

Sea of Dreams: André Breton and the Great Barrier Reef

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'The Treasure Bridge of the Australian "Great Barrier"' is an underwater photograph in *Mad Love* (1937). André Breton's caption tells us the source was the New York Times but not who the photographer was. The research informing this article reveals the coral reef is not Great Barrier in the Pacific but the Bahamas in the Caribbean. The photographer is J.E. Williamson. I establish the provenance of this photograph and argue for its centrality to surrealist aesthetics. I discuss the image's many possible symbolisms but also argue that Breton's desire was to construct Great Barrier Reef as the uncanny Pacific of his imagination.

In this article I trace the provenance and context of a black and white photograph of a coral reef taken underwater and published by André Breton in *L'Amour fou* (*Mad Love*, 1937). Its caption reads: 'The treasure bridge of the Australian "Great Barrier."' Approaching the photograph as an art historian with a particular interest in exchanges between the disciplines of biology and art and specifically in relation to the Great Barrier Reef, I wanted to uncover the circumstances surrounding Breton's possession of such an early, and therefore rare, underwater photograph of the Reef. What was the source of the image and how did Breton obtain it? In 1937 very few Australians had seen under the surface of the sea at Great Barrier and the fluid ocean was of much less significance to Australian identity and history than the territory above sea level.¹

Inquiry led me to discover a discrepancy between the photograph and its caption: the geography of the photograph is not Great Barrier. Instead the location is the Bahamas – according to the New York Times, where it was first published in 1929 in an article on the image's maker, the photographer John Ernest Williamson (1881-1966). This finding in turn led me to consider the significance of the image to André Breton and to surrealism more broadly, particularly to the cornerstones of surrealist aesthetics including dreams and the unconscious, the uncanny and convulsive beauty.

Here I discuss the implications of Breton's appropriation and recontextualisation of the image from American journalism to surrealism. It was an example of 'photography in the service of surrealism,' as distinct from 'surrealist photography,' according to the distinction drawn by Dawn Ades to account for the vast number of readymade photographs appropriated from popular culture by surrealists for surrealist ends.² In the 1920s and 1930s a new culture of photographically illustrated newspapers and magazines allowed for unprecedented, international circulation of documentary images. Through the new telegraph system a modern class of itinerant image, akin to floating signifiers, could be plucked from one context and placed in another. When collaged together and juxtaposed they increased dramatically the possibilities of creating new realities for the world. And Breton himself knew he was benefiting from this vibrant, virtual image culture when he wrote how the new 'wireless telegraphy, wireless telephony, wireless imagination' enabled him to become 'a seeker of gold ... in the air.'³



In addressing the relevance of ‘The treasure bridge of the Australian “Great Barrier”’ to Breton’s private life I want to discuss certain connections between water and the figure central to *Mad Love*, Breton’s wife Jacqueline Lamba. I want to argue that the vision of a submerged landscape relates to Lamba through evocation of sensual pleasure but also to the unconscious and, by association, memories and dreams. However, the photograph’s relevance to surrealist aesthetics more broadly radiates from the vision it offers of nature’s surreality, and from its ambiguous status as a photograph – an index of reality – that also resembles a dream.⁴ This object, then, demonstrates a point made by Ian Walker in relation to photography in the service of surrealism; that it can simultaneously render the world ‘as an hallucination that is also a fact that is also an hallucination.’⁵ Given this rupture between reality and fiction, and in light of the fact that this photograph, taken by Williamson from inside an early submarine, has an historical connection with Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), I want to raise the possibility that it was the photograph’s science-fiction aesthetic that attracted Breton.

Finally, as signposted at the beginning of this Introduction, my discovery of Breton’s misappropriation of a photograph of the Bahamas to stand in for the Great Barrier Reef leads me to discuss his fantasy of Australia. As I will show, by changing the geographical location of the coral reef and by not disclosing the photograph’s authorship Breton was able to project onto the image his idealized vision of the Pacific as a place filled with imaginary nature and a place different from Europe both physically and psychologically.⁶ In the context of *Mad Love* this underwater photograph no longer denotes the reality of place; instead the image and caption are two signs that collude in a form of mutual mimicry. The signifier ‘Great Barrier Reef’ serves to connote the ‘edge of the world.’⁷



Fig. 1: Front of Wide World Photos photographic print acquired by André Breton 1929-1936 (Photo: Association Atelier André Breton).



Sometime between 1929 and 1937 André Breton obtained an underwater photograph belonging to Wide World Photos in Paris, the photo-agency then owned by the New York Times (Figs. 1 and 2).⁸ In 1937 he published it in the pages of *Mad Love* naming it 'The treasure bridge of the Australian "Great Barrier."' It is possible the image was originally sent to Breton from New York as a 'wire photo' using the new telegraph technology available in 1935.⁹ A fellow surrealist might have passed it on as happened throughout the history of the movement when artists chanced upon surprising, often uncanny press photographs. Meret Oppenheim, for example, sent Breton a newspaper picture of a bicycle seat seething with bees, a defamiliarising union of two objects that creates a disquieting strangeness.¹⁰ But while it is possible that the underwater photograph in question originally reached Breton through a friend and as a 'wire photo,' at some point he also obtained a photographic print from the Paris office of the New York Times.

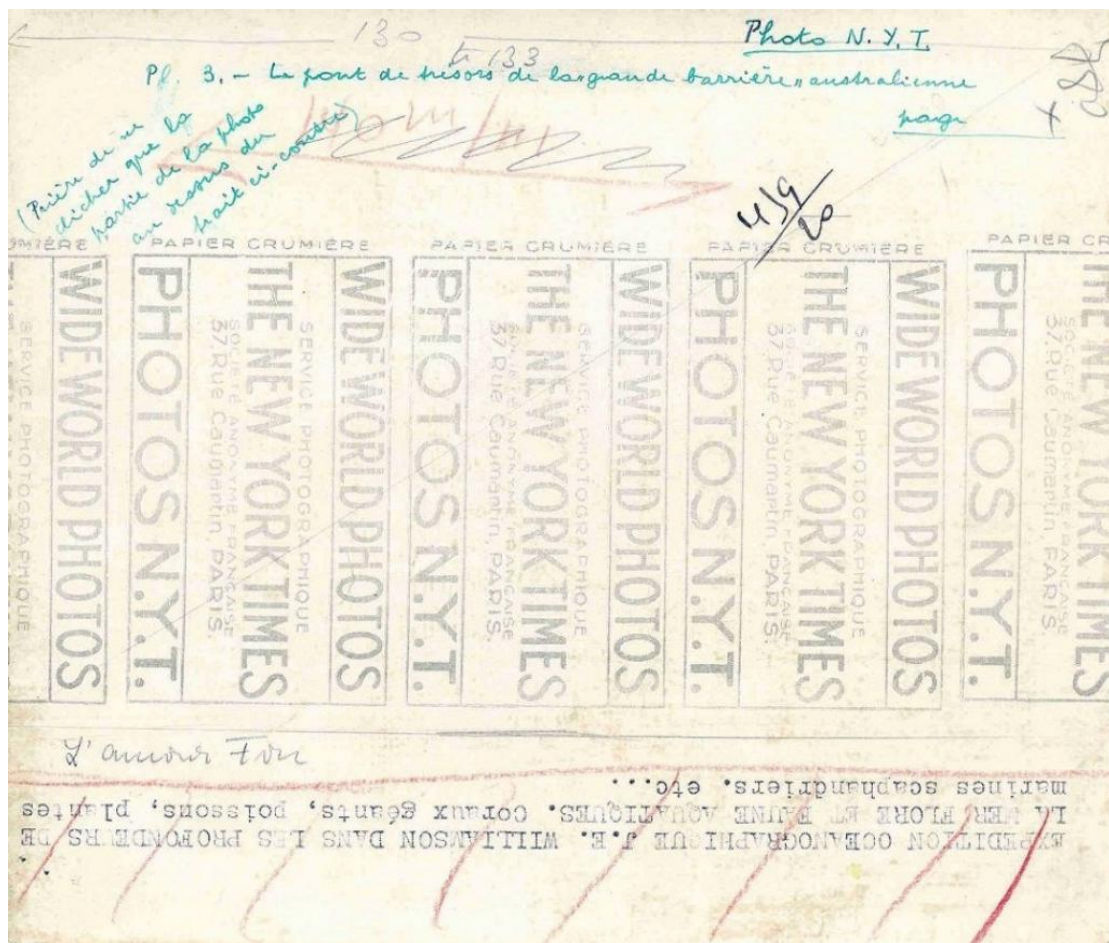


Fig. 2: Back of Wide World Photos photographic print acquired by André Breton 1929-1936. With title: 'Pl.3.- Le pont de trésors de la « grande barrière » australienne.' (Photo: Association Atelier André Breton).

Together with Man Ray's photograph of a sunflower captioned 'This kind of helianthus,' the underwater scene of coral caverns in *Mad Love* remained in Breton's collection of books, manuscripts, photographs and art at 42 Rue Fontaine in Paris until his death in 1966, after which it was preserved and then digitized by the Association Atelier André Breton before the collection was dispersed through auction in 2003.¹¹ Such longevity of possession was not unusual for a man who



amassed thousands of objects including shells, crystals and corals in a private museum that served as raw material for surrealist practice and theory and embodied an 'expression of its owner's psyche.'¹²

Utterly surprising is the news agency photograph's spectacular clarity compared to the pale, murky, reproduction it became in *Mad Love*. Every dark grotto, every mysterious variation in tone and pattern of light, and every eerie shape of coral reef flora and fauna, is visible. The photograph evokes a sense of peering into the depths of being, of experiencing 'the oceanic feeling' of subjectivity unbounded and unconstrained, and of being witness to the mind as it dreams.

'The treasure bridge of the Australian "Great Barrier"' was one of twenty photographs reproduced in *Mad Love*. Their inclusion raised the price of the book so considerably that of the 1800 copies printed by Gallimard Editions only 544 sold over a period of three years.¹³ But they were integral to the book's concept. While many commentators have addressed the photographic conditions of *Mad Love*, they differ as to the images' function. For Dana MacFarlane, Breton draws 'out the textual element by creating captions for the photographs that call into question any assumption of photographic objectivity.'¹⁴ The 'Great Barrier' picture is a case in point. Yet in Anna Balakian's view the photographs were a concession to curious readers 'who need the static reality of the place or object' referred to in the text.¹⁵ Kim Grant has similarly claimed that when *Mad Love* was published, Breton 'used photographs not as interventions in the real but as documents and a sort of sentimental evidence.'¹⁶ But Mary Ann Caws has better captured the poetic value of the images. In Caws's Introduction to her translation of *Mad Love*, she explains how the book was first put together as an assemblage of writing, photographs and letters all interleaved and stuck on the pages, constituting 'not just a book, not just the record of an extraordinary love – that between André Breton and the artist with whom he shared his life – but an object inserted madly and really, now in our world.'¹⁷ *Mad Love* is a passionate assemblage of text and image and a fitting tribute to Breton's love affair with his wife Jacqueline Lamba, the mother of Aube for whom the concluding letter of *Mad Love* was written.

Relevant to this discussion, and to the symbolism of the underwater photograph under scrutiny, is the fact that Breton met Lamba in 1934 when she was a nude dancer in an underwater tank in a Montmartre music hall.¹⁸ In those early years he had taken his friends to watch her dance, according to Lewis Kachur (who wonders whether Salvador Dalí was amongst the visitors since two years after publication of *Mad Love* Dalí built the *Dream of Venus*, an installation at the 1939 New York World's Fair in which topless women swam in a deep water tank inviting the audience to dream of love and erotic desire).¹⁹ In mythology the sea was the birthplace of Venus, the goddess of love, and because of this the sea and erotic love have long been associated. For M.E. Warlick this is most obvious in Dalí's installation where 'spiky protuberances of coral' rise from an 'underwater grotto, or uterine environment.'²⁰ In Breton's photograph in *Mad Love* coral also rises as phallic shapes towards the surface of the sea from vulval grottos in the body of the ocean. Kirsten Powell, however, finds something 'puritanical' in his choice of coral for sexual suggestion. She comments that the erotic is 'veiled' since the delirious love and 'orgasmic aesthetic experience' embodied in Breton's concept of convulsive beauty, a concept integral to *Mad Love*, is difficult to reconcile with 'coral beds of the Great Barrier Reef.'²¹ Nevertheless, coral as well as crystal inspired in Breton the psychological state he termed



‘convulsive beauty.’ In the first chapter of *Mad Love* he addressed a comparison of coral and crystal before developing the poetics of convulsive beauty: ‘Life,’ he wrote, ‘in its constant formation and destruction, seems to me never better framed for the human eye than between the hedges of blue titmouses of aragonite and ‘The treasure bridge of the Australian “Great Barrier””²²

Comparing the underwater photograph of the ‘Great Barrier’ with a photograph by Brassai titled *The house where I live, my life, what I write*, Breton compared the rigidity of crystal to the image of calcified coral whose destiny is to dissolve into the liquid sea. Later in the book he used the phrase a ‘petrifying fountain’ and while not specifically related to the ‘Barrier Reef’ image it captures perfectly the look of coral formations in the photograph. Both image and phrase evoke the contradictory effect of a gush of water turning to stone, a vision that is uncanny in that it produces intellectual uncertainty.²³ In turn the image of a petrifying fountain creates a visual equivalent of Breton’s aesthetic category of ‘fixed-explosive,’ one of three aesthetic groups identified in *Mad Love* that illustrate the concept of convulsive beauty.²⁴ Along with ‘veiled-erotic’ and ‘magic-circumstantial’ the category of ‘fixed-explosive’ evokes a clash of opposites and a disturbance of the senses that – for Breton at least – aroused erotic bodily sensations, the sign of convulsive beauty.

With only very few images in public circulation in the 1930s of coral reefs photographed underwater Breton was fortunate indeed to find one that conveyed such a powerful image of motion arrested and one that embodied a visual clash between something fixed and something explosive. But he heightened the photograph’s mystique even further, and accentuated the image’s strangeness, by giving it a title that located this vision in the Pacific Ocean at the outer limits of the world that few Europeans had seen through photographs taken beneath the sea.²⁵

In the first decades of the twentieth century the Pacific, and the sea in general, was still surrounded by mystery. Ocean-space was not a space of society as it later became; instead it stood for the unknown.²⁶ Scholarship on André Breton recognises the sea as one enigma that remained important throughout his life. A ‘haunting presence’ is the way Anna Balakian described the sea’s place in shaping Breton’s temperament and in motivating his future as an artist.²⁷ References to the sea are abundant in Breton’s work as they are throughout surrealism prompting Allan Sekula to name surrealism as ‘the last aesthetic movement to claim the sea with any seriousness.’²⁸ Four examples of the sea’s representation in surrealism drawn from a huge store of possibilities are Max Ernst (*Forêt*, 1927), René Magritte (*Collective Invention*, 1934), Pablo Picasso (*Figures on the Seashore*, 1931), and Buñuel and Dalí (*Un Chien Andalou*, 1928). At the start of ‘Surrealism and Painting,’ published in 1928, where Breton brought to mind ‘the Marvels of the sea a hundred feet deep,’ he wrote that only the ‘wild eye’ freed from habit can be fully receptive to the magical sensations of the outer limits of the world.²⁹ As well as reflecting key elements of surrealism including the creative power of spontaneous vision, Breton’s reference to the marvels of the deep captured the spirit of the times. In 1928 the invisible realm beneath the surface of the sea was a frontier that few had witnessed, studied or photographed yet one many yearned to experience and possess.³⁰ Consequently to contemplate the ocean floor and its primordial mysteries – the site of evolution for life on earth – was to identify with a wilderness alien to civilization and order. Those early photographers of the deep, including French



filmmaker Jean Painlevé, exaggerated the sea's surprising potential and unknown secrets and revealed the imaginative possibilities of a new type of fiction based in science.

A contemporary of Painlevé, the American photographer **John Ernest Williamson** was a celebrated inventor, explorer and underwater cinematographer. Williamson published widely about his underwater achievements including in *Scientific American* in 1914 where he wrote about the triumph of photographing the bottom of the ocean.³¹ In 1932 Williamson filmed one of the earliest known underwater documentaries, entitled ***With Williamson Beneath the Sea*** (1932). The film's publicity promised audiences an awesome spectacle of 'a lost world fathoms below recovered in savage splendour.'³² At a time before the populace at large developed a visual vocabulary for looking at the world beneath the sea Williamson's films and photographs ushered in that new paradigm of vision. Submarine film offered audiences the thrill of observing something for the first time with a wild, untrained eye. André Breton, too, was excited about the new frontier.

The underwater photograph Breton chose for *Mad Love* was published in his book as an anonymous press image; but it was Williamson who took the photograph, on location in the Bahamas. In 1916, with his brother George, Williamson became a sensation for filming a silent, underwater adaptation of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870). Released by Universal Pictures, it was the first Hollywood movie shot underwater. **Williamson was not a surrealist but he was a science fiction filmmaker with an eye for images that could take the viewer beyond the boundaries of normative experience. His films, photographs and dioramas produced a combination of estrangement and logic, and as such enacted the genre conventions of science fiction.**³³ The subjects he sought in the natural world – sharks, fish and coral formations – were not in themselves unusual but Williamson coded them as dangerous and exotic, presenting 'man-eating sharks' and coral 'jungles.' The production of *Twenty Thousand Leagues* was made possible by Williamson's invention of the 'photosphere,' an air-filled enclosure placed on the ocean floor and big enough to house Williamson. It had a spherical window to photograph through and a strong headlight to enhance Williamson's vision.³⁴

The photograph that Breton captioned "The treasure bridge of the Australian "Great Barrier"" was taken in 1929 when Williamson led an expedition with Chicago's Field Museum to collect Bahamian coral for dioramas and fish for taxidermy.³⁵ It was taken beneath the water at Nassau just before the same ancient coral formation in the photograph was extracted from the ocean floor and shipped to Chicago. Even today visitors to the Field Museum can view the impressive coral structure in the 'Bahama Islands diorama.' Williamson photographed and wrote about the process of 'lifting the huge coral trees.'³⁶ The natural history museums in Chicago and New York, inspired by the growing impact of Charles Darwin's 1842 treatise 'The Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs' (where he proposed the theory that coral reefs are formed by the earth's subsidence), acquired large quantities of coral specimens from the Bahamas for their displays of marine life.³⁷

In 1929 The New York Times published Williamson's photographs of the underwater expedition to the Bahamas, including the eerie image that eight years later appeared in *Mad Love*. Reflecting the frontier status of the ocean in 1929, a realm almost as foreign as outer space and therefore considered ripe for conquest, the caption read: 'The coral world beneath the waves that the



Williamsons invaded.³⁸ The fact is that between 1929 and 1937 the same underwater photograph by J. E. Williamson appeared in *The New York Times* (1929), Williamson's autobiography *Twenty Years Under the Sea* (1936), and Breton's *Mad Love* (1937). Over that time it had three different captions, two of which placed it in two different geographical locations – the Bahamas and Australia. We know from the stamp on the verso side that the print in Breton's possession originated from the New York Times photo-agency, but not whether Breton was familiar with the New York Times article – let alone whether he had seen Williamson's films or read his autobiography (a book so popular it was translated into several languages including French).³⁹

But what about J.E. Williamson: was he aware that his pioneering photograph taken under the sea at Nassau had found its way to France and into a key work of the European avant-garde? A copyright notice in the front pages of Williamson's 1936 autobiography states that 'no part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher.' Without doubt copyright did not count for much in the early twentieth century since illustrated journals and books frequently used photographs without naming the photographers.⁴⁰ However, what makes the case of *Mad Love* different is the surprising presence of J. E. Williamson's name, typed on the back of the photo-agency print that Breton acquired (Fig. 2). Was it André Breton's intention or mistake to misname the photograph's geographical location and omit the name of its author? His annotations on the print provide more insight.

Both front and back of the photo-agency print are marked with Breton's handwriting. On the front, below a line drawn horizontally across the image, there is a note, at times illegible, providing instructions on how to crop the photograph (Fig. 1). In the final reproduction the lower section is missing. Cropped out for publication in the book was the bottom of the image showing a strangely curving white ocean floor, a give-away sign of the round viewing chamber of Williamson's photosphere through which he photographed the underwater scene. In other words the distracting sign of the process of making the photograph, a barrier to unmediated visual experience, was cropped for reproduction in *Mad Love* in order to focus completely on the coral formations and illusion of direct access to the uncharted ocean.

On the back of the print, beside an official agency stamp is an agency title naming the photographer, J.E. Williamson (Fig. 2). It reads: 'Expedition oceanographique J.E.Williamson dans les profondeurs de la mer flore et faune aquatiques. coraux géants, poissons, plantes marines scaphandriers. etc...' ['JE Williamson oceanography expedition in deep sea aquatic flora and fauna. giant corals, fish, marine plants divers etc...']. These words, however, have been deliberately crossed out as if irrelevant, superfluous, and not required. Written directly above the crossed-out agency title, in Breton's handwriting, are the words 'L'amour Fou' and on the opposite side of the print's back is more of Breton's writing: 'Pl.3.- Le pont de trésors de la « grande barrière » australienne.' This sentence was the basis for the final title in the first French edition of *L'Amour fou*: '3. Le Pont de Trésors de la «Grande Barrière» Australienne (p. 15) (*Photo N.-Y.-T.*).'

The pages of *Mad Love* were not the first place the words 'the Australian "Great Barrier"' appeared in Breton's captions. They accompanied a series of photographs of coral in the essay entitled 'Beauty Will Be Convulsive' ('La beauté sera convulsive'), which was published in 1934 in



Minotaure and later incorporated into *Mad Love*. In *Minotaure* the words appeared below a page of Brassai's photographs of coral and crystal specimens: 'Entre Les Haies de Mésanges Bleues de L'Aragonite et la «Grande Barrière» Australienne.'⁴¹ Already part of Breton's repertoire of captions, the phrase came readymade to the pages of *Mad Love* where it appears in-text as well as below the photograph.

The underwater location in Breton's book is not the Great Barrier Reef. The question is why he named it so, and secondly whether it matters that the caption and the geography don't match. Now, *Mad Love* is part theory, part autobiography, and part fiction,⁴² and as such we might expect it to open onto what Robert McNab has described as the geography of imagination.⁴³ Since the title 'The treasure bridge of the Australian "Great Barrier"' is also a line from the text of *Mad Love*, it feels right to think of it as a poetic supplement to the image. The words exacerbate what Paul Hammond refers to – when explaining Breton's approach to writing about Miró's *Constellations* – as enigma, ambiguity, frisson.⁴⁴ Miró's own approach to titling his work is helpful: 'I invent a world from a supposedly dead thing,' he remarked. 'And when I give it a title, it becomes even more alive. I find my titles in the process of working, as one thing leads to another on my canvas. When I have found the title I live in the atmosphere.'⁴⁵

One thing is plain: Breton's caption adds to the atmosphere of the image but without creating a disjunction between word and image or critiquing the habits of language, as in Magritte's 1928-1929 painting, *The Treachery of Images*. These are not incongruous elements and disparate realities brought together to create a more poetic reality, but rather elements of imagined resemblance. Yet 'The treasure bridge of the Australian "Great Barrier"' does draw our attention to the unreliable space between image and text, between seeing and reality, and between thought and representation; to slippages in communication that Breton himself articulated in 'Surrealism and Painting' in 1928 when he wrote that 'words, images, touch are all cruel. I am not writing what I thought I was thinking.'⁴⁶

One way to consider the title is to think of it as an example of a caption becoming a directive for reading, as discussed by Walter Benjamin. In 'A Small History of Photography' (1931) Benjamin asked, rhetorically, about photography in modernity: 'will not the caption become the most important component of the shot?'⁴⁷ The caption, he predicted, would supersede the image and become a directive for politicized thought and propaganda. Breton's caption directs our thinking to Australia, at the far reaches of the planet, a place Breton never visited. In the context of the autobiographical nature of *Mad Love* the title even insinuates that Breton was a great traveller, which he was not – unlike Paul Eluard, who in 1924 journeyed to Australia and New Zealand, travelling past the Great Barrier Reef en route to New Guinea.⁴⁸ Breton, in the view of Robert McNab, was an **armchair traveller** – yet one 'longing for new horizons.'⁴⁹ And perhaps because he was an armchair traveller, he was less concerned with geographical reality and more with the excitement of a photograph that suited his fantasy of the remote Great Barrier Reef. Breton's title exoticises the narrator, implying that he is a man in touch with the antipodes of the world. The title also politicizes the image in Benjamin's sense, decentring Europe, **privileging the Pacific, the southern hemisphere and the Tropic of Capricorn.**



What a different life experience was promised by the wilderness of Great Barrier Reef compared with Paris, a city that Denis de Rougemont referred to as the 'geometric locus of the modern adventure.'⁵⁰ If the experience of Paris was 'geometric' the encounter with Great Barrier Reef seemed likely to offer an extravaganza of the organic and an encounter with a natural wilderness of the type identified by Gavin Parkinson as 'antithetical to the habits, customs, restrictions, and laws that characterized modern Western society.'⁵¹ Coincidentally, when Williamson's photograph was published in the New York Times in 1929, the surrealists published 'The Surrealist Map of the World,' where 'France had all but disappeared and the Pacific Ocean was at the centre of the world.' As Barbara Creed notes, the surrealists were fascinated by the idea of the Pacific which represented a faraway exotic location, a refuge, a place to seek the marvellous, to make new beginnings, to encounter other cultures.⁵²

As the passage quoted above from *Mad Love* indicates, coral reefs, for Breton, were places to witness the formation and destruction of life. Scientists as well as artists found metaphysical resonance in the physical nature of corals, especially the way young coral organisms build their lives on the bodies of the dead. For example, while working in 1905 at the Cocos-Keeling Atoll where Charles Darwin studied corals in the nineteenth century, the British scientist Frederic Wood Jones was struck by the way coral animals inhabit both 'their dwelling place and their mausoleum.'⁵³

Again, artists and scientists have both been intrigued by the ambiguity of coral formations. As one scientist remarked of the Great Barrier Reef, **the paradox of corals is that they are mistakenly classified as stone, but branch and bud like plants, and while properly classified animal are immobile, whereas animals 'run, walk, fly, swim or crawl.'**⁵⁴ Coral excites the imagination due to its uncanny blurring of the vegetable and mineral and this is expressed in *Mad Love* where Breton marvelled how 'the inanimate is so close to the animate that the imagination is free to play infinitely with these apparently mineral forms.'⁵⁵

Rosalind Krauss has argued that Breton's attraction to the mimicry of coral and its disorienting likeness to flowers, plants and rocks stemmed from surrealism's fascination with reality as representation and 'the natural production of signs, of one thing in nature contorting itself into a representation of another' also seen in Brassai's photographs of plants that resemble insects.⁵⁶ When in *Mad Love* Breton wrote about the uncanny likeness of animate coral to inanimate mineral he referred to this illusion as 'nature's fantasies' and compared the affect of this phenomenon to that provoked by the poems of Lautréamont. Both left Breton transfixed by the object's convulsive beauty 'like the feeling of a feathery wind brushing across my temples to produce a real shiver.'⁵⁷ And not only in surrealism, but in science fiction, were writers drawn to the coral uncanny.

There is little doubt that when J.E. Williamson photographed the underwater scene destined to become part of *Mad Love* he framed it through the eyes of Jules Verne whose images of life underwater he knew intimately. Breton's relation to Verne is less clear.⁵⁸ Nonetheless *Mad Love* recalls *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. When Breton refers to two kinds of coral by their scientific names, as 'those absolute bouquets formed in the depths by the alcyonaria, the madrepores,'⁵⁹ he echoes Jules Verne's narrator, Dr. Pierre Aronnax, who, in describing Captain Nemo's coral collection, used the same unusual technical terms.⁶⁰ When, one year before *Mad Love*



went on sale, J.E. Williamson published the coral photograph in his autobiography *Twenty Years Under the Sea*, he titled it as if a film still for a Jules Verne production: “Where the huge, loathsome octopus might lie in wait”; A Lovely Setting for Horrible Tragedy.⁶¹ The underwater setting reminded Williamson of the lair of the gargantuan squid in Verne’s story. Williamson (in the spirit of Verne) imagined this coral reef as the home of a monstrous freak of nature, as a site of the Darwinian grotesque.⁶²

Pamela Kort has argued that it was *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* that inspired Max Ernst’s forests and that *Forêt* (1927) was a response to Verne’s passage about the resemblance of coral to petrified forests; it explains, writes Kort, why viewers of Ernst’s works feel as if they are ‘standing on the ocean’s floor.’⁶³ The surrealist fascination with underwater imagery was also influenced by the German naturalist Ernst Haeckel, and his colleague Wilhelm Bölsche. Bölsche’s *Love-Life in Nature* (*Das Liebesleben in der Natur*, 1898) stimulated in German and Viennese modernism an interest in the ocean ‘as a primordial erogenous zone.’⁶⁴ A passage from Bölsche resonates with the erotic context of Breton’s appropriation of this photograph of a uterine, sensual ocean where there is ‘infinite life, trees rising from the coral depths, covered ... with the greedy orange-yellow mouths of polyps, darting silvery fish, and ... the medusa, the most enchanted of all children of the sea. ... Myriads of quivering souls. ... All is one vast chain of life, one vast chain of love.’⁶⁵

How disappointed Breton must have felt when he opened the first copy of the first edition of *Mad Love* and found that magnificent, detailed, vibrant underwater photograph become a dim and imprecise copy. Yet possession of the photograph gave him an image of life underwater every bit as strange and theatrical as Jean Painlevé’s photographs of sea creatures published by Georges Bataille in *Documents* in 1929.⁶⁶ In the late 1920s surrealists celebrated Painlevé’s photographs for probing the ‘optical unconscious’ of underwater space. It is interesting to speculate whether Painlevé and J.E. Williamson, working in two different countries but both practicing at the intersection of science and art, knew each other’s work. I would make the observation that while the long, picturesque view in *Mad Love*’s underwater image stands in contrast to the defamiliarising close-ups of Painlevé’s crustacean ‘monsters’ in *Documents*, the similarity lies in the suggestion of alien life materialising from the deep. Both photographers amplify the mystery of nature underwater while also expressing, in the manner of science fiction, anxiety about the sea, that new geographical frontier opened up by modern science.⁶⁷

André Breton admired the mimicry of coral, and consciously or unconsciously, by titling the photograph ‘Great Barrier’ he created another type of mimicry; that of title and image imitating each another. Because the general resemblance of image and caption are so close and because it is difficult to tell one reef from another, the error has long gone undetected. Most of us would struggle to place the geography of the Bahamas simply by looking at the image in Breton’s book. However, today’s marine scientists have no difficulty identifying the peculiar nature of Caribbean reefs and the distinctive Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*) in the lower right of the photograph.⁶⁸

Whether Breton came to be in possession of J.E. Williamson’s extraordinary underwater photograph by chance or design, it is a vision maximally opposed to urban, machine culture. It is certainly true that in 1937 the underwater photograph reproduced in *Mad Love* indexed technological



innovations. But the gaze of nature returned by 'The treasure bridge of the Australian "Great Barrier"' effects a return of the repressed. To the thousands of readers of *Mad Love* who, across time and space, have put image and caption together to form a mental picture of the ocean floor at the Great Barrier Reef – one that, while mistaken, rates amongst the earliest global impressions of the Reef obtained through mass reproduced photography – it has presented a vision of nature unruly and other; yet an otherness also enthralling, belonging to a jewel in the sea at the edge of the world that magically bridged, as coral reefs do, past and present, life and death, animate and inanimate, and the thresholds of sea, land and sky.

¹ The dominance of the land and repression of the sea in Australian history and mythology is discussed by Ross Gibson, *26 Views of a Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-1791*, University of Western Australia Publishing, Perth, 2012, 228.

² Dawn Ades, 'Photography and the surrealist text' in Rosalind Krauss, Jane Livingston, *L'Amour fou: photography and surrealism*, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C, and Abbeville Press, New York, 1985, 187.

³ André Breton, Richard Sieburth and Jennifer Gordon (translators), from *Point du Jour*, Editions Gallimard, 1970, in *October*, Vol. 69, 1994, 133.

⁴ Ian Walker, *City gorged with dreams: surrealism and documentary photography in interwar Paris*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2002, 21-23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶ The European portrayal of the Pacific as picturesque and other is discussed in Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, 54-87.

⁷ M.E. Warlick, 'Magic, alchemy and surrealist objects,' in Elmar Schenkel and Stefan Welz (eds), *Magical Objects: Things and Beyond, (Leipzig explorations in literature and Culture 12)*, Galda + Wilch Verlag, Glienicke, Berlin; Madison, Wisconsin, 2007, 18.

⁸ The history of the Paris office of the New York Times discussed in John G. Morris, 'Henri Cartier-Bresson: Artist, Photographer and Friend,' *News Photographer*, September 2004, 2, consulted 23 August 2012, http://www.nppa.org/news_and_events/news/2004/08/jgm_hcb01.html

⁹ Steven Edwards, *Short History of Photography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 32.

¹⁰ Oppenheim's gift to Breton noted in Fionna Barber 'From "Familiar: Alice Maher" 1995,' in Fintan Cullen (ed), *Sources in Irish art: a reader*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2000, 157

¹¹ Thankyou to Constance Krebs for providing a digital print of 'The treasure bridge of Great Barrier Reef' which is catalogued under 'photographs' at the website for the Association Atelier André Breton, consulted 5 September 2012, www.andrebretton.fr

¹² The collection is discussed in Dagmar Motychka Weston, 'Communicating vessels: André Breton and his atelier, home and personal museum in Paris,' *Architectural Theory Review* Vol. 11, No. 2, 2006, 106.



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- ¹³ Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 1995, 441.
- ¹⁴ Dana MacFarlane, 'Photography at the threshold: Atget, Benjamin and surrealism,' *History of Photography* Vol. 34, No. 1, 2010, 28
- ¹⁵ Anna Balakian, *André Breton: Magus of Surrealism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1971, 110.
- ¹⁶ Kim Grant, *Surrealism and the Visual Arts: Theory and Reception*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, 199.
- ¹⁷ Mary Ann Caws, 'Translator's Introduction,' in André Breton, *Mad Love* (1937), trans. by Mary Ann Caws, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln; London, 1987, xvi.
- ¹⁸ Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 1995, 403.
- ¹⁹ Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, and Surrealist Exhibition Installations*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2001, 138.
- ²⁰ Warlick, 'Magic, alchemy and surrealist objects,' 18.
- ²¹ Kirsten H. Powell, 'Hands-on surrealism,' *Art History* Vol. 20, No. 4, 1997, 523.
- ²² André Breton, *Mad Love* (1937), trans. by Mary Ann Caws, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln; London, 1987, 13 (translation modified).
- ²³ This is Jentsch's definition of the uncanny, cited by Freud in his essay of that title. See Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny,"' (1919) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. J. Strachey, Hogarth Press, London, 219.
- ²⁴ André Breton, *Mad Love* (1937), 19.
- ²⁵ No underwater images of Great Barrier were available to an international public until the 1930s. See **Celmara Pocock, 'Entwined histories: photography and tourism at the Great Barrier Reef,'** in *The Framed World: Tourism, Tourists and Photography*, eds. Mike Robinson and David Picard, Ashgate, Farnham Surrey, 2009, 191-192.
- ²⁶ For a discussion of the development of the ocean as social space see Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001.
- ²⁷ Anna Balakian, *André Breton: Magus of Surrealism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1971, 12.
- ²⁸ Allan Sekula, *Fish Story*, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and Richter Verlag, Rotterdam, 1995, 51.
- ²⁹ André Breton, 'Surrealism and painting' (1928) in André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, translated by Simon Watson Taylor, Macdonald and Company, London, 1972, 1.
- ³⁰ Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye For the Tropics*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2006, 156-186.
- ³¹ J. E. Williamson, 'Taking moving pictures at the bottom of the ocean,' *Scientific American*, 11 July 1914, 25.
- ³² Advertisement quoted in Brian Taves, 'With Williamson beneath the sea,' *Journal of Film Preservation* Volume XXV, No. 52, 1996, 61.



³³ This definition of science fiction by Darko Suvin from *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) is quoted in Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, University Press of New England, Hanover, 2000, 16.

³⁴ Williamson writes about 'the first film drama beneath the sea' in J. E. Williamson, *Twenty Years Under the Sea*, Hale, Cushman & Flint, Boston and New York, 1936, 132-146.

³⁵ The Field Museum-Williamson Expedition is described by Williamson in J. E. Williamson, *Twenty Years Under the Sea*, Hale, Cushman & Flint, Boston and New York, 1936, 251-255.

³⁶ The photograph in question and a description of the removal of the coral formation appear in J. E. Williamson, *Twenty Years Under the Sea*, Hale, Cushman & Flint, Boston and New York, 1936, 287-289.

³⁷ Loren P. Woods, 'The Bahama coral reef,' *Chicago Natural History Museum Bulletin* Vol. 34, No. 4, 1963, 6-7.

³⁸ Virginia Pope, 'In an odd world of coral and fishes,' *The New York Times Magazine*, 1 December 1929, 95.

³⁹ Brian Taves, 'With Williamson beneath the sea,' *Journal of Film Preservation* Vol. XXV, No. 52, 1996, 54.

⁴⁰ Two useful discussions on photographs, authorship and attributions are: Dawn Ades, 'Photography and the surrealist text' in Rosalind Krauss, Jane Livingston, *L'Amour fou: photography and Surrealism*, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C, and Abbeville Press, New York, 1985, 159; J. H. Matthews, 'Modes of documentation: photography in La Révolution surréaliste,' *Modern Language Studies* Vol. 15, No. 3, 1985, 38-48.

⁴¹ André Breton, 'La beauté sera convulsive,' *Minotaure*, Issue 5, May 1934, 11.

⁴² Argued in Roger Bellin, 'Retrospection and prophesy in the structure of Mad Love,' *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 30, No. 2, 2007, 3.

⁴³ Robert McNab, *Ghost Ships: A Surrealist Love Triangle*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2004, 236.

⁴⁴ Paul Hammond, *Constellations of Miró, Breton*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 2000, 80-81.

⁴⁵ Miró quoted in Paul Hammond, *Constellations of Miró, Breton*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 2000, 86.

⁴⁶ André Breton, 'Surrealism and painting' (1928) in André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor, Macdonald and Company, London, 1972, 11.

⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'A short history of photography,' *Screen* Vol. 13, No. 1, 1972, 25.

⁴⁸ Robert McNab, *Ghost Ships: A Surrealist Love Triangle*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2004, 69.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁰ Denis de Rougemont quoted in Justin O'Brien, ed, Introduction, *N.R.F.: the most significant writings from the Nouvelle revue française, 1919-1940*, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1958, xi.

⁵¹ Gavin Parkinson, 'Emotional fusion with the animal kingdom' in *The Art of Evolution: Darwin, Darwinisms, and Visual Culture*, eds. Barbara Larson and Fae Brauer, Dartmouth College Press, Hanover and London, 2009, 268.



⁵² Barbara Creed, 'The unheimlich Pacific of popular film: surreal geography and the darwinian sublime,' *Papers of Surrealism* No 6, Autumn 2007, 3.

⁵³ The comments of Frederic Wood Jones paraphrased without a source in William J. Dakin, *Great Barrier Reef and some mention of other if other Australian coral reefs*, The Australian National Publicity Association, Melbourne, 1951, 12-13.

⁵⁴ William J. Dakin, *Great Barrier Reef and some mention of other if other Australian coral reefs*, The Australian National Publicity Association, Melbourne, 1951, 15.

⁵⁵ André Breton, *Mad Love* (1937), 11.

⁵⁶ Rosalind Krauss, 'The photographic conditions of surrealism,' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., 1986, 112.

⁵⁷ André Breton, *Mad Love*, 8.

⁵⁸ Terry Hale and Andrew Hugill note that while Breton did not mention Verne in the 1924 *Manifesto* and did not name him as a precursor to surrealism, the science fiction writer occupied a significant place in surrealism's background including 'oblique reference to Verne' by Breton. See Terry Hale and Andrew Hugill 'The science is fiction: Jules Verne, Raymond Roussel and surrealism,' in *Jules Verne: narratives of modernity*, ed. Edmund J. Smyth, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2000, 132. See also Pamela Kort, 'Arnold Böcklin, Max Ernst, and the debate around origins and survivals in Germany and France,' in *Darwin: Art and the Search for Origins*, eds. Pamela Kort and Max Hollein, (eds), Wienand, Cologne, 2009, 48.

⁵⁹ André Breton, *Mad Love*, 11.

⁶⁰ Jules Verne, Part 1, Chapter 11: The Nautilus, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, translated by F.P. Walter, Paris, Hetzel, 1870, consulted retrieved 28 July 2012 <http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/83/twenty-thousand-leagues-under-the-sea/1383/part-1-chapter-11-the-nautilus/>

⁶¹ J. E. Williamson, *Twenty Years Under the Sea*, Hale, Cushman & Flint, Boston and New York, 1936, 164.

⁶² A useful essay on Charles Darwin and the grotesque is Nicola Brown, 'Entangled banks': Robert Browning, Richard Dadd and the Darwinian grotesque,' in *Victorian Culture and the Idea of the Grotesque*, eds. Colin Rodd, Paul Barlow and David Amigoni, Ashgate Farnham Surrey, 1999, 119-143.

⁶³ Pamela Kort, 'Arnold Böcklin, Max Ernst, and the debate around origins and survivals in Germany and France,' 46.

⁶⁴ Marsha Morton, 'Nature and soul: Austrian responses to Ernst Haeckel's evolutionary monism,' in *Darwin: Art and the Search for Origins*, 131.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ See examples of Painlevé's photographs in Dawn Ades and Simon Baker, *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and DOCUMENTS*, Hayward Gallery, London, and MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2006, 168-169.

⁶⁷ Lauren E. Fretz, 'Surréalisme Sous-l'Eau: science and surrealism in the early films and writings of Jean Painlevé,' *Film & History* Vol. 40, No. 2, Fall 2010, 50-51.

⁶⁸ When shown the photograph in *Mad Love* Anthony Gill, Curator of Natural History at the Macleay Museum, University of Sydney, identified 'a West Atlantic reef,' and 'the Nassau Grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*) in the lower right part of the photo [which is] a large and distinctive species.'



Anthony Gill email to Jude Phelp, MacLeay Museum, University of Sydney, 21 March 2012, <jude.philp@sydney.edu.au>.

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