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## *Erotic Witchcraft: Mario Mercier's occult sex films*

“Cinema will bear a greater and greater resemblance to the fantastic...” (Antonin Artaud)

A significant portion of the history of French culture is devoted to the relationship between art and occultism. In Paris, in 1884, Madame Helena Blavatsky founded her Theosophical Society aimed at forming myths and religions into a new order of truth. In 1892 Joséphin Péladan opened his first Salon de la Rose+Croix. It was an attempt at unifying a system of occultism through music and ritual (Erik Satie was an early member of the order). Péladan's aim was to invoke “the rebirth of mysticism decisively victorious over science, materialism and the Revolution of modern times.”<sup>1</sup> The first Surrealist Manifesto was published in 1924 by Andre Breton wherein the author called for the “recuperation of lost mental powers”. Although such Symbolist/Decadent/Occult activity was viewed by some as sanitised, traces of the sensational imagery and conceptualisation of the ritualistic would find their way into the then new and exciting art form of cinema.

French cinema is impregnated with the occult. Since the early days of film theory, the impressionist/surrealist model of cinema extolled the virtues of the cinematic arts as a form of witchcraft. The Parisian surrealists believed that the industrial/enlightenment age enabled a reactivation of mythic powers, and that cinema was the art form ideally placed to achieve this. Cinema, with its tricks, hypnotisms, hallucinations and reveries, was capable of forging what Albert Valentin defined as ‘black-and-white magic’<sup>2</sup>. This is the ‘witchcraft’ to which the surrealists subscribed.

Jean Epstein, one of the early masters in film art, believed the cinema, a mass of synthetic images of existence, could do no less than reveal “the spirit's appearance.”<sup>3</sup> For these French writers, film was at last an art form which could explore the magic of fantasy and imagination with the same ferocity great literature had –only better.

In 1928 Antonin Artaud wrote an essay entitled ‘Sorcery and the Cinema’. Written in the early stages of film history and film criticism, Artaud nevertheless argued that the cinema was already at “an advanced stage of development within human thought.”<sup>4</sup> “Any image, even the slightest and most banal, is transfigured on the screen”, he wrote. The way in which film is able to isolate (some would say fetishise) objects “endows them with a second life.”

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<sup>1</sup> Nadia Choucha, *Surrealism and the Occult*, 1991, pp. 24

<sup>2</sup> Albert Valentin, ‘Black-and-white magic’ in Philip Hammond, ed., *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, San Francisco, 2000, pp.95

<sup>3</sup> Jean Epstein, ‘*Photogénie* and the Imponderable’ in Richard Abel, ed., *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907-1939 Vol. 2*, 1988, pp.192

<sup>4</sup> Antonin Artaud, ‘Sorcery and Cinema’ in Philip Hammond, ed., *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, San Francisco, 2000, pp.103

This 'second life' of which Artaud speaks is the contingency and mystery of cinema, not found in other arts. The film camera is capable of focussing, with a fetishistic relish, on everyday objects and rendering them intoxicating and 'marvelous'<sup>5</sup>. Thus the cinematic object moves onto another plane of experience and is transfigured.

Film is capable of creating a "physical intoxication" the likes of which had not been seen or experienced before, at least with such intensity. The dream-like nature of the projected film is unprecedented in art, for the first time "supreme in the enlargement of reality that is the marvellous, in that prolongation of psychology that dream is."<sup>6</sup> For Artaud, more than any other surrealist film-maker, film was more akin to the trance, the dream, inner consciousness and the alteration of received meaning. It is clear then, that the earliest conceptions of film were essentially 'supernatural'; the transfiguration of images and the virtual power images behold to go 'rummaging in the depths of the mind for hitherto unused possibilities'<sup>7</sup> is of an occult nature, and one would have naturally thought that these revelations would inspire a tranche of spectacularly occult experiments in cinema.

Despite the commercial cinema's obsession with the occult in horror and fantasy<sup>8</sup>, Artaud's hoped-for procession of cinema magicians - "sorcerers and saints"<sup>9</sup> - did not appear.

But Mario Mercier (b. 1945) is a figure who, as a painter, novelist, historian and alchemist, seems to epitomise Péladan's infamous proclamation: "Artist, thou art priest."<sup>10</sup> Mercier is like the 'modern alchemist' that writers Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier met in Paris in 1953 when researching their classic occult text *The Morning of the Magicians*.<sup>11</sup> He, like Mercier, viewed gardening as a form of alchemy. Mercier realised only a handful of films but these faithfully realised the promise of fantastic cinema that began and virtually ended with magicians such as Méliès and Feuillade. Mercier was that rare thing: a film poet; less concerned with plot and narrative and, like the early impressionist film-makers, keen to reveal the thrill of rituals and incongruities, where "reality and nightmares collide."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hammond defines the marvelous as 'our experience of the perturbing flux between the imaginary and the real'. Philip Hammond, 'Available Light' in Philip Hammond, ed., *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, San Francisco, 2000, pp.38

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Brunis, 'Crossing the Bridge' in Philip Hammond, ed., *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, San Francisco, 2000, pp.102

<sup>7</sup> Antonin Artaud, 'Sorcery and Cinema' in Philip Hammond, ed., *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, San Francisco, 2000, pp.103-104

<sup>8</sup> See Carrol L.Fry's book *Cinema of the Occult* (Cranbury: 2008) for a study of the more infantile examples of this.

<sup>9</sup> Antonin Artaud, 'Sorcery and Cinema' in Philip Hammond, ed., *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, San Francisco, 2000, pp.104

<sup>10</sup> Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France: Joséphin Péladan and the Salon de la Rose+ Croix*, 1976, pp.105

<sup>11</sup> This meeting is echoed in Frédérick Durand's strange meeting with Mercier in the Café de Flore in 1999

<sup>12</sup> Roy Armes, *French Film*, London, 1970, pp. 23

Mercier worked with that feverish brand of Polish/French surrealism evident in the early works of Roman Polanski (notably his collaborations with writer Gérard Brach), Roland Topor, Fernando Arrabal and Walerian Borowczyk. Their images of sex, death and the occult pervaded new wave cinema of the post-war period. Mercier's Jewish father was a doctor and biologist fascinated by occultism (this figure of the 'part-time occultist', and the ways in which the supernatural can be located just as easily in a sunny home as much as a gloomy remote castle, is echoed in the pre-credit sequence of his first film *La Goulve*). Mercier excelled at school and became a gang leader in his local village (a role also reprieved in the opening of *La Goulve* but this time reversed: Raymond is the victim of a gang of tearaways). Mercier is generally better known in France as a novelist and writer on the occult, with several disturbing works of fiction to his name, most of which were censored in some manner.<sup>13</sup>

Mercier's first feature, *La Goulve* (1971, English title: *Erotic Witchcraft*), a retelling of the Gorgon legend, is one of the most original films ever made. It is a film saturated with the horror of the occult and eroticism. Many of the scenes in the film are astonishing set-pieces demonstrating a real understanding of the evil power of film and how to shock and surprise audiences with its occult mysteries. *La Goulve* also draws on early masterpieces of French fantasy such as Balzac's *La Peau de Chagrin* (1831) a study of a young man who misuses the magic powers granted to him and Théophile Gautier's *Omphale* of 1834 where a beautiful figure in a tapestry comes seductively to life. The most startling scene in the film occurs when Raymond is transformed into a female form, a succubus, and captivates the girl. Mercier explored this notion in his first sensational novel *Jeanne's Journal* (1969), when the heroine, possessed of a secret alchemy, fantasises that she may "split herself" so that she "might make love to myself."<sup>14</sup> The eerie electronic music pulsing through this scene echoes the mutations and electro-magnetic inductions Jeanne is able to create. As Jeanne observes of her state:

"I sometimes become masochistic when I contemplate horror and its fascination. To be masochistic is to become the gap which welcomes the torrents of the universe"<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, this statement is a concise explanation of the experience of watching a supernatural horror film.

Set in the southern regions of France where Mercier lived (a land with a particular kind of rural paganism<sup>16</sup>), the film follows the story of Raymond who, as a child, witnessed his father first kill his mother and then himself. He is subsequently bullied by the village kids and accused of being a 'demon.' Pitying Raymond's plight, Axel, the old village sorcerer, takes

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<sup>13</sup> The publisher of *Le Journal de Jeanne*, Eric Losfeld, was fined several million francs, *La Cuvée des Singes* was pulped and *Le Nécrophile* (1970) was prohibited.

<sup>14</sup> Mario Mercier, *Jeanne's Journal*, London, 1972, pp. 12

<sup>15</sup> Mario Mercier, *Jeanne's Journal*, London, 1972, pp. 16

<sup>16</sup> For example, in 1931 the French mystic and historian Antonin Gadal investigated the Cathar Grail mystery in the pyrénées reguion of southern France, where *La Goulve* was shot. The ruined fortresses of this area continue to hold an occult fascination. Fittingly, the Marquis de Sade's ruined chateau at Lacoste (now owned by fashion designer Pierre Cardin) is nearby.

him in and teaches Raymond the powers of the occult. Every weird element of Axel's tiny house comes alive to Raymond with mystery. The strange clock chimes; unknown liquids bubble and boil on the table. Axel warns Raymond of an evil vial of lemur's spittle and instead encourages Raymond to sniff a perfume. Immediately he is transported back to a vivid abstract image of his mother. A plaintive guitar plays lyrically. The screen bursts into a yellow mist. This is the first of many alchemical moments in the film. Then, as Raymond surveys the bizarre room, electronic music slowly seeps in. This is augmented with a sudden burst of thunder and flashing lights, as an icon of *la goulve*, an ancient goddess with magical powers, looms up before Raymond. Axel then gives him a tour of the occult paraphernalia littering the tiny apartment. He will teach him everything.

Years later, at Axel's funeral the cackling heads of the village idiots torment Raymond again. Disturbing electronic organ accompanies this scene. The laughter of the gravediggers is also drenched in unsettling reverb. Another astonishing sequence follows: the ghost of Axel appears in a withered tree, warning Raymond not to misuse the powers of *La Goulve*. However, in order to control the women of his desires he cannot resist harnessing the grotesque power of the spirits.

Through Raymond's subsequent doomed relationships with women, first Agnès and then his cousin Nadine, Mercier portrays women as evil spirits: deceivers and temptresses. Any opportunity to see the women naked is taken. In this Mercier is following the dictum presented in *Jeanne's Journal*: "In matters of eroticism, priority must be give to the total application of its rules: it excludes conventional morality which would inevitably render it insipid."<sup>17</sup> Raymond's frustrated sexual desires are the cause of his murderous and sadistic uses of the occult. In Breton's similarly incredible novel *L'Amour Fou*, he outlines the surrealist conception of how women epitomise beings capable of conjuring the occult via sex: "Beauty will be erotic-veiled, explosive-fixed, magic circumstantial or will not be." Both Agnès in *La Goulve* and Aline in his second film *La Papesse* are made, through exposure to the occult ritual, to rejoin the occult forces which make them powerful and yet extremely fragile, "everything and nothing at the same time."<sup>18</sup>

Mercier draws on the fetish of the 'alchemical woman' outlined by another French occultist writer Michel Leiris for Georges Bataille's *Documents* magazine.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, this is a deeply sexist version of eroticism, evident in most of Mercier's novels and films. On the other, it is an attempt at representing a visionary and revolutionary potential of female sexuality- according to Bataille: "inseparable from the idea of transgression."<sup>20</sup> The occult erotic in Mercier's films is not, however, that of the satanic horror film offering a sleazy tableau of witchcraft, but rather he uses the erotic as part of magic, the drive which enables transportation into another realm of the senses...

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<sup>17</sup> Mario Mercier, *Jeanne's Journal*, London, 1972, pp. 32

<sup>18</sup> Mario Mercier, *Jeanne's Journal*, London, 1972, pp. 70

<sup>19</sup> Leiris discusses the erotic occult appeal of some photographs of a woman in a black leather mask sent to him by William Seabrook. These disturbing images are some of the first photographic images combining the occult with the erotic.

<sup>20</sup> Nadia Choucha, *Surrealism and the Occult*, 1991, pp. 83

In order to control Agnès, Raymond conducts an occult spell invoking the image of her other lover Constant and the sacrifice of a chicken whose blood is cooked up with herbs and nails. Raymond shuffles around the room and enters the magic circle barefoot. Swirling psychedelic organ fills the air. As Agnès is awakened in her bed by the spell, pulsating synthesizer music kicks in. A powerful storm swirls all around, the fury of *La Goulve* expressed through nature. Transformed into a version of the spirit, in female form, Raymond then enters the room Nadine's is occupying in his house and hypnotizes her into stabbing herself with a magic dagger. The *Goulve* then heals this wound. Agnès is lured back into the river (where she has earlier bathed seductively for Raymond) but this time at the behest of magic powers. The dark woods hiss and buzz with the terrifying nocturnal sounds of birds and animals. The moon becomes a dangerous, all-seeing orb.

The beauty of the pastoral landscape is utilised in both of Mercier's films as a site of mystery and danger. Agnès, deranged by the erotic spell, masturbates against a gnarled tree stump while a storm flashes around her. The *Goulve* has entranced the entire landscape and possessed its people. In Constant's final dream/nightmare, a gang of sexy witches drift through the landscape bathed in a yellow glow. The music is the weird refrain heard earlier but now played on a single heavily-reverbed string bass, baleful and creepy. Death masks peek out of bales of straw. Sex and death are entwined in the scene when The *Goulve* slowly hypnotises and seduces Agnès while Nadine's body, her throat slashed, lies nearby, snakes writhing near her dead body. Only in the form of a possessed woman can Raymond seduce. In addition to the bizarre and striking imagery, Mercier uses Guy Boulanger's shimmering music throughout to convey occult powers. In the haunting pre-credit sequence, the soundtrack for Raymond's torment is a demented arpeggio piano riff which recurs throughout.

In their book *Immoral Tales*, Tohill and Tombs, despite claiming that: "watching *Erotic Witchcraft* is like having the top of your skull taken off and blown into"<sup>21</sup>, criticise the film for its low budget and cheap effects (in actual fact, I found the optical effects, by Paul Soullignac-Thomas, entrancing and terrifying). But that is to miss what Mercier was trying to achieve; namely: to convey the incredible powers of the occult through a series of striking rituals of cinematic expression. There is no need for fine acting, a deep story and elaborate special effects when you can conjure up the spirits in simple but effective use of sound and image using the ancient tricks of the cinema: original and striking *mis-en-scene*, simple shifts of focus and an intense, relentless musical score. The kind of 'psychic transport'<sup>22</sup> Mercier wishes to use to take his audience on requires that conventional notions of narrative and continuity be disregarded. Mercier is updating the practices of the early French impressionists, deploying *photogenie* and magic to create the *fantastique*. The vignettes are at times cruel and savage, erotic but always entrancing. Mercier, before our eyes, transfigures actors into spirits.

Mercier's second feature, *La Papesse* (1975), a more lurid and vivid horror work, introduced the dark aesthetics of late 1960s counter-culture to the occult film. It is an unflinching and surreal account of the sexuality of witchcraft, described by Michel Guy, the Minister of

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<sup>21</sup> Cathal Tohill and Pete Tombs, *Immoral Tales: Sex and Horror Cinema in Europe 1956-1984*, pp. 60

<sup>22</sup> Mario Mercier, *Jeanne's Journal*, London, 1972, pp. 65

Culture at the time, as being “an uninterrupted succession of scenes of sadism, torture and violence.”<sup>23</sup> The film opens with the camera panning again across the harsh rural landscape of Southern France (“somewhere in the world but outside of it” we are told). *La Papesse* is Geziale (supposedly a real witch) and we see one of the men who desire to be initiated into her cult. As with *La Goulve*, the specific nature of these occult groups is unclear; the rituals and rites more folkloric than sensational and satanic. In Mercier’s films we lurch from the medieval into the present-day. A band of bearded counter-culture types mark out a circle of fire inside which a man is buried up to his neck. A basket of snakes is tipped over him. One has a deadly poisonous bite. Suddenly, it attacks and the camera pans upwards to the perfect blue sky...

The head in the circle of fire belongs to Laurent, a young man on a masochistic quest for pure liberation of the mind and body that results in an astonishing array of sadistic imagery. Leaving his wife Aline he meets a mysterious woman (Iltra) on a bleak hillside. He allows her to chain him to a cross and be whipped by a psychopath in a leather jacket (Borg). Laurent grimly surveys that bleak countryside. He is whipped and faints with pain. When he comes back to consciousness, he sees a vision of a gang of hooded men whose gowns are marked with red crosses. We see that this is actually Aline’s POV and now she too is to be whipped. As the monks pray and the moon glows in the twilight, she suddenly becomes old and withered (playing with the mystical connections between lunar powers and the female principle). She wakes with start from a dream. But when she looks the marks are still on her back; the pain from Laurent’s whipping had been telepathically conveyed by Iltra.

The music again is significant. A groovy mix of psychedelic organ and bass guitar-driven rock, it makes the film seem both ancient and modern. The central rituals are again cruel and surreal. Aline’s initiation, presided over by Geziale as a medium for Laurent’s transcendence, is held in a primitive stone setting. Flamed torches light the proceedings. Tribal music and chanting sets an unworldly, ominous scene. Geziale explains that her mission is to create “the reign of women of all ages in the ‘Age of Aquarius.’” She explains that because of ‘traditional’ religion women have lost their original powers and must, through ritual, recover love’s initiatory and sacred power. The adepts kiss Geziale’s kinky high-heeled boots. The blood-red moon is bathed in fluid and the Sabbat commences; an orgy of naked revelry. After a series of violent abuses, Aline eventually dies a gruesome death when hiding in a tree she falls. Xavos, Borg’s vicious dog, rips her neck. As she dies she stares up at the branches of the tree, looming ominously above her.

Mercier’s films are thus designed, like his literary works, to be exercises in the “provocative powers”<sup>24</sup> of artistic expression. Mercier’s films were issued at a time when the French cinema, via a heady mix of sexual and political liberation, was “possessed by the demon of sex”<sup>25</sup> with directors such as Jean Rollin making horror films saturated with an erotic content.

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<sup>23</sup> Cathal Tohill and Pete Tombs, *Immoral Tales: Sex and Horror Cinema in Europe 1956-1984*, pp. 61

<sup>24</sup> Mario Mercier, *Jeanne’s Journal*, London, 1972, pp. 9

<sup>25</sup> Cathal Tohill and Pete Tombs, *Immoral Tales: Sex and Horror Cinema in Europe 1956-1984*, pp. 53

Artaud spoke of the film-maker as being capable of revealing the inner self that had previously been the domain of the "Illuminati."<sup>26</sup> The modern film-maker could use the tools of cinematic art to gain access to secret knowledge and to reveal it to the world. This is not the world however, of the dead brought back to life or of satanic ghouls, nor of documentary records of taboo rites. Mercier described his work as a project called "witch cinema"<sup>27</sup>, an attempt at using the art of film to create occult rituals on screen.<sup>28</sup> His films are exciting supernatural records of the psychological processes of the rites of the dream. They do not explain anything about witchcraft but instead try to conjure up some form of erotic magic ritual on the two-dimensional plane. His films bear little resemblance to other acknowledged works of occult cinema (Kenneth Anger's *Magick Lantern Cycle*, or Benjamin Christensen's *Haxan*) because, like those writers Mercier perhaps has more in common with (the dark eroticism of Emily Brontë, the decadence of Huysmans, the pronounced sense of evil found in Heinrich Von Kleist, the strange gloom of Poe, and the erotic nightmares of de Mandiargues and Michaux. They draw on extreme psychological terror in order to amplify the sensory experience. The Black Mass becomes a vehicle for delirium and ecstasy in the form of a cinematic moment. Jeanne, like Raymond, Axel and Mercier himself is a magician with a life directed by occult and alchemical erotic rituals. Jeanne and Raymond become masochistic figures capable at any moment of a cruel and sadistic form of eroticism.

The films of Mercier also explore the psychedelia and surrealism of modern witchcraft. The adepts in *La Papesse* are young funkily-attired devil-worshippers, the flipside to the peace-and-love counter-culture beloved of the media. They are dark figures more akin to the disturbed followers of Charles Manson, and Anton LaVey. Mercier's films and books are connected to the fantasy world of Claude Seignolle's *Contes Sorcières* (1974) as his stories are concerned with creating horror figures with a disturbing element of reality. These figures are driven by destructive sexual impulses and exist in creepy rural locations like those of *La Papesse*. The folklorist nature of Mercier's films contributes to that particular form of occult horror cinema. The sex rituals are invocations carried out as initiations into the kind of modified kinky magic rituals of Masoch, De Sade and Crowley. The writing of Andre Pieyre de Mandiargues is concerned with Eros and Thanatos (love and death). It was an influence on Mercier's novels and films, and Mandiargues was one of the few to praise Mercier. The cover notes for the English edition of *Jeanne's Journal* boast that "Mercier's entire artistic personality is dedicated to the occult and the fantastic."<sup>29</sup>

Artaud noted that "the cinema reveals a whole occult life, one with which it puts us directly in contact with. But we have to know how to divine this occult life." The films of Mario Mercier go some way to help us achieve this divination. Mercier tried to use the cinema, its iconic and abstract imagery, subliminal content and visual effects to affect our mind state- to transcend the ordinary world of the commercial film space and to take us into mental

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<sup>26</sup> Antonin Artaud, 'Sorcery and Cinema' in Philip Hammond, ed., *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, San Francisco, 2000, pp.104

<sup>27</sup> Communication with the author, 23/9/13

<sup>28</sup> Mercier employed Claude Déplace, an expert on the occult as an advisor on his films would know of Jules Michelet's classic 1963 study *Satanism and Witchcraft*.

<sup>29</sup> Mario Mercier, *Jeanne's Journal*, London, 1972

landscapes that are dream-like. Like the surrealists, Mercier had faith in the cinematic apparatus's capacity to de-sublimate the unconscious mind and leave it disorientated and free from the channels of repressive society. Whilst largely metaphorical, the surrealist notion of 'film language as an analog of oneiric thinking'<sup>30</sup> still retains an immense power and Mercier's 'witch cinema' was an attempt at realising this on screen.

De Mandiargues claimed that Mercier's novels were important examples of "raw literature". Artaud defined one important aspect of the art of cinema- *le cinéma brut*- as emitting 'something of the atmosphere of trance conducive to certain revelations'<sup>31</sup>. It is clear from *La Goulve* and *La Papesse* that Mercier's films are continuations of this in another medium. In other words: *raw cinema*.

Provocative artists exploring the links between horror, the oneiric, the erotic and the occult will always be feared and dismissed by the mainstream or worse; treated to "death by silence."<sup>32</sup>

Yet, as Mercier himself noted:

"Whoever dies such a death can always place his hopes in resurrection"<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Philip Hammond, 'Available Light' in Philip Hammond, ed., *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, San Francisco, 2000, pp.9

<sup>31</sup> Antonin Artaud, 'Sorcery and Cinema' in Philip Hammond, ed., *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, San Francisco, 2000, pp.104

<sup>32</sup> Studies such as Jill Forbes *The Cinema in France* and Hayward and Vincendeau's *French Film: Texts and Contexts* for example, contain no mention at all of any aspect of the French horror film.

<sup>33</sup> Mario Mercier, *Jeanne's Journal*, London, 1972, pp. 9