

# Paris, 1924: Aragon, Le Corbusier, and the Question of the Outmoded

By Abigail Susik, Ph.D. Candidate, Columbia University

Aragon and Le Corbusier are not names that generally appear in tandem in any sustained fashion in historical analyses of Paris during the 1920s. Certainly, these two figures were aware of one another in the years immediately following the Great War, and their paths crossed more than once during this time.<sup>1</sup> However, the strict *rappel à l'ordre* adhered to by the older Le Corbusier in his purist phase during this period would necessarily have kept as loyal and vocal a denizen of the radical avant-garde such as Aragon at more than an arm's distance.<sup>2</sup> The nationalist and iconoclastic aesthetics of *L'Esprit nouveau*—the journal that Le Corbusier had produced together with Amédée Ozenfant since 1920—could not have offered a more perfectly crystallized antithesis of the staunchly defeatist position that was pronounced across the board in *Littérature*, the dadaist organ to which Aragon contributed between 1919 and 1923.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, in a curious historical coincidence that has gone under-acknowledged in the scholarship devoted to either of these figures over the past century, the year 1924 saw both Aragon and Le Corbusier grant significant attention to the same controversial current event in two contemporaneous publications. Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* and Le Corbusier's *Urbanisme*, for all their obvious distance across the horizon of French aesthetics at this time, both tread with ponderous steps upon the identical piece of contested Parisian ground in a manner that bears striking formal similarities. Forcing two starkly opposed viewpoints into close and uncomfortable proximity, their mutual articulation of a single contemporary civic issue merits further scrutiny as a condensation of some of the broader cultural dilemmas at stake in France during the post-war period.

Between June and September of 1924, Aragon published the first portion of his autobiographically inflected novella, *Le Paysan de Paris*, in a series of four *feuilleton* installments in the literary magazine *La Revue européenne*.<sup>4</sup> About half of this sizeable text was written in just two weeks, during a flurry of activity that spanned the last days of 1923 and the commencement of 1924.<sup>5</sup> Yet, unlike many of his compatriots who were still busy tapping the expedient lyricism of automatic writing at this time, such as André Breton for instance, Aragon's alacrity in writing *Le Paysan de Paris* had little to do with such attempts at an unfiltered projection of the mind.

Indeed, it is of no small consequence that this prodigious literary outpouring, which appeared exactly coincident with the most nascent stirrings of the surrealist movement, was inspired in large part by the flatly practical *modus operandi* of Aragon's dire financial situation at the time.<sup>6</sup> Philippe Soupault, one of Aragon's dadaist comrades who had recently been named a new editor at *La Revue*

PARIS PEASANT

dealer's, next door to the Petit Grillon, where a short, sad story had already been related succinctly by successive sheets of paper :

CLOSED ON ACCOUNT OF  
OWNER'S SICKNESS

followed, lower down, by :

CLOSED ON ACCOUNT OF  
OWNER'S DEATH

someone had stuck a newspaper article, clipped, I gather, from *Le Bien Public* :

## THE BD HAUSSMANN BUILDING SOCIETY

Several of the small tradesmen who have been victimized for the benefit of huge enterprises such as the *Galeries Lafayette* are, we learn, on the point of seeking relief from the competent judicial authorities. But there can be no doubt that the City of Paris was fully aware of all the underhand deals and corrupt practices which have studded the history of the Boulevard Haussmann Building Society.

What is quite certain is that, at the very least, the compensation payments should have been allocated equitably. But the majority of the members of the Town Council—and this is a matter of public scandal—are shamefully involved in the misappropriation of public funds, and got themselves elected solely in order to pursue such activities.

Now, it may not be long before we learn some interesting facts. And thanks to the legitimate indignation of these shabbily treated tradesmen, it will be possible to lift the veil concealing the skulduggery of our aediles and of certain big financial sharks.

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Fig. 1. Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, article from *Le Bien Public*, 1924-1926. © 1926 by Exact Change.

*européene*, had promised a nearly desperate Aragon substantial remuneration for this literary undertaking.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, rather

than turning to any oneiric reservoir in order to fulfill Soupault's request for an extended prose piece all the more hastily, Aragon, who had

consistently harbored a veiled distaste for automatic practices, chose instead to focus his pen upon a popular debate that had recently taken on added urgency in the Parisian press.<sup>8</sup> This choice of subject matter, it seems, was a rather obvious one for Aragon. As a practiced twentieth century flâneur, he had long nurtured a curiosity for the cobble-stoned streets of his hometown.<sup>9</sup>

A large section of the right bank of Paris was slated for demolition between 1923 and 1926 in what were the long-delayed final stages of the massive reorganization of Paris begun by the Prefect of the Seine, Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, during the prosperous decades of the Second Empire.<sup>10</sup> The completion of the wide thoroughfare that bears the name of its creator was initially suspended owing to budget deficits during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, then was further postponed with the advent of the First World War. Now in its recommencement, the construction of Boulevard Haussmann once again ordained the destruction of block after block of venerable Parisian properties. As had been the case with much of Haussmann's program, this final episode of invasive city planning met with adamant criticism from different sides of the French populace. According to scholar Robin Walz in a recent study on this subject, Parisian newspapers were rife with argumentative articles commenting upon the subject throughout 1923 and 1924.<sup>11</sup>

Some detractors of the new boulevard viewed the demolition as the outright disregard for invaluable national heritage and patrimony,

which they argued was essential to the reconstruction of a strong national French identity in the aftermath of the war. On the other end of the spectrum, advocates of the completion of Boulevard Haussmann cited deplorable traffic conditions as sufficient reason for the guiltless razing of so many historical structures, appealing to the ideology of progress as a crucial post-war value as France continued to navigate its relationship to the accelerated pace of mass consumerism.

In one dramatic episode of this quarrel, a downtrodden shopping arcade dating from the early nineteenth century called the Passage de l'Opéra was scheduled to submit to the wrecking ball in the first months of 1925. This fact drew irate protests from preservationists as well as the unfortunate proprietors of the arcade, who were forced to relocate their businesses elsewhere at a great financial loss. This shopping arcade, one of many located in the ninth *arrondissement* of Paris, was built between 1822 and 1825 during the height of the Restoration era, and thus was one of the earliest manifestations of what was at the time an innovative architectural species, the glass-covered passageway.<sup>12</sup> Hugely popular for the first thirty years of its existence, the two linking galleries of the Passage de l'Opéra catered to the affluent with numerous stores providing goods, services, refreshment, and entertainment.

However, with the advent of the Second Empire, both the practical advantages and the vogue of the shopping arcade began to wane rapidly. And, by the turn of the twentieth century the Passage de

l'Opéra, like many of the shopping arcades in Paris, was a lackluster commercial backwater, offering a hotchpotch of humble wares and cheap erotic diversions to middle and lower class customers. When Aragon and his friend André Breton selected a couple of the cafés located in the Passage de l'Opéra to become the designated haunts of the *Littérature* cénacle in 1919, it was in stark contrast to the glittering nightspots of the left bank illuminati that they contrasted the drab décor of the aging arcade.<sup>13</sup>

Like most of his friends, Aragon was a keen newspaper reader and popular culture enthusiast, and so it comes as no surprise that he was well informed about the controversial issue of the fast approaching demolition of the passage. However, it also seems that in particular among his coterie of friends, Aragon felt a personal draw to the space of the Passage de l'Opéra. He frequented its cafés, restaurants, theaters, public baths on a regular basis, and its brothels intermittently, making his choice of subject matter in this instance even more understandable.<sup>14</sup>

But what, more specifically, might have been the precise nature of Aragon's interest in this disputed current event in Part I of *Le Paysan de Paris*, and what was his opinion of the impending demolition? Given Aragon's significant personal history with this particular passage, and the fact that he peppers his detailed description of this location in *Paysan* with the occasional anecdote or reminiscence, one critical conclusion would be to assume that, as narrator, Aragon regrets on some level the destruction of the Passage de l'Opéra.

Accordingly, in such a reading Aragon's main authorial aim in Part I of *Paysan* would be both to protest the final stages of Haussmannization and to memorialize or reverently mythologize the doomed Passage de l'Opéra in some fashion.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, were it not for the rampant sarcasm that infiltrates much of Aragon's text, his faux-documentarian style of reporting the injustices of the "Boulevard Haussmann Building Society" via a mishmash of seemingly precise facts, figures, and facsimiles of several documents might support a convincing argument for his nostalgic attitude toward the doomed passage.<sup>16</sup>

However, although Aragon tells the story of the passage's demolition distinctly from the point of view of the hapless proprietors of the passage, he also makes it resoundingly clear throughout his narrative that he neither identifies nor sympathizes to any great extent with their plight. In fact, following his reportage-style description of the Boulevard Haussmann controversy, complete with reproductions of handwritten protests, belligerent newspaper articles, and rousing proclamations, Aragon devotes a lengthy section to the outright mockery of the "magnificent bacterial dramas" that characterize this public debate.<sup>17</sup> And yet, at the same time, even while it is readily apparent that Aragon feels no special regret for the loss of the passage or the woes of its inhabitants, he likewise affirms in passim in his text that he has no respect for the "g i a n t r o d e n t" of Haussmannization.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Aragon displays throughout the whole of Part I of *Paysan* a palpable disdain for

both the advocates of demolition and the protesting defenders of the Passage de l'Opéra. Neither

progressivist nor preservationist, conservative nor populist, Aragon's interest in the endangered passage

LOUIS ARAGON

It is the same with the wine and champagne merchant in the Galerie du Baromètre who describes himself proudly as By Appointment to *Son Altesse Royale Monseigneur le Duc d'Orléans*, and marks his bottles with gold fleurs de lys accordingly. Between the two placards which list the clearance sale prices of his champagne and port, he has placed the following notice:

*As the result of an Expropriation  
which is nothing short of  
robbery  
(not only for myself but for the whole district)  
it has become impossible  
for me to establish myself elsewhere  
and I find myself obliged therefore to dispose of my stock*

Established here since 1909  
7 years of lease still to run  
Free of rent  
thanks to subtenancies  
Indemnity: 6,000 francs  
insufficient to cover even  
expenses, taxes and removal costs  
LONG LIVE JUSTICE !!!

On offer to any business  
possessing working premises

*Enquiries invited*

*Callers 3 to 6 p.m.*

The Petit Grillon was bought four years ago for 200,000 francs, of which sum 80,000 francs in outstanding bills of exchange remains to be paid, yet as total compensation for expropriation and for repurchase of the remaining eleven years

Fig. 2. Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, the wine and champagne merchant, 1924-1926. © 1926 by Exact Change.

instead becomes a convenient manner of critiquing each of these platforms at once via the triangulation of a radicalized third position.

That being so, how does Aragon distinguish his own point of view from that of these two dominant parties, and what is his stake in the Passage de l'Opéra if he is ultimately indifferent toward either its destruction or salvation? From the first moments of his exegesis in Part I of *Paysan*, it is evident that for Aragon the value of this superannuated shopping arcade lies precisely in its identity as a contested urban space. The uber-ephemerality of the passage, its uncomfortable proximity to death and decay, and its reputation as a haven for the cheapest forms of the bizarre, the obsolescent and the risqué, become for Aragon distinct avenues for the differentiation of his own critical position from that of his designated mainstream adversaries. As much as Aragon debunks the progressive measures of the final stages of Haussmannization, he also admits that it is "only today, when the pickaxe menaces them, that they have at last become the true sanctuaries of a cult of the ephemeral, the ghostly landscape of damnable pleasures and professions."<sup>19</sup> The insatiable momentum of progress, therefore, renders all the more visible what could be called the radical remainders of modernity: the recently ruined, lately depleted, presently-passé entities that, for better and for worse, multiply and accumulate in the wake of accelerated production and consumption in industrial society.

Therefore, for Aragon, nearly everything about the Passage de

l'Opéra can be situated under the sign of the *recently* old; its antiquated halls embody all that was fashionable just a few decades earlier. In such a way, the Passage de l'Opéra serves for Aragon as a condensed example of the dizzying fragility of the temporality termed modernity, a transience that he repeatedly terms throughout the entirety of *Paysan*, "the vertigo of the modern."<sup>20</sup> Any restoration or recuperation of the passage would clearly have reversed such an intensified experience of ephemerality.

Rather, Aragon views the destruction of the Passage de l'Opéra in a relative light, as part of what he calls repeatedly, and not without a soupçon of irony, the tenuous "myth" of modernity, in which all things quickly pass from a valued state of novelty to the endless purgatory of obsolescence.

Meanwhile, much like Aragon, the Swiss architect Le Corbusier was also intrigued by the vast amount of public attention being given to the final stages of Boulevard Haussmann. He featured it prominently in his second book, *Urbanisme*, which appeared in the last days of 1924—just a few months after the installments of the first half of Aragon's *Paysan* finished its run in *La Revue Européenne*.<sup>21</sup>

Given this timing, as well as the conspicuous proximity of the subject matter of these two texts, a staged conversation of sorts between the two men could almost be intimated. To be sure, the unusual format of each of these publications alone was enough to suggest a premeditated rapport. In





Fig. 3. Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, the first strike of the pickaxe, 1922-1924. © FLC / SODRAC (2008).

a remarkably similar manner to the unusual collage-like format of many of *Paysan's* pages, in which documents gleaned from the Passage de l'Opéra constantly interrupt the flow of Aragon's narrative with their indexical presence, Le Corbusier likewise chose to furnish his discussion about this contemporary event and its broader ramifications with myriad facsimiles of found texts and images.

Nevertheless, despite these close parallels with Aragon's text, *Urbanisme* did not result from newfound preoccupations on Le

Corbusier's part. Following many of the themes and formal trends that had been established in his first book, *Vers une architecture*, published in 1923, *Urbanisme* speaks in an overarching manner to Le Corbusier's longtime interest in issues of urban design.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, it is fitting that the demolition of large areas on the right bank of Paris to make way for the Boulevard Haussmann would capture his attention, so proximate was this current event to his lifelong preoccupations.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, a decade of thought devoted to metropolitan issues had recently culminated in Le Corbusier's first working plan for a modern city in 1922: the project for a *Ville contemporaine* of three million inhabitants unveiled at the Salon d'Automne in Paris that year.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, a year after the publication of *Urbanisme*, this initial schema would soon morph into the more expanded and ambitious *Plan Voisin* exhibited at the *Exposition des arts décoratifs*, as well as the simultaneously constructed Pessac development that Le Corbusier realized in the southwest of France.<sup>25</sup>

However, in addition to the obvious practical applicability of a civic controversy such as that of the construction of Boulevard Haussmann to Le Corbusier's work at the time, his account of this event in *Urbanisme* also conveniently allowed him to firmly situate his own ideological program in relation to the dominant modernist discourses of the day. For it is partially via his account of this final stage of Haussmannization in *Urbanisme* that Corbusier is able to so resolutely outline his profoundly rigorous position as the most radical of

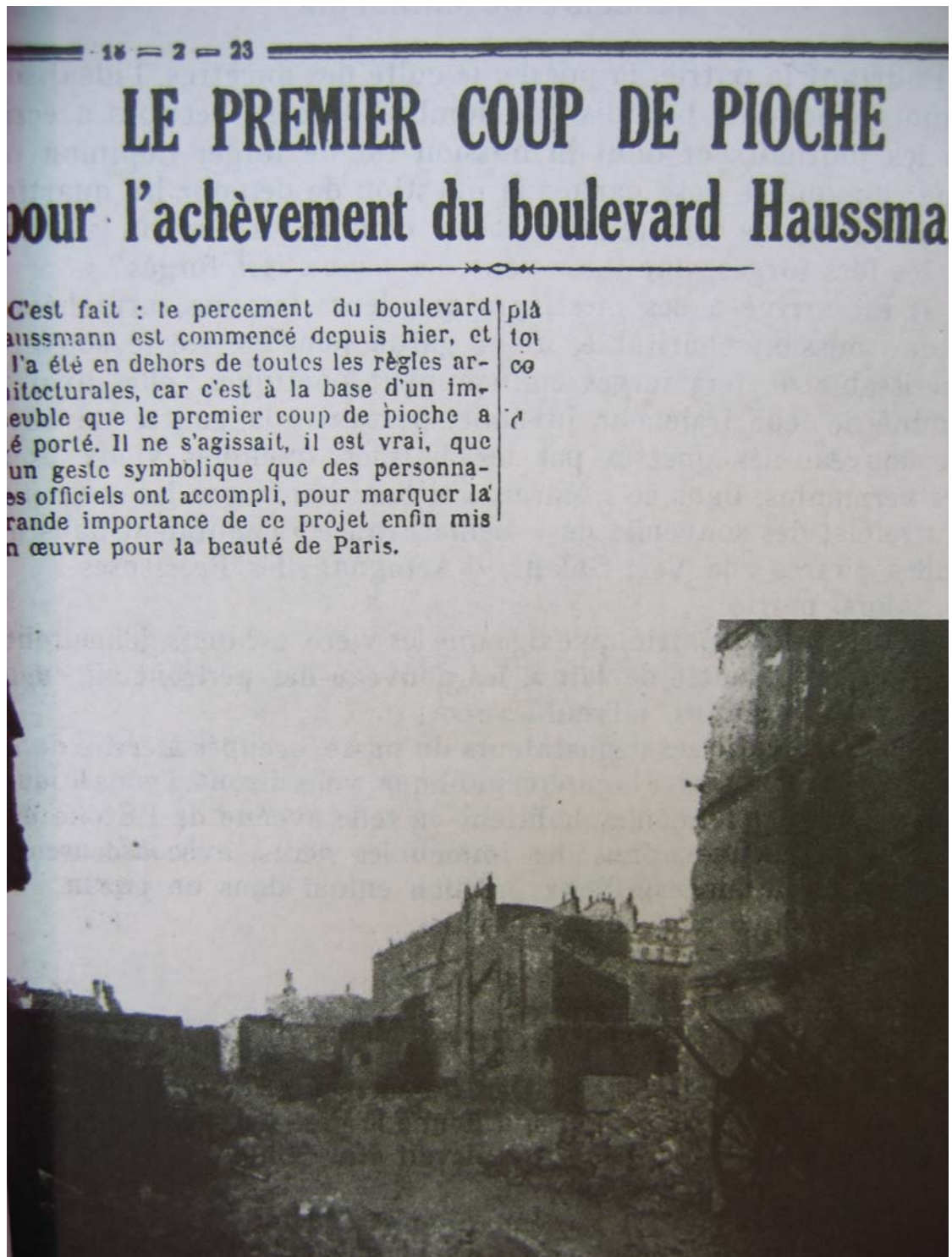


Fig. 4. Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, the completion of Boulevard Haussmann, 1922-1924. © FLC / SODRAC (2008).

progressivists, violently opposed to the preservation of old ways of life, and incisively critical of the moderation that characterized current approaches to modernization.<sup>26</sup> Much

as he had begun to outline his loyalty to the practice and implementation of the ideological program of *l'esprit nouveau* in *Vers un architecture* a year earlier, with *Urbanisme*, Le

Reproduced from: Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme* (Flammarion, 1994).



Corbusier extends this ultimatum further still with nothing other than a sustained attack on the category of obsolescence itself, a phenomenon which appears in *Urbanisme* as the most nefarious and widespread of societal diseases. In this sense, *Urbanisme* speaks directly to Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris*, whether or not this dialogue was intentional.

While topics related to Haussmannization appear throughout the text alongside copious illustrations, it is within the chapter entitled *Médecine ou chirurgie* that *Urbanisme* intersects most evocatively with Part I of Aragon's *Paysan*. In the opening lines of this chapter, Le Corbusier sets the urgent tone of his discussion of this current event: "In 1924 the whole Press gave tongue, so to speak, almost every day. Town planning had to be considered, for Paris was sick, deadly sick."<sup>27</sup> Although, unlike Aragon, Le Corbusier does not detail the impending demolition of the Passage de l'Opéra specifically, he does prominently position the disputed completion of the Boulevard Haussmann and the destruction of surrounding neighborhoods as the core issue in the current war waging within the Parisian press.

Like Aragon, Le Corbusier both acknowledges and debunks each side of the public debate, deploring the sentimentalist tactics of preservationists such as *La Commission du Vieux Paris*. All the while he lambasts the advocates for the improvements of traffic conditions as sorely limited in their vision for municipal progress. For him, simply razing and rebuilding

Paris anew in the same ad hoc manner as before will not suffice to kill the insidious cancer of *démodé* tissue that he repeatedly claims is plaguing the city in a fatal manner. Rather, according to Le Corbusier, the problems that riddle Paris will only be solved by a total and uncompromising reconstructive surgery, in which *all* of the dated urban fabric would be excised and reconstructed without further consideration.

It follows accordingly, then, that the example of Baron Haussmann is paid great homage in *Urbanisme*, as are his more regal forebears such as Louis XIV, whose Versailles project is held aloft by Le Corbusier as a paragon of rational planning.<sup>28</sup> For Le Corbusier the completion of the boulevard named in honor of Haussmann serves as a reminder of the kind of sweeping state power required to realize a visionary metropolis. Therefore, Le Corbusier shows not even an ounce of patience with either the leagues of preservationists who plaintively lament the loss of "beautiful old wrought-iron-work", or the small businessmen and inhabitants of long-established *quartiers* such as the Passage de l'Opéra, or, for that matter, the deeply ingrained French predilection for the preservation of the status quo.<sup>29</sup>

Two photographs from newspaper articles haphazardly torn from their context punctuate Le Corbusier's emphatic argument for an urban *tabula rasa* in an effectively somber manner. The first shows a stoic politician making the first symbolic strike of the pickaxe in the construction of the Boulevard

Hausmann.<sup>30</sup> A few pages later, another article contains an image of the rubble after demolition in the area of the Passage de l'Opéra. Captioning this last image, Le Corbusier has the final word about the outcome of this contemporary event. He writes, "This immense space which has been opened up in the jumbled and overcrowded city is deeply impressive. *It is a proof.*"<sup>31</sup>

In what way exactly can *Le Paysan de Paris* and *Urbanisme* be said to speak to one another? Currently, there is no concrete historical evidence to support a staged dialogue between these two authors in 1924. However, even with the lack of solid facts in this regard, it is easy to conclude that neither Aragon nor Le Corbusier intentionally sought an inter-avant-garde debate with these texts. Indeed, the near simultaneity of the appearance of their publications precludes the possibility of a premeditated retort on the part of either author. Their exchange in 1924, then, is surely extempore, resulting from the contemporary prominence of the contentious issue of Hausmannization and the profound relevance of this scenario to themes that were crucial to different factions of Parisian artistic milieu at this time.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, their fortuitous documentation of the same current event in 1924, as well as their mutual treatment of similar thematic issues, such as progress and obsolescence, functionality and uselessness, health and decay, permanence and ephemerality, etc., creates by default an extraordinarily rich debate

regarding some of the most pressing aspects of Modernism in post-World War I Paris. On the one hand, the artificial dialogue sustained by these texts suggests the deep investment of different factions of the post-war avant-garde in the drama of everyday life itself. On the other, it also confirms the ongoing centrality of the question of the identity of modernity and its relation to the past—as well as the materiality of the past—after the Great War. Such a projected debate between the surrealists and the purists of course continues the polemical legacy begun by earlier waves of the avant-garde. This is seen, for instance, in the various scuffles that characterized the competition between the decadents versus the moderns, or the so-called *passéistes* versus the futurists, among other such prevalent agonistic constellations.

Aragon, for his part, was resolutely focused upon the paradoxical value of what German philosopher Walter Benjamin famously called the *outmoded* [*Veralteteten*] in relation to surrealism.<sup>33</sup> According to Aragon, modernity's excessive progress produced a peculiar kind of waste that paradoxically encompassed a radical potential. But this was so only as a result of its unstable ephemerality, its outright resistance to efforts of preservation.

Similarly distinct from the dominant discourses, but in a diametrically opposed manner to Aragon, Le Corbusier likewise voiced his disgust for both the mainstream preservationist and progressivist stances that permeated the press. Advocating a total abolition of the outmoded, the very characteristics of modernity prized by Aragon for their

critical potential, Le Corbusier agitated in favor of a utilitarian, Taylorist, and anti-revolutionary vision for society.

In sum, the commonalities between these texts are as obvious as the divergences, and these productive tensions could no doubt be analyzed to great fruition elsewhere. It is significant in itself that both Aragon and Le Corbusier felt the strong need to position themselves in relation to the popular debate regarding the completion of Hausmannization and the building of a final boulevard. But at the same time, they each stressed also the overarching question of the modernization of life in general, the way in which the tense dialectic of the new contra the old had come to infiltrate nearly every aspect of the quotidian.

#### Notes:

† This essay has been adapted from ideas that I develop in, *The Vertigo of the Modern: Surrealism and the Outmoded* (PhD diss., Columbia University, in progress).

1. I have located only two documented instances that suggest the possibility of their personal acquaintance before 1925. In an early show of hospitable relations with Le Corbusier and his circle, Aragon published an article about Guillaume Apollinaire in *L'Esprit nouveau* in 1920. Aragon, "Calligrammes," *L'Esprit nouveau* (Oct. 15, 1920). This article is reprinted in, Aragon, *Papiers inédits: de dada au surréalisme, 1917-1931*, ed. Lionel Follet and Edouard Ruiz (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 80-85. In addition, in February of 1922, Aragon most likely would have encountered Le Corbusier in the developmental proceedings for the *Congrès de Paris*, as Ozenfant, Le Corbusier's close comrade at arms, was a key player in André Breton's plans for this never-realized conference. For a detailed account of

this event, see, Michel Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2005), 280-304.

For more general analyses of the relationship between Le Corbusier and Surrealism in later years, see Chapters 2,9, and 13 in particular of Thomas Mical, *Surrealism and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

2. Le Corbusier was almost exactly ten years older than Aragon.

3. *L'Esprit nouveau* was terminated in 1925. For an account of some of this journal's aims, see Beatriz Colomina, "Publicity," in *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 141-99. Also see, Charles Jencks, *Le Corbusier and the Continual Revolution in Architecture* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2000), 11-123. For an excellent overview of the nationalist undertones of *L'Esprit nouveau*, see Simon Richards, "1914-1929: Technocracy," in *Le Corbusier and the Concept of Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 23-36. In addition, see Kenneth E. Silver, "Perchance to Dream," in *Esprit de corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-garde and the First World War, 1914-1925* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 362-99.

Aragon initially served as an editor of *Littérature*, and later, as a regular contributor. See Pierre Daix's biography for an overview of Aragon's involvement with this journal: Pierre Daix, *Aragon* (Paris: Tallandier, 2004). For a general history of the emergence of surrealism from dadaism, see Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, trans. Alison Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

4. The first two sections of *Le Paysan de Paris*, the "Préface à une mythologie moderne" and "Le Passage de l'Opéra," appeared in three monthly installments of *La Revue européenne* between issue 16 (June 1, 1924) and issue 19 (September 1, 1924). The third section, "Le Sentiment de la nature aux Buttes-Chaumont," appeared in four issues of the same journal in the spring of 1925: between issue 25 (March 1, 1925) and issue 28 (June 1, 1925). The conclusion, "Le Songe du paysan," was published for the first

time when *Le Paysan de Paris* appeared in an edition produced by Gallimard in 1926.

5. Here I follow the date given by Daniel Bournoux in volume 1 of Aragon, *Oeuvres romanesques complètes*, ed. Daniel Bournoux, ed. Philippe Forest (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), XLVII. Other authors have argued that Part I was written later, in the spring of 1924.

6. Lionel Follet, among other authors, has confirmed that between 1922 and 1925 money was a “problème constant” for Aragon. See Aragon, *La Défense de l’infini: romans*, ed. Lionel Follet (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), XXIV.

7. In a letter to Soupault included in *Paysan*, Aragon states in a blasé tone that he wrote the text “mainly to compensate you [Soupault] for certain pecuniary advances you had been good enough to grant me.” Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1994), 184. “...et particulièrement pour vous dédommager d’avances pécuniaires que vous m’aviez consenties,” Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 224.

However, in an article of 1930, Aragon modified this version of the story. He explained that rather than writing *Paysan* to pay off a personal debt to Soupault, he hoped to settle the debts of the first numbers of *La Révolution surréaliste*. Note, though, that this claim is made problematic by the fact that the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* was not published until December of 1924, a year after the initial drafts of *Paysan* were written. See, Aragon, “Critique du *Paysan de Paris* (Une jacquerie de l’individualisme),” *L’Infini*, no. 68 (winter 1999), 74.

8. Aragon was still experimenting with automatic writing as late as 1924, but four years later, in his brilliant rant, *Traité du style*, Aragon critiques the bulk of automatic prosody as simply bad writing. For automatic texts by Aragon written 1919-1920, see Aragon, *Le mouvement perpétuel. Précédé de Feu de joie et suivi de Écritures automatiques. Par Aragon. Préf. de Alain Jouffroy* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 143-51. For automatic texts by Aragon from 1924, see Aragon, *Garde-le bien pour mes*

*archives*, ed. Olivier Barbarant (Paris: Stock, 1997). For his critique of automatic writing, see Aragon, *Traité du Style* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 182-93. This text has been translated as Louis Aragon, *Treatise on Style*, trans. Alyson Waters (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 92-98.

9. Both André Breton and Maxime Alexandre, among Aragon’s closet friends during this period, confirm separately that Aragon was a dedicated urban explorer. Breton, for example, said of Aragon in an interview later in his life, “No one was ever a more able detector of the unusual in all its forms; no one was ever more inclined toward such intoxicating reveries on a kind of hidden life of the city...” André Breton and André Parinaud, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 27. “Nul n’aura été plus habile détecteur de l’insolite sous toutes ses formes; nul n’aura été porté à des rêveries si grisantes sur une sorte de vie dérobée de la ville...” André Breton, *Entretiens 1913-1952, avec André Parinaud et al.* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 44. Also see Alexandre’s colorful account of Aragon in this regard: Maxime Alexandre, *Mémoires d’un surréaliste* (Paris: La Jeune Parque, 1968), 50-51.

10. For an overview of Haussmannization, see Michel Carmona, *Haussmann: His Life and Times, and the Making of Modern Paris* (Chicago: I. R. Dee, 2002) and David P. Jordan, *Transforming Paris: The Life and Labors of Baron Haussmann* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

11. Robin Walz, “The Baedeker of Hives: The Opera Passageway and Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris*,” in *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 13-41. In *Urbanisme*, Le Corbusier also documents this journalistic controversy. See Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994). This text has been translated as, Le Corbusier, *The City of To-morrow and its Planning*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover, 1987).

12. For the best historical account of the



Passage de l'Opéra in English, see Johann Friedrich Geist, *Arcades: The History of a Building Type* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 476-86. See also: Jean-Claude Delorme and Anne-Marie Dubois, *Passages couverts parisiens* (Paris: Parigramme, 1996) and Patrice de Moncan, *Les Passages couverts de Paris* (Paris: Editions du Mécène, 2003).

13. In *Le Paysan de Paris*, Aragon compares his and Breton's loathing for Montparnasse and Montmatre with the pleasure they derived from the "equivocal atmosphere of the passages." Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 74. "...l'équivoque des passages," Aragon, *Paysan*, 92.

14. See Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 21, 81-2, 50-58, 92-93, 98, 103-07.

15. Of course, this sort of escapist monumentalizing is precisely what Walter Benjamin, after a period of initially unbridled enthusiasm for *Paysan*, ultimately decided that Aragon intended with his search for what he called a "modern mythology." For a key article documenting the history of Benjamin's encounter with both Aragon and surrealism at large, see Karlheinz Barck, "Lecture de livres surréalistes par Walter Benjamin," *Mélusine: Actes du colloque en Sorbonne*, no. 4 (1983), 277-88. In addition, for an excellent review of the nature of Benjamin's criticisms of Aragon, see Jacques Leenhardt, "Le Passage comme forme d'expérience: Benjamin face à Aragon," in *Walter Benjamin et Paris: colloque international 27-29 juin 1983*, ed. Miguel Abensour and Heinz Wisman (Paris: Cerf, 1986), 163-71.

Surprisingly, given Benjamin's ambivalence regarding *Paysan* and the highly particular political climate that prompted his later criticism of this text, several contemporary scholars have continued to popularize the negative interpretation that *Paysan* is critically compromised as a result of its nostalgic stance, among other such problematic issues. See, for instance, Ackbar Abbas, "On Fascination: Walter Benjamin's Images," *New German Critique: An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies*, vol. 48 (1989), 43-62 and Michael Sheringham, "Surrealism and the Everyday,"

in *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 59-94.

16. For examples of this sarcasm, see in particular the following pages: Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 24-32.

17. *Ibid.*, 33. "Magnifiques drames bactériels," Aragon, *Paysan*, 43.

18. Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 14. "...ce grand rongeur," Aragon, *Paysan*, 21.

19. Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 14. "...car c'est aujourd'hui seulement que la pioche les menace, qu'ils sont effectivement devenues le paysage fantomatique des plaisirs et des professions maudites," Aragon, *Paysan*, 21.

20. For instances of the usage of "vertigo" in *Paysan*, see Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 60, 69, 125, 35.

21. The two texts were produced more or less contemporaneously, and it is difficult, and perhaps pointless, to attempt to determine which appeared first. Parts of *Urbanisme* were written before Part I of Aragon's *Paysan*. However, the portion of *Urbanisme* that concerns the issue of the building of Boulevard Haussmann was most likely written after the initial installation of *Paysan* was published in *La Revue européenne* between June and September of 1924, suggesting the possibility that Le Corbusier may have known about Aragon's text. For a complete bibliographic list of the chapters of *Urbanisme* that were first published in *L'Esprit nouveau*, see Darlene A. Brady, *Le Corbusier: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1985), 45-53.

22. Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture* (Paris: G. Crès et Cie., 1923). This text has been translated as, Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover Publications, 1986). *Vers une architecture* is a compilation of articles that Le Corbusier published between 1920 and 1922 in *L'Esprit nouveau*. For a helpful commentary about this book, and also *Urbanisme*, see Geoffrey H. Baker, *Le Corbusier—The Creative Search: The Formative Years of Charles-Edward*

*Jeanneret* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold; E & F Spon, 1996), 267-81.

23. As early as 1910, Le Corbusier (then still Charles-Edouard Jeanneret) intended to write a book on urban planning with the preliminary title, *La construction des villes*. He was primarily influenced by the work of Camillo Sitte at this time, and thus this early text stands in sharp contrast to his later progressivist ideals. For an overview of this unfinished tract, see H. Allen Brooks, *Le Corbusier's Formative Years: Charles-Edouard Jeanneret at La Chaux-de-Fonds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 200-08. Also see Jencks, *Le Corbusier and the Continual Revolution*, 61-3.

24. See volume 1 of, Le Corbusier, *The Complete Architectural Works*, ed. Pierre Jeanneret and Willy Boesiger (London: Thames & Hudson, 1964), 34-39. For an overview of Le Corbusier's interest in urban planning throughout his life, see the chapter, "Urbanism," in Stanislaus von Moos, *Le Corbusier, Elements of a Synthesis* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979), 187-238.

25. Le Corbusier, *The Complete Architectural Works*, 78-86, 92-121. For information concerning Le Corbusier's contribution to the 1925 *Exposition des arts décoratifs* in Paris, see Tag Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity: Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 114-45; George H. Marcus, *Le Corbusier: Inside the Machine for Living: Furniture and Interiors* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2000), 26-49; and Nancy J. Troy, "Reconstructing Art Deco: Purism, the Department Store, and the Exposition of 1925," in *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 159-226.

On the Pessac project, see Brian Brace Taylor, "Le Corbusier at Pessac: Professional and Client Responsibilities," in *The Open Hand: Essays on Le Corbusier*, ed., Russell Walden (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 162-85.

26. Many scholars have made note of the distinction between Le Corbusier's respect

for certain antiquated structures, such as the Parthenon, and his diatribe against old, useless entities—which has also often been more generally framed as a tension between tradition and modernity, invariability and ephemerality, or futurism and nostalgia in his work. See, for instance: William J. R. Curtis, *Le Corbusier, Ideas and Forms* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), 11-13, 48-57; Carol S. Eliel, *L'Esprit nouveau: Purism in Paris, 1918-1925* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 11; and Romy Golan, "A Crisis of Confidence: From Machinism to the Organic," in *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 61-83.

For an excellent essay on Le Corbusier's complex attitude toward the preservation of historic monuments, see Thordis Arrhenius, "Restoration in the Machine Age: Themes of Conservation in Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin," *AA Files*, no. 38 (Spring 1999), 10-22.

27. Le Corbusier, *The City of To-morrow*, 253. "En 1924, on peut dire que toute la presse donna, et à peu près quotidiennement; vraiment l'urbanisme faisait parler de lui, Paris étant malade, malade," Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, 241.

28. See the following pages for references related to Haussmann: Le Corbusier, *The City of To-morrow*, 155-6, 257-8, 61, 67-70. For pages referring to Louis XIV, see, Le Corbusier, *The City of To-morrow*, 8, 17, 39, 72, 152-6, 260, 73, 302.

29. Le Corbusier, *The City of To-morrow*, 256. "...des beaux fers forges," Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, 247. Le Corbusier's impatience with the preservation of the past is further articulated in subsequent books. In particular, see *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (1925) and *La Ville Radieuse* (1933). In all of each of these books, the outmoded is vilified on the level of the object as well as the meta-level of the metropolis.

30. Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, 241. This image is not reproduced in any of the English translations of *Urbanisme*.

31. Le Corbusier, *The City of To-morrow*,

258. “Le trou immense ouvert dans la ville tassée, écrasée, sursaturée, entre la rue Taitbout et les boulevards, fait un impression saisissante. *C’est une prevue,*” Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, 248.

32. Even if Le Corbusier may not necessarily have been aware of the shared subject matter of part of his *Urbanisme* with Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris*, by the time *L’Art décoratif d’aujourd’hui* was published a year later in 1925, he was already quite familiar with the surrealist project, which had been officially announced in October of 1924. Interestingly, in *L’Art décoratif*, Le Corbusier speaks directly to the question of the surrealist predilection for outmoded, non-utilitarian objects. He points out that although the “nouveaux” surrealists “prétendent s’élever au-dessus des brutalités de l’objet” [“claim to lift themselves above the brute nature of the object”], they constantly integrate banal technological objects into their practice. For Le Corbusier, then, the object-based nature of surrealism necessarily relegates the movement to a form of realism, and in his view, rationalism. This is so because in his view, “les points d’appui des rapports émouvants seront des *objets*, et seuls possible, des *objets qui fonctionnent*,” [“the only possible objects are objects with a function.”] Despite the fact that Le Corbusier spends much of his time in *L’Art décoratif* deploring the proliferation of outmoded and useless objects in society as a crime still worthy of Adolf Loos, he here hopes to take a contrary route and assert at surrealism’s expense the comparative dominance of functionalism in contemporary society. In particular, he seems to hope to pit the timelessness of the purist object against the conspicuous periodicity of the surrealist object in this formulation. See Le Corbusier, *L’Art décoratif d’aujourd’hui* (Paris: Arthaud, 1980), 189-90 and, in translation, Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, trans. James I. Dunnett (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 187-88. For an insightful commentary on this text, see Marcus, *Le Corbusier: Inside the Machine*, 18-25. In spite of this critique, only four years later Le Corbusier would swallow his abhorrence of the surrealist outmoded in order to win the prestigious and lucrative commission of designing a surrealist apartment for the South

American millionaire, Charles de Beistegui, complete with Baroque settees and gilded candelabras. On this unusual interlude in Le Corbusier’s career, see, Jencks, *Le Corbusier and the Continual Revolution*, 203-07.

33. Benjamin first employed this term in relation to surrealism in the article, “Der Sürrealismus,” published in *Literarische Welt* in 1929 in four installments. It has been translated as, Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 177-92.

## Response

In shedding new light on the problem of the outmoded, Abigail Susik’s paper also raises the crucial question of the enduring significance of this concept. Regardless of its origin, the Surrealist found object was placed in the service of a subjectivist project that was nonetheless predicated on revolutionary aims. Whether ethnographic or industrial, modern or *démodé*, the world of objects was already a phantasm for Louis Aragon, providing poetic material for what Rosalind Krauss has described as an unlimited flow of references crossing multiple fields: “The city as a field convulsed and disrupted into a chain of representations, each subsuming the other, the city as a continual process of reference, is what characterizes the Surrealists’ conception of it as modern.”<sup>1</sup> Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* chronicles the deterioration of the *passages* while constructing a new style and a mythology that foregrounds the marvellous through the public encounter. The objects that proliferated in this period and risked

obsolescence pointed to a new way of doubling the product of human labour. In *Stanzas* (1993), Giorgio Agamben follows Marx in ascribing to the commodity a divided character: as use-value transformed into exchange value, the product of work acquired a phantasmatic quality.<sup>2</sup>

Caught between the notions of Marxian commodity fetishism and Bataillian base materialism, the realm of the inanimate in discourse from the 1920s and 1930s allowed for a timely rethinking of the potentials of industrialization and the nature of community and urban space. Aragon's notion of the outmoded is conceived in Susik's paper as a "radicalized third-term," one that initiated a critique of both progressivist moralizing and conservationist nostalgia. In this regard, we might investigate how the Surrealist experience of the *passage* could be related to the Benjaminian emphasis on the past as a repository of traces of a Messianic time. We might also ask how the historical discovery of the obsolete may be relevant in understanding more recent returns of the past in contemporary discourse, culture, fashion, and public space. Hal Foster, for example, has argued that, by collapsing "medium onto medium" and aligning non-synchronous moments and incongruous spaces, certain artists have addressed the image glut of design culture by recovering moments when a certain course of events was still possible.<sup>3</sup> For such artists, cinema in particular has been reinvested as an obsolete form. In general, this problem would implicate Benjamin's theory of the outmoded as well as later notions, such as

Frederic Jameson's empty pastiche and Guy Debord's *détournement* of the spectacle. What is at issue is the overlapping of different historical epochs—a history of continuities and ruptures, of advances towards difference and uncanny returns of the same.

- Milena Tomic , M.A. student,  
University of British Columbia

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**Notes:**

1. Rosalind Krauss, "Nightwalkers," *Art Journal*, 41, no. 1 (1981): 38.
2. Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald Martinez (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 37.
3. Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 143.