so needed less paraphernalia around him – no easels, no

special materials. The notes and sketches that he made at Herne Bay could easily have been scribbled in deckchairs along Marine Parade.

Scholars, artists as well as local groups are keen to learn more about his visit to Herne Bay. With its spectacular entertainment programme, so unlike the quiet resorts on the Normandy coast, admittedly, with better beaches than the shingle here, but offering little else in the way of commercial attractions – might not his first visit to England deserve more than a scholarly footnote? We will look at the town to see what it might offer to a visiting French artist and his younger sister. Recent scholarship from Jeremy Millar and Glenn Harvey has shown how a local colony of sand wasps may point to the appearance of the ‘wasp’ in the descriptive language for the voracious female protagonist, ‘The Bride’ in the ‘The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, even’ and we can begin to wonder about the levels of torment, fear and paranoia that these creatures can engender. More benignly, the English style of sash window may have shaped the two-panel design of the ‘Large Glass’ and if so this may also be attributable to his stay in Herne Bay. Any analysis has to consider the pier, which was, one of the longest in Britain, but also the key to the town’s visitor attraction. However determining the outline of the pier in 2013 is a bit like determining Duchamp’s stay a century ago. The beginning and end

points are verifiably there but the intervening features have all but disappeared.

On the pier bawdy music-hall deliveries jockeyed with seaside farce; the newer technologies relating to film were to be found elsewhere – but all these competed with the novelty of electric, outdoor illumination and so we remember that it was the pier and its brand new electric lighting that Duchamp singles out when he recollects:

An electric fete recalling the decorative lighting of Magic city or Luna Park. Or the Pier Pavilion at Herne Bay.

Duchamp's statement is notable in equating the brash-sprawl of Coney Island's entertainment complex with this taut ribbon of light extending outwards over the undulating water.

Dissatisfactions

Duchamp's life was about as undemanding as he might wish, by now. An easy job in a prestigious Paris library, and additional financial support from his father meant that he was reasonably independent. He now enjoyed the esteem of artists and writers, he had been profiled in Apollinaire's monograph on cubism, and his paintings had sold and been sensationally successful in America. Although the American money had

yet to appear, he was confident that it would and on balance, things should have contributed to a feeling of wellbeing. Yet, just before his sojourn to Herne Bay, Duchamp wrote to his friend Walter Pach in New York telling him that he was planning this trip to England and reporting: "I am very depressed at the moment and I do absolutely nothing. These are short unpleasant moments."

Internal despondency need not necessarily be attributed to external causes but if one was to be sought, perhaps we might go no further than consider the fact of his baby daughter who was born in 1911. His feelings about the infant remain unrecorded but it is doubtful whether he saw very much of her, but it is probable that he was given little opportunity to do so. Jeanne Serre, the baby's mother, perceiving Duchamp to be the unreliable breadwinner that he would surely have become, seems quickly to have settled with the successful businessman Henry Mayer who evidently provided the paternal love that Yvonne needed; this would leave Duchamp on the periphery of a relationship that he seems to have accepted. Given his father's bourgeois standards and his need to stay on good terms with him it is probable also that the child would be kept a secret.

If we can believe that he remained unaffected by this, we might consider a second relationship, this time with the avant-garde musician Gabrielle Buffet who was also the wife of his closest friend Francis

Picabia. Duchamp became infatuated with Gabrielle around the time of the debacle with Jeanne Serre, but Gabrielle seems to have kept his fixations in check by directing them along the lines of her own commitment to 'pure' atonal forms of music with its emphasis on process.¹ So surely, therefore, it's possible to see Gabrielle's influence in a work such as *'Erratum Musical'*, which looks forward to and seems to pave the way towards his *'3 Stoppages Étalon'* and so it is unlikely that his infatuation—even with its maddening lack of erotic completion—would have caused the despondent tone in his letter to Walter Pach.

The Three-Year Law

We need to consider political changes in France and her preparations for war with Germany to gather a better understanding of Duchamp's sense of malaise. He might well shrug off the responsibilities over parenthood and continue to yearn for Gabrielle, but escaping the reach of the army who wanted him for his second tour of duty would be a different thing altogether and I suggest that his attempts to avoid conscription are closer to the heart of his brooding disquiet. In 1905 he had exploited a loophole by volunteering two years before his official time, to minimise his period of service. This had rankled with the army and it aimed to change the law.

...no longer will it be possible for the sons of rich parents to escape with one years service by going through the farce of taking up the *carrière libérale* of a lawyer, doctor, or artist which he has not the slightest intention of pursuing, whilst the humble peasant has to bear the burden and the heat of the day in the shape of the full three years' service. (PRO.WO.33.363 1905:54)

More work is needed on the effect to a sheltered teen-ager, entering the hard world of a conscript infantry regiment, composed entirely of older men; but the sociologist Josefa Joyteko's official report to the French High Command entitled *L'entraînement et fatigue au point de vue militaire* of 1905 gives a measured account of the grim environment Duchamp would enter.² Joteyko's recommendations for a shorter period of service were ignored and in May 1913, a month or so before Duchamp wrote to Pach, conscription was extended to three years; soldiers, nearing the end of their period, suddenly found that they were now detained for a further twelve months, causing troops to mutiny across France.³ This must have prompted his extraordinary note, published in the 'Box of 1914' emphatically stating his opposition to military service. The note is unique within Duchamp's work in that it can be traced to an actual situation.⁴ Duchamp must have written it in the days after May 1913, when the army's plans to increase conscription came into affect. Although the new policy aimed to increase military manpower by a

third, the measure did not achieve the complementary number of NCOs who tended to be longer-term professionals. In spite of his youth and antipathy to the army, Duchamp was now a corporal and it must have been clear that the legislation would demand an early recall of conscripted NCOs. Since 1909, however, he had been appealing for a discharge on medical grounds. It seems likely that the uncertainty over his appeal weighed heavily and would cause his dispirited tone in the letter to Walter Pach.

Herne Bay Military Music

On arriving in Herne Bay in August 1913, Duchamp's response to the prevalence of British army regulars would have raised disturbing anxieties over his uncertain military status in France. These soldiers were chiefly bandsmen from different regiments, all on entertainment duty, and all dispensing a robust regimental bonhomie towards the civilian audiences who flocked to see and hear them play. There was no escaping the sight and sound of military bandsmen, variously stationed around the town, paraded in ceremonial kit at key entertainment spots.

This contrasted with France where, following the disgrace of the army after Dreyfus in 1905, measures were taken by Republican administrations to curb the army's more visible manifestations. One measure was to limit the use of military bands at non-official public

functions. The silence, this achieved, was so effective that restrictions were even imposed on the emblematic use of buglers to summon men to their duties. Although these measures were now being relaxed, the performance of music in public places by military units was still uncommon in 1913 and when it did occur was frequently viewed with resentment.

British regiments, by comparison, successfully maintained highly popular brass bands for public parades while their prestigious string orchestras played at gala concerts and fetes; leavening martial music with extracts from the operatic repertoire. In Herne Bay, such bands were a regular feature of the weekly entertainment schedule organised by the Urban District Council and prominently advertised in the Herne Bay Gazette. The town had one resident orchestra, which was generally seconded out to the pier head, where it played to the incoming and departing passenger boats. The District Council, therefore, relied, on military bands to perform in concerts at the Grand Pier Pavilion, the King's Hall Bandstand and Tower Gardens.⁵ A measure of their popularity and sophistication is demonstrated by their weekly celebrity recitals and concerts at the Grand Pier Pavilion performing to crowds of anything up to 2,000 visitors at a time.

In contrast to this municipal outreach, the widespread resentment in France would form the background to Duchamp's appeal to the army

board against further military service. The details of the appeal, on medical grounds, are insufficiently known and need further research. His own explanation of a 'heart condition', is somewhat undermined by his dedication to competing at tennis and the postcards that he sent from Herne Bay to this effect only weaken the claim.

Cinema

Away from the pier and the bandstand, distractions would be found in the allure of the two electric picture theatres. Entering the foyers of the 'The Grand' or the 'Paragon Electric' on the High Street, their names displayed in incandescent light bulbs,⁶ audiences were promised the dazzle of day for night, the essential frisson that electric picture theatres traded in. Entranceways, conceived in an arrangement of mirrored décor and multi-coloured electric light provided a spectacular preamble to cinema, promising the thrill of action, danger, romance, seduction and of course anonymity. Whether the glamorous illusion lingered once audiences were evacuated into the malodorous back allies after the show is another matter. The bland disappointment of the street could be addressed by a return through the glittering entrance three days later at the start of the new programme.⁷

Competition between the electric picture theatres can be seen in their claims over cleanliness and hygiene. They aimed for the elevated tone that separated them from the more unruly music halls like the 'Bijou' further down the High Street. Electric picture theatres would employ small palm-court orchestras with a conductor who arranged the film-music from pre-selected scores, chosen to approximate the mood of the film – although this was frequently a fairly loose fit. Reviews in the Herne Bay Gazette rarely commented on the musical accompaniment, the target audience was the average 'Britisher', of conventional taste, confident of empire and through the Gazette's continuous reporting, informed about and wary of the impending international crisis.

Herne Bay Gazette March 9 1913

March 8th 1913. Report on a magic lantern lecture at the Connaught Hotel, Herne Bay.

Defence of Empire

'If France at any time became German property it is evident [that Germany] with its army of 3,000,000 men and a navy equal to, or superior to our own, our little island would not long remain British property.'

Almost all of the films screened during Duchamp's stay in Herne Bay were shot in 1913 and so film carried an immediacy that formed an essential part of their attraction. The American Imperial Company's

production of 'Ivanhoe' was advertised in the Herne Bay Gazette and screened at 'The Grand' the week after its release after being shot on location in Chepstow in June 1913. For Duchamp, the attraction of these English films would be that they spoke an international silent language through the slower rhythms of visual and musical communication only.

Selsior

Film projectors, in this period were all hand cranked, causing problems with synchronization between the movie and the live orchestral musicians. Projectionists had a tendency to follow the rhythm of the music, slowing down and quickening in accordance with the score rather than maintaining the steady tempo required by the machine. A novel solution was screened at 'The Grand' (16th- 20th August) in a film called 'The Evening News Waltz (Always Gay)'. This was a 'Dancing' film and in it problems of tempo were resolved by featuring the conductor, in this case a celebrity figure, who appeared on screen, with the dancers as part of the action.⁸ It now became a simple matter for the projectionist to crank steadily through the film so that the actual musicians, playing in the auditorium below could follow the gestures through the virtual conductor that he now manipulated. The simplicity of this idea translated into a satisfactory method of communicating at a distance, achieving a convincing synthesis between the depicted world and the

actual world of the orchestra .⁹ In the film, the two-dimensional conductor, unconditionally dictating the musical tempo, appeared powerfully extended above the heads of the labouring musicians as the personification of a superior being in an illusive dimension dictating terms to an inferior group struggling in the physical realm below. A similar relationship would inform the structural dissatisfactions that exist between Duchamp's *Bride and Bachelors* in the two sections of the 'Large Glass'.

East Lynne

When music hall comedians needed a laugh, before leaving the stage, a common catchphrase would be: "thank you ladies and gentlemen, coming next we have ... dah! daah! ... 'East Lynne'!" The gag depended on knowing that although the announcement was spurious, the 'East Lynne' story, because of its popularity was rehashed by the studios in subsequent versions with hard-headed, commercial regularity. Audiences would know, however, that the next week's programme, already listed and advertised, would not be 'East Lynne'. There had been many adaptations of the story since its author Ellen Wood released her 'sensation' novel in 1861.¹⁰ First on stage and then as a film where versions of the same unhappy tale gave succeeding leading ladies the chance to re-articulate the sad, silent, decline of Lady Isabel Carlyle.

Notable versions were released in 1903, 1908, 1912, but Duchamp's visit to Herne Bay did, in fact coincided with the release of a new one with Blanche Forsythe, Fred Paul and Rachel de Solla in the leading roles.¹¹

'East Lynne' is the second movie to suggest a connection with Duchamp's practice, albeit for different reasons than 'The Evening News Waltz' – it was screened on August 9, 10 and 11th at the 'Bijou Theatre'. If Nat Travers the popular 'coster' comedian, or Winifred Lynn, sharing this billing tried the same well-worn gag on their audiences that week, it would be with the extra twist that the promise was good and that a new 'East Lynne' was about to be screened. Surely Miss. Winifred Lynn, 'comedienne and expert dancer' would have lost no time in conjoining her stage name with the title of the celebrated movie in the final moments of her own act – and if she didn't, it wouldn't surprise me if Marcel did.

The novel was translated into French in 1862 and reintroduced in 1886 as *Les Châtelaines d'East Lynne*. Coincidentally, it was invoked during a French bedroom farce called 'Oh, I Say!' that was playing at the Pier Theatre at the same time as 'East Lynne' was screened at the Bijou.¹² In the course of the play, one of the characters declares that the elevated tone of 'East Lynne' was preferable to the risqué French repertoire (such as 'Oh, I Say!') So it's clear that the story of 'East Lynne' would

have had a popular currency in France and probable that Duchamp will have known the rudiments of its plot; sufficiently to follow the action of the movie without needing the English inter-titles – if he happened to be at the ‘Bijou Theatre’ to watch the film that evening.

It is difficult to imagine Duchamp being affected by this sentimental tearjerker. The celebrated line: ‘Gone, Gone! And he never called me mother’ may have resonated with him, for very particular reasons, but at the same time we would be wrong to second guess what Duchamp would choose to go and see, particularly when he had his seventeen year-old sister to consider as well.

While listening to the music for the film at the ‘Bijou Theatre’, Marcel may well have been reminded of another performance, on the 8th August, in the Grand Pier Pavilion when the diminutive Ruby Helder, the celebrated seventeen year old ‘Lady Tenor’, stepped onto the stage in her recital with the regimental musicians of the Royal Garrison of Artillery to sing ‘Then You’ll Remember Me’, the song that would feature as the *leitmotif* of ‘East Lynne’.¹³ By this time, Ruby Helder had been singing on the international stage since she was twelve, she had toured America and would later join John Philip Souza’s band. She measured just five feet and her unorthodox and ambiguous presence, heightened by the unfamiliarity of a powerfully male vocal delivery

emanating from a female figure so small sufficiently unsettled a section of the audience at the Pier Pavilion that the Herne Bay Gazette, in reviewing her performance in its 'Front Page' leader, reported a sense of distaste, from sections of the audience, emanating from something, perhaps, culturally ingrained:

'There are not a few people who seem almost to resent Miss Helder's possession of a man's voice and there are those who say that an uncanny feeling obsesses them when they listen to her singing' (Herne Bay Gazette. Sat Aug 16th 1913)

In the course of Pierre Cabanne's series of interviews with Marcel Duchamp in 1967 at the end of his life, the subject came round to Duchamp's female alter ego where Duchamp remarks rather surprisingly that he contemplated a Jewish persona before arriving at the gender uncertainties of Rrose Sélavy. This might be interpreted as a direct response to ingrained anti-Semitism during the Dreyfus period. The resentful attitude of sections of the audience to the gifted Ruby Helder – a girl the same age as Marcel's own sister – invokes a resentment towards established forms of bigotry that may well have set in train a line of response that would lead him – eventually – to formulate the contradictory persona of Rrose Sélavy, eight years later.

Conclusion

This paper outlines three concerns of Marcel Duchamp's at the start of his stay in Herne Bay: the secret fact of his daughter, his unfulfilled relationship with Gabrielle, and his plans to evade national conscription. It suggests, also, the way that the amenities here alternately alleviated and exposed these concerns. Away from Gabrielle, he began to elaborate the aggressive sexual metaphors that had begun to appear in his work. The insights of Jeremy Millar and Glen Harvey have provided a plausible basis for further research along this line and sustain a line of thought that shows Duchamp returning to these preoccupations after the productive yet self-regulating experiments encouraged by Gabrielle. [Reconciling this problematic enquiry with Duchamp's role as chaperone to his younger sister remains, at best a puzzle, but is unlikely to account for his encoded messaging and the air of arcane secrecy that surrounds them; that mode of obfuscation was already established.]

The paper suggests that the 'wasp's' aggressive proclivities somehow fitted Duchamp's conception of a voracious and hostile sexuality that stood for larger concerns in the international politics of the day that he sought to avoid. If he was unsuccessful, the toil he adumbrated for the uniformed, male bachelors who serviced the voracious wasp, might well be visited on him. The metaphor is explicit although it leaves an uncertainty about how far it developed in Duchamp's own thinking beyond this point – certainly his determination to get out of the army

was paramount at this time. The Herne Bay Gazette's 'Our Point of View' leader on 9th August was entitled 'Kill or Cure' and commented on the recruitment problems faced by France with its 'stagnant' birth rate, describing the continent as an armed camp.

'France cannot hope to go on increasing her army out of a dwindling population – it is proposed to tax every citizen who has reached the age of forty-five without having three children living'.

In the week that he arrived in Herne Bay, one hundred and seventy two nursing volunteers arrived and set-up camp close to Downs Park road giving demonstrations, setting-up field hospitals and kitchens to demonstrate their readiness for war if attempts were made to invade Britain. The following week, the paramilitary Boys Brigade set up camp. Herne Bay, by this time, must have seemed overrun with uniformed personnel and the liminal area behind Downs Park became, to all intents and purposes, a site of military occupation.

On returning to France in September, Duchamp would return to the family atmosphere of Yport, leaving behind the attractions and glittering illuminations of the pier and the electric picture palaces. Assuming, just for a moment, that Yvonne did spend her time as a blameless language student, virtuously dividing her time between studying at Lynton College and disporting happily on the pier, leaving

Marcel to his esoteric conundrums on dominating sexual partners; they would be both more remedially preoccupied than even I have assumed. Notwithstanding, the temptation of setting foot on the pier, the thrill of seeing it all lit-up at night, would be sufficient for him to recall:

An electric fete ... the decorative lighting ... (of) Luna Park. Or the Pier Pavilion at Herne Bay.

This paper closes with the lights dimmed in the auditorium of the same Pier Theatre from which Duchamp's familiar postcard of the Grand Pier Pavilion was taken. It presented three plays that week; the first was a comedy in three acts called 'The Mollusc'.¹⁴ It had just completed its successful debut at the Criterion Theatre, Piccadilly Circus and was now on tour and perhaps we can picture Marcel and Yvonne, having paid their tickets, settling down to do their best with English comedy. The play revolves around Dulcie Baxter, who strenuously contrives to do as little as possible while organising those around her to do everything for her. Her chess-loving husband is reduced to playing the game with the children's governess, instead of with his wife. The chess theme might have been sufficient for Duchamp to risk an evening of incomprehensible English. When the action begins, the chessboard is installed and while he is trying to figure out the opening moves on the chessboard from his

seat in the auditorium Duchamp here's this exchange coming from the stage:

[After three moves of chess Dulcie.Baxter says]

Dulcie Baxter. Oh, here's such a clever article about **wasps**. It seems that **wasps** – I'll read you what it says. *[She clears her throat]* **Wasps** –

Mr. Baxter. Dulcie, dear, it's impossible for us to give our minds to the game if you read aloud.

Dulcie Baxter. *[Amiably]* I'm so sorry, dear. I didn't mean to disturb you. I think you'd have found the article instructive. If you want to read it afterwards its on page 32, if you can remember that.

I'm still looking for the article – but all I have is 'page 32'.

¹ Gabriëlle had studied with Edgar Varèse at the Paris based Scola Cantorum run by the Vincent d'Indy, but along with Varèse had then worked with the more controversial Ferruccio Busoni in Berlin at a time when they would be influenced by Busoni's *Outline of a New Aesthetic of Music* published in 1907

² Jarry ref + Joyteko ref

³ PORCH, D. 1981. *The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871-1914*. Cambridge . C.U.P.

⁴ *Éloignement. Contre le service militaire obligatoire: un 'éloignement' de chaque member, du cœur et des autres unités anatomique; chaque soldat ne pouvant déjà plus revêtir un uniforme, son cœur alimentant 'téléphoniquement' un bras éloigné, etc.*

Puis plus d'alimentation; chaque 'éloigné' s'isolant. Enfin une Réglementation des regrets d'éloigné à éloigné.

⁵ Week of Sat Aug 2nd. Band of the Royal Garrison of Artillery: Grand Pier Pavilion, King's Hall Bandstand and Tower Gardens

Week of Sat Aug 9th. Band of the Royal Garrison of Artillery: Grand Pier Pavilion, King's Hall Bandstand and Tower Gardens. French Composers Night Grand Pavilion.

Week of Sat Aug 16th Band of the Queens own Cameron Highlanders

Week of Sat Aug 23rd Thurs . Aug 31. Great Waterloo Night. Descriptive Fantasia of 'The Battle of Waterloo' Band of Kings Regiment.

Week of Sat August 30th Miss Margaret Cooper accompanying herself on the piano with the Band of the Queens Own Cameron Highlanders

⁷ I am grateful to the historian of early cinema Prof. Michael Punt at Transtechnology Research, University of Plymouth for these and further insights, derived over numerous discussions email correspondence.

⁸ For the Selsior 'dance' movies see: BOTTOMORE, Stephen. 2013. 'Selsior Dancing Films 1912-1917' in *The Sounds of the Silents in Britain*. Eds Julie Brown and Annette Davison. Oxford. OUP.

⁹ The Evening News Waltz was written and conducted by the celebrated dance band conductor and light music composer, Archibald Joyce .It was danced by Vera Maxwell and Jack Jarrott who seem to have disappeared from the lists of dance performers after this popular success.

¹⁰ WOOD, Ellen. 1861 (2005) . *East Lynne*. Oxford

¹¹ The film would receive further treatments in 1915, 1920, 1925, 1931 and so on. Finally a TV drama was made in 1984, long after vaudeville and music halls such as the 'Bijou Theatre' had closed down.

¹² 'Une Nuit de Noces' by Henri Keroul and Albert Barré. The English version was set to music by Jerome Kern and after touring to Edinburgh played on Broadway for 68 nights before slipping out of sight.

¹³ M. W. Balfe "The Bohemian Girl"

Then You'll Remember Me (When Other lips)

When other lips and other hearts
Their tales of love shall tell,
In language whose excess imparts
The pow'r they feel so well,
There may, perhaps, in such a scene
Some recollection be
Of days that have as happy been,
And you'll remember me,
And you'll remember, you'll remember me.

When coldness or deceit shall slight

The beauty now they prize,
And deem it but a faded light
Which beams within your eyes;
When hollow heats shall wear a mask
'Twill break your own to see:
In such a moment I but ask,
That you'll remember me,
That you'll remember, you'll remember me.

Sung by Ruby Hedler (The Lady Tenor)

¹⁴ DAVIES, Hubert, H. 1913. *The Mollusc: a play in three acts*.