

# The Obscene and the Corpse: Reflections on the Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat

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This paper examines Jean-Michel Basquiat's obsession with the marginal and the obscene - understood literally as the ob-scene. The context of a graffiti art, and particularly the glyphic character of graffiti art, allows the work to defy the ordinary logic of the picture frame in order to figure, rather than represent, indeterminate into it. Thus, Basquiat characterizes death and the dead body not in the light of a transcendent space but as prolonged into the depths of an alterity, an ob-scene in the sense of an alter-side that belongs to the scene.

Basquiat's paintings are obscene. They are obscene, not in the quotidian sense of the depraved, offensive or lascivious, but rather in the etymological sense of 'the obverse side of the scene.' Whenever the ob-scene is encountered, an otherwise concealed element of the specular has turned up or disclosed itself. What is obscene, it could thus be said, is the un-presented content that belongs on the other side of a present vision. It transgresses visibility, is no longer the visible, and moves out into a region of displacement and destabilization.

The obscene, in this sense, articulates the anamorphic: the morphoses of a quotidian and so-called normative regard is subtended, subverted or returned back (ana-) to something ab-normal, in order that this previously hidden scene (often othered because of its taboo content we repress) may exhibit itself.<sup>1</sup> As anamorphic, an obscene exhibition is thus a showing of what was previously hidden by the normative regard. This hidden, other scene is structurally privative in relation to the present scene, in the sense that it is a lack, void or depth into which the scene is inherently prolonged or elongated. The obverse side of the scene tests the very security of the image's foundation. It is this structure of disequilibrium and unease that the Basquiat can reveal.

Though his paintings do not reveal the sexually obscene, they are nevertheless an expression of the lack inherent to erotic displacement more generally. But they do not express erotic displacement merely. I argue that Basquiat's images express *the death that induces* an anxiety beyond *eros*. Whereas the erotic conveys a lack in the way of displacement—a lack that constantly needs filling by some object or another—anxiety is before a lack of lack. The erotic, which only ever arises as invested in something, in fact

keeps us from becoming anxious, since anxiety is the very void implicit in *eros* appearing for a subject *as such*. Anxiety, in this sense, comes upon the subject because the subject is presented with the nothing itself. Basquiat's work will re-acquaint us with this previously unseen or unnoticed void with which we may be secretly familiar, but this is not to say that it is content just to convey the anxiety before this void. The repeated image of the corpse in Basquiat's work, I argue, places the dead body within a structure of lacking and marginality in such a way as to go beyond the particular object, no longer functioning as a thing but opening up into the very lack of lack—death as the induction of anxiety. Basquiat's corpses can thus *signal* the emptiness of death itself. The erotic and death: these two terms do not stand against each other in the Basquiat canvas. How this may be, and the unique way Basquiat achieves this depiction of death, is my concern in this essay.

That a Basquiat canvas reaches towards death is possible because of its fundamental orientation to the obscene and the marginal. To stand in front of a Basquiat is to have the norms to which one subscribes interrogated by a hitherto unnoticed profundity. To this end, Basquiat's work is sometimes seen in the context of a post-colonialism (especially African Diaspora). His drawings, famously, often evoke a beloved aristocracy of African-American bebop musicians and boxers: Charlie Parker, for instance, is named, in somewhat juvenile scrawling, as "Charles the First I"; Sugar Ray Robinson, or at least an outlined head we are told belongs him, has Basquiat's well-known crown painted above it; Joe Louis is called "St Joe Louis surrounded by snakes." But of course this post-colonialist reading also understands Basquiat's images to depict the trauma resulting from being uprooted (specifically feelings of loss and estrangement). The recurrent representations of the dismembered black male body in his paintings present an alien as that which is brought into the same only by means of some violent act. Basquiat often represents isolated anatomical parts and bodies with exposed internal organs, skeletal structures, breaks and wounds (even Dizzy Gillespie is painted in this way in the 1983 image *Horn Players*). He continually displays the signs of a split-identity. It is this schism within the scene, and especially the schism that Basquiat's continual references to the corpse present, that I regard as significant. This schism allows us to understand in new, more radical ways the obversity of the normative regard, and the profound perversions that lurk underneath it.

Consider as an instance of what is meant by obscenity this 1981 painting, *Untitled (Skull)*. Images such as *Untitled (Skull)* are often a touchstone for those who wish to treat Basquiat's paintings not only in the context of an apparent schism but also to understand just what this schism could mean to Basquiat. Here, as in many of Basquiat's other works, we see a head apparently torn apart, but this one is kept together



*Untitled (Skull)* 1981  
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas

by a series of stitches, around the teeth, near the left eye and towards the back of the skull. There is contrast between a face in which we see some external features of a head on the left and a right side in which we see its inside, something like the inner-workings of the head's mind. This contrast is kept up since *Untitled (Skull)* does not follow a uniform tone for skin and bones. The left panel evokes a profound despairing: the eyes are downcast; the teeth are broken. The face, as is often the case with Basquiat's skulls, is stretched thin in a frozen expression of anguish; the mouth is clenched, the jaw shattered. Basquiat himself helps us read pain into the painting: the canvas uses aggressive brushstrokes, with shocks of red or blue paint surrounding the head. This is a bursting distress that can hardly contain itself. The right side of the image makes visible the internality of this distress. There, we have a view of a morass of wiry lines, which perhaps remind us of veins or neurological pathways. There is also a series of cubical or rectangular spaces that give the impression of an interior head to which there belongs the mental data of a picture-consciousness. What is the relation between this interior headspace and its exterior? The interior headspace seems just as urgent as its outside—there are shocks of orange, yellow and red—although for the inside Basquiat uses smaller, less aggressive strokes. Is this space 'contained' by the stitches? Or is it bursting, even exploding, outward? And just what is written above the head?

Such attempts to fix the meaning of *Untitled (Skull)* are unending. It is not enough simply to point out the painting's schism and its possible meanings. It is the schism, as a *schism*, that is operational in the image, allowing it to be a view of the ambiguous itself, and precisely this is what frustrates a viewer. Marc Mayer, the director of the National Gallery of Canada, writes in his essay "Basquiat in History" that he,

can't help feeling that a painstaking analysis of Basquiat's symbols and signs is a trap that lures us away from the abstract and oneiric purpose of these pictures. They are not sending us coded messages to decipher iconologically, so much as confusing and disarming us at once with their discursive sleight of hand...he painted a calculated incoherence, calibrating the mystery of what such apparently meaning-laden pictures might ultimately mean (49-52).

What is certain is that the Basquiat canvas is replete with multivalences, and this amounts to the showing of indeterminacy itself. It is a

scene, which, without any real fixity of meaning, can only put on display something more profoundly unthematic and oneiric. This is the marginal other-scene, and of course to paint this scene is not necessarily to derive a new aesthetic. It is partly what concerns the so-called ‘primitivism’ of Gauguin or Picasso, which has oftentimes been understood in terms of Freud’s dream-work. For, like dreams, primitivism originates in the *descensus ad infernum*, the undaunted, explicit invocation of primitive conflicts. For primitivism, this is in pursuit of a new aesthetic. Picasso could never have conceived his revolutionary *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, for example, were it not for his specific act of inciting conflict. He plays with what he considers philistine notions of decency by allying himself with what the bourgeois considered taboo—prostitutes and African masks—in order that his art may in fact purge these taboos. He intentionally uses these despised objects, employing them symbolically in terms of subject matter and form, in order to allow them to transgress their conventional use-value.

Still, there is a sense in which the neo-expressionistic obsession with the marginal is more radical than Picasso’s. It often focuses not simply on the primitive impulse with which the normative is in conflict but on the normative *itself*. Basquiat’s canvases for this reason are not exactly shocking, although they continually, and in a direct way, test the limits of the normative. The painting *Crowns (Peso Neto)* (1981), according to Annina Nosei, who began showing Basquiat’s works in the early 1980’s, may be read as a,

comment on the conventions of weights and measures. So peso neto is a convention, like salt is a convention that society has. Jean-Michel was declaring that much of society’s conventions are just artificial decisions. Peso neto, in principle, wouldn’t hurt anybody, but there are other societal conventions that hurt people. He was presenting the conventionality and banality of society, and in some cases, society’s puzzling aspects (Studio: 86).

Perhaps there is no more puzzling aspect of society for Basquiat than money, and the place of intersection between money and art. Again and again, his works refer to the gold (ORO) and dollar signs. Sometimes his work even makes explicit reference to getting paid for them. There is the sense that Basquiat’s work, as well as its monetization,

is not more than a joke on the patron. Still, there is a further sense that Basquiat himself became “deeply offended by the stupidity of the art world” (ibid.). While it is often remarked that his addiction to drugs was perhaps a symptom of this offense, a sign that Basquiat could not handle the absurdity of monetizing art, it is no less true that his artwork, too, seems to be a catharsis for his offense (ibid.). From this point of view, Basquiat’s works display what James Clifford calls the “institutionalized systemic opposition between art and culture,” in which a cultural object takes up a second home in order to be an aesthetic one (195). Basquiat’s works take place within, and are expressive of, precisely this liminality. They can sometimes interrogate the very identity of the “aesthetic” and how this notion is socially operative. Basquiat’s work may thus be understood not simply as a confrontation of the norm by the taboo, but also as the display of the taboo that is always already at work within the norm, corroding it from the inside out. *For Basquiat, the obverse of the scene is absolutely inescapable.*

How does Basquiat accomplish the obscene? Since it is the norms of its viewers that are under interrogation by the Basquiat canvas, placement and location is integral for the work. It accomplishes itself by finding its way into an audience that may not want to face it. It is in the context of location that we can understand a glyphic character of Basquiat’s images. To say that Basquiat’s images are glyphs is to understand their signs and symbols require them to be understood as akin to inscriptions and thus also as plastic, capable, that is, of being applied to any surface. (Basquiat’s paintings are graffiti art, after all). As glyphic, then, the Basquiat canvas does not in fact abide by the logic of the represented image contained by the picture-frame. Its mode of signifying is primarily spatial. The Basquiat achieves its plasticity or sculpturality by requiring an alterity in the sense of an alter-side. This alter-side is precisely what gives the Basquiat its quality of being obscene, since the surface functions as the anamorphic or as the un-presented content within the presented vision. This alter-side of the glyph will not raise its anterior side to a contrapuntal extreme, which would be a radical break away from the image that would show itself fundamentally only as an inadequation to exhibition. Rather, the absence at work in the obscene is understood to bear the structure of an anamorphosis of the glyph. Vision’s lack, and its passage into what it is not, is thereby constituted by its crossing out into plasticity. Absence works in the glyph by coiling itself onto the underside of the present

scene. It is literally a psychical-locality, to use Lacan's description of the Freudian "other scene," an-other side.

The internal interrogation of the scene in the Basquiat is taken to its limits and, rather than abide by a specific logic of a representation that sees death as, in itself, essentially unrepresentable, the glyph tests the degree to which death can be displayed. It does not radicalize alterity to the point that the anterior ground is no longer part of the image. Just the opposite: the glyphic image operates by putting into play an alterity, an alter-side, without which there would be no image. I argue that it is the expression of a *thanatos* that functions not in opposition but hidden within or underneath *eros*. It is in this context, furthermore, that we can understand Basquiat's use of dismembered bodies and the corpse. The corpse, we might say, is the height of an ob-scene at work in the present scene in that it discloses death. One can thus connect Basquiat's use of the obverse side of the scene to the Latin *obscaenus* in the sense of the "ill omened" or "abominable."

### *The Glyph*

Before he was discovered, and in the early stages of his career, in the late nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties, Basquiat was a graffiti artist under the name SAMO ("Same Old Shit"), using a magic marker to write cryptic sayings (such as "radical chic," or "Daddy's\$fund\$"). The surfaces targeted were not arbitrary per se. They were positioned, for example, near to the art gallery of Mary Boone, for the purpose of exposing the materialist populace of art purveyors and buyers to anti-materialist messages, albeit cryptic ones. "Ninety percent of SAMO graffiti was executed in the heart of the art neighborhood. He kind of stuck it to Soho" (ibid.: 19). There is no doubt that this act of graffiti is political in nature: the viewer is forced to confront, through the graffiti's image, its conditions and capricious nature of these conditions. In this sense, placement of the graffitied image is thoroughly intentional. It even serves as part of the "point" of the image, even though, as perceived defilement, Basquiat's scrawlings would no doubt also have had the feeling of arbitrariness, possibly applied to any random surface, turning up especially on billboards, sides of buildings, walls, etc.— an apparently random attack, at least to its viewer.

This strategy of apparent randomness only aids in the image's subversiveness. It is this requirement of the image to be placed in a certain way, and this placing as a strategy, that is of interest here. The image's place allows its meaning to accomplish itself, and this use of surface is what gives the graffiti its glyphic quality, a quality that Basquiat would later explicitly employ for his own artistic ends. The result is that the image, when applied to a surface that is not a canvas as such, does not participate in any clearly defined pictorial space, existent above or removed from the surface. The glyph will sometime even use the surface in order to achieve more than a framed planarity, and this indicates a way of understanding of pictorial space as ontologically akin to a world beyond the canvas, a space exceeding the enclosed composition. The image's reliance on its surface implies not only that it overcomes the enclosure of a composition, but also that what grounds it is not some transcendental logic of the art-object but rather something indeterminate. As Glenn O'Brien says, Basquiat "fragments everything. He throws it into the mix and blasts it. So it becomes all these details and little fragments. It's like you take the history of art and throw it in the blender" (ibid.).

Basquiat's work reveals this polysemy of meaning, even when it explicitly uses text, which is ordinarily meant to restore fixity to the polysemic. I would even go so far as to say that, since the text of the image participates in the image's glyphic quality and therefore relies on the arbitrary surface, the text in fact helps to render a polysemy of meaning.

Take, for instance, the canvas below, *In Italian* (1983).

This is characteristically Basquiat. Basquiat usually uses broad brushstrokes with acrylic paint in order to make large fields of colour, against which he uses oil stick to draw and write. One can thus read words without any strenuous effort inside the image. The word "teeth" is repeated here. In one case, it appears within a kind of box and over a red figure, under which is written "diagram of the heart pumping blood" (the word "blood" is circled). In an apparent attack on capitalism, in the top left corner of the image is a coin with the words "In God We Trust" and "Liberty" crossed out. These words point back to the painted image, and one can pin down their meaning to some extent. Other words, like "sangre" and "corpus," may very well have meanings but these meanings are obscured. This too is typical. The meaning of words is oftentimes intentionally covered over in Basquiat's paintings; they are endlessly crossed out, written again and





In Italian 1983.

Acrylic, oil paintstick, and marker on canvas mounted on wood supports, two panels.

corrected, emphasized and obliterated. Sometimes the texts are orphaned, appearing alongside machine parts, parts of speech, exclamatory symbols, trailing lines, graphs, but bearing no obvious relation to these images. In these cases especially, the text insists on marginality and defends against the reign of any fixed determinations.

Basquiat's canvases are in a certain sense an extension of Klee's "script pictures" of the nineteen-twenties. Script pictures, for Klee, express the equivalence between writing and drawing, between poem and picture, in

order to bring together metaphoricity and the architectonic (Watson: 23). In the Basquiat, a line—any line—conveys this more radically. Writing and drawing are brought together by the glyph since in each there functions a grapheme that, insofar as it belongs to the glyph, is neither painterly nor literary but both draftsmanly and plastic. In each case, whether it is for the sake of an image or for a word, the grapheme functions as an inscription into a surface that escapes the logic of enframement. The image's surface is not a necessary structure per se, but it is nevertheless significant. That there is a surface for the image tells us that the image does not cut itself off, as an aesthetic object, from the real world and thus the same image could have been placed elsewhere; but that this other placement allows the image to accomplish or convey itself differently also tells us that that its present surface is now significant to it. In this sense the surface comes to betray, and even serve as, the image's inherent indeterminacy.

Since the glyphic character of Basquiat's paintings demand that it could be inscribed into what it is *not*, both in the sense that it requires another surface for the sake of the image and in the sense that its present canvas could have been otherwise, we could say that the painting allows itself to cross over into the unfamiliar and for this unfamiliarity to operate within the painting. Its very plasticity harks to the unforeseen and excessive. In this sense, the inscription in the Basquiat is always also "exscription" (Nancy: 23). One can also situate his images in the context of Lacan's analyses of *das Ding* in architecture (*Ethics*: 136-42).<sup>2</sup> Whatever form is there in the Basquiat, this is just an assumed guise, a foreign body standing in the place for, or even circumambulating, some void or lack. The inscribed form, that is, always has an interior secret to which it refers in an oblique way. The form thus spans the poles of interiority and exteriority, and is in this sense an extimate monument. Finally, the inscribed grapheme of a Basquiat canvas brings into presence a constitutive emptiness, suggestiveness or incompleteness of the image. This internal lack of the grapheme becomes the very basis of obscenity in the Basquiat, and it is in this context that the repeated portrayals of the corpse can be understood.

### *The Corpse*

Basquiat makes the grapheme obscene, and to a certain extent this in fact places him within a familiar tradition of painting. The painting, insofar as it in fact articulates something not immediately evident, allows

Basquiat to join those artists (especially the Expressionists) for whom the line is the representation of an *eros* that is subject not only to conscious processes but also to unconscious ones, especially displacement. In this case, the line will always allude to some process greater than the realistic image. Cubism, most notably, achieves a similar dissociation of the contrast of shadow and light from its traditional function as modeling in order to translate sculptural qualities into painting. This disassociation allows the painted image to function as one pictorial code among other possible codes in order to freely efface the realistic image with the use of multiple, contradictory light sources and views. The effacement of the realistic image by this process of refraction is precisely what allows Picasso to tear open an inner conflict that belongs solely to the human. The image, that is, becomes the revelation of a conflict of energies, especially sexual energies. The line of the image, for Picasso, is consequently revealed as never more than the process of some painterly cathexis.

What is of interest here is not exactly the real object but rather the significant complex of the object. What interests the painter in the nude figure, for instance, is not just a body without clothes but the absencing of clothes and body presented in the act of denudation. The figurations of the nude body present an act, a denudation that can draw us near and show the figure's availability to touch. Here the line of the image drips with one's erotic impulse to be given over to its content. But if indeed the figurations of the painted line are erotic, and if erotic impulses are understood in general to stand against the death instinct, this death instinct problematizes the extent to which the artwork can represent. On a reading of the death instinct as *essentially* beyond representation, painting can give us an erotic displacement itself but it cannot give us death itself. While the painting can only convey the processes of the erotic, on this view, it cannot ever show death proper, which is the utter and complete erasure of the representation. Where the artwork takes death itself as its subject matter, in this case, it does so only by referring its viewer to an essentially different space completely apart from itself.

The assumption that there is an essential difference between *eros* and *thanatos*, between the space of the artwork and the death, is something, as we will see later, that Basquiat calls into question and thus his images make us think of death in a special sense. Normally construed, however, the death instinct does not refer to any physical end but to the end of the psyche itself. It bespeaks of a state in which there is nothing more for

which to wish—a sublime state of Nothing, as it were—and it is the part of the psyche that remains unknown, unwanted and inherently impossible. This instinctive impulse of Negation, furthermore, implies that contents of consciousness are repressed and rendered tolerable only because they are hidden or forgotten in erotic desire. It implies a sense of the uncanny, for Freud, in which an otherwise familiar part of the psyche has been made alien through an act of repression.

Though uncanniness is representable for Freud—it is, according to him, in fact represented in the highest degree in relation to dead bodies, ghosts, etc.—death as that which induces uncanniness itself is unrepresentable. Julia Kristeva, for one, follows this logic of the fundamental unrepresentability of *thanatos*. For her, Holbein's *Dead Christ* carries out this logic in the extreme: the body of Christ, she writes, conveys death “by spacing’s, blanks, discontinuities, or destruction of representation” so that death is “imprinted” in the canvas (138). This imprint is the result of a double movement: First, the body of Christ in the Holbein does not itself transcend toward anything. It is carnal matter, and thus, according to Kristeva, the death of god comes to convey a complete loss of meaning for the modern person. Second, therefore, this carnal body “reveals itself as such to the imaginative ability of the self in isolation of signs” (*ibid.*). That Holbein's canvas conveys an irrevocable absence of meaning for Kristeva means that it can have death imprinted into it only by means of a spacing or discontinuity, by means of the total destruction of representation. To convey death, then, is henceforth to announce a radical break, and this break can show itself only as the total effacement of any relation to the sign, therefore, utterly devoid of meaning.

But here, I want to say, is where Basquiat differs. The death he portrays is not in isolation of anything, nor is it destructive or even a deformation (in Kristeva's sense) of the signficative. It is in fact everywhere lurking in every sign, and without subjecting the sign to a radical absence beyond it. This consideration of death is an extension of the glyphic character of Basquiat's images. Nothing is ever imprinted in the canvas so much as the image extends itself *into* its other. Rather than approach death by means of spacings, discontinuities, isolations, breaks, etc., the Basquiat operates on the basis of lack, void, privation, prolongation, the alterior. I suggest that this prolongation and transcending of the painting into alterity, into an alter-side, allows even death to be at play within it rather than indicated apart and at a distance from it. It does not make

death *wholly* other. This is in a certain sense a primal death, a death that is not yet conceived as exterior to existence. It is a death confronted prior to the logic of representation itself (a logic to which Kristeva's reading of the Holbein must at least indirectly subscribe) in such a way that any image becomes a propaedeutic—as on the way towards exceeding itself—to death itself. Death is in turn brought down to earth by Basquiat; it consistently appears as the other-side of certain signs especially —skulls, masks, broken bones, bodies, etc.—which already have a polysemy and excess of meaning working within them. On the one side, then, Basquiat allows the eros at work in the painted line to enter into the dimension of the repressed, to be a site of displacement. On the other side, however, Basquiat also brings into the fold of an otherwise determinate image a fundamental ambiguity that is not merely representational. This is a presentation, not re-presentation, of death, a disclosure or uncovering of something previously there. Basquiat allows death to be conceived in such a way as to be contained alongside the scene, since for him the scene is always on the way towards ceding to an abyss. Death, that is, is contained in the scene as the anamorphic, and it is precisely this anamorphosis that can unveil itself as itself.

One other way to understand the Basquiat canvas is consequently more profound than an act of political graffiti. The recurrent recollections of Haitian Vodou ritual drawings, the vevers, the diagrams to summon the gods, while they are perhaps not self-consciously Haitian or African they nevertheless hark to a “magical element” (*Studio*: 19). Today especially it is difficult not to see Basquiat's work in the tradition of Haiti. Elizabeth McAlister describes Frantz Zephirin's painting, *Resurrection of the Dead*, which has recently appeared on the cover of *The New Yorker*, in this way: there are “the unblinking faces of the spirits of the recently dead. Just crossed over, they still have eyes, which are the blue and red of the Haitian flag.” She continues:

Below them are the waters, the waters under which lies the country without hats, where the sun rises facing backwards. This is where the dead spend a year and a day. An ba dlo. Under the water. Resting. Floating. After that when it is time, they will be lifted out, drawn out, by their living. If they are lucky to have children living and walking on the earth...The dead are still with us, in the unseen world. They have a space. They have a time. They have company. They are not alone. They will be received. They will hear prayers. They look at us.

In her remarkable essay, “A Sorcerer’s Bottle: The Visual Art of Magic in Haiti,” McAlister gives a thorough analysis of the “magical work” (*wanga*), which she says at one point “speaks poetically about will and desire” and at another point “tell a complex tale of the conception of life and death itself, and at the same time they are unblinking eyes, watching and deflecting” (ibid.: 13 & 14). The *wanga*, then, does give way to the mysterious. But this opening into the mysterious is not just the result of an erotic displacement against which death is contrapuntally situated. McAlister points out that there is no such sanitization of death. It has not yet been removed from reality, and the *wanga* opens up this inherently mysterious fact of the real.<sup>4</sup> The same seems to be true in Basquiat’s works. Life, the Basquiat painting reveals, is everywhere littered with the signs of death. The recurrent spectacle of the corpse in Basquiat’s paintings is precisely such a sign, and in many ways is the height of the painter’s tireless pursuit of the fundamental indeterminacy inherent to the determinate. Consider, for instance, the image below, entitled *Riding With Death* (1988), painted in the year of Basquiat’s own death.

There are a few flourishes here that are characteristic of Basquiat. The image of the skull, of course, is ubiquitous in Basquiat’s work. Although, this particular skull is a pared down version of other skulls he paints. As in *Untitled (Skull)*, there is also a play between the inside and outside in the fleshy body; yet here there is no expression on either side of the body, no look of anguish on a face and no internal operations conveyed by the organs. The flesh is incompleting, just as it was in *Untitled (Skull)*, left by the painter as the stump of a torso with one leg. In *Riding With Death*, furthermore, it is death that appears to be gnawing at the flesh. If anything, this gnawing gives the painting whatever pathos it has. Otherwise the image is eerily cold. Could it be that in this painting death becomes that which makes possible all the characteristic traits of his paintings—the dismembered or unfinished bodies, the anguish of estrangement and loss, even the quality of over-determination itself? Could it be that the image for Basquiat was always making its cold march towards death without knowing it? The body, after all, is sitting atop death precisely where death has been made invisible. Basquiat may very well aim to display the apophansis of death without condemning it to any fixed determination or even referring us to some wholly different space. In this case, the image itself operates, more profoundly, as an exhibition of its condition of possibility; it shows what makes Basquiat’s images possible—death itself—and thus *Riding With*



*Riding with Death* 1988  
Acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas

*Death* becomes nothing less than the deeply strange and indeterminate itself. The image of the dead body, I suggest, aims to fulfill without resolving the work of the glyphic image, to show what is on the thither side of the scene. It is the ultimate obscenity.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am borrowing from the Lacanian analysis of the anamorphic object to understand the Basquiat canvas. Lacan describes the Death's Head of Holbein's canvas *The Ambassadors* in which the viewer's first gaze of two well-attired, vain persons is, in a second moment, attacked by an 'anamorphic object' just as he or she is about to turn away. This second gaze of a Death's Head overwhelms the good consciousness of the spectator in the first gaze, questioning and tacitly pursuing it. There is an externalization of the viewer, brought about by the second anamorphic gaze of the canvas, which makes explicit seeing's rootedness in an invisibility and indeterminacy. Thus, seeing is only apparently stable. It originally emerges from out of what Lacan calls an "iridescence" of the object, not the object itself but its halo, its shine that circumscribes it but is not itself perceived as such. This invisibility is what Lacan, borrowing from Merleau-Ponty, calls "the toils (rets), or rays (rais)" of a "seeingness (voyure)."

It is an operative process, which, although not itself visible, allows for seeing. The seer, in other words, is derived from a kind of invisibility that labours underneath it in order that there may be something seen. This structure of invisibility in visibility informs Lacan's analyses of the erotic (lack), anxiety (lack of lack) and, of course, death (that which induces anxiety), all of which I make use of in this paper. (Fundamental: 82)

<sup>2</sup> Lacan spends a good portion of time in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* examining temples, palaces, houses, etc., as meaning an unrepresentable core of absence. He goes so far as to extend this to the history of prehistoric art. Cave paintings, for example, were done in caves that were unlit—interior spaces that were empty, occupied only by what he calls *das Ding*.

<sup>3</sup> McAlister repeats this description in her essay, "A Sorcerer's Bottle: The Visual Art of Magic in Haiti": "Death is a new beginning; it represents a passage into the spirit realm. The initiated soul will go to "an ba dlo," a spiritual dwelling full of spirits and other souls. It is conceived as being a land underneath the water itself, but not necessarily underwater. Some times *lot bo* or "the other side." Sometimes it is called *nan Ginen*, the mythological, spiritual Africa that lies across purifying, ancestral waters." (305-321)

<sup>4</sup> Contextualizing this un-sanitized notion of death, McAlister writes: "But death is all around St. Jean's neighborhood, this slum which adjoins the sewage canal on one side and the *simitye*, the famous cemetery where Duvalier was buried, on another..." *ibid*.

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