

Geography of the Body: Jean Epstein's Poetics and Conceptualization of the Body in his Unpublished Writings

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Abstract. Jean Epstein wrote many books during his life, but some of them were left unpublished. This unpublished corpus is of significant importance to understand his work and thinking. In this essay I address three of these books: *Ganymède* (a book on male homosexual ethics), *Contre-pensées* (*Counter-Thoughts*), a compilation of short essays on a wide variety of topics), and *L'autre ciel* (*The Other Heaven*), a literary work. My main purpose is to better understand a major motif in Epstein's thought: the human body. These writings show how his interest in physiology was profound and very important during his whole life, and how he always emphasized the material side of any psychology, identity, or thought. Secondly, they address the topic of artificiality and humanity. Epstein claims that what is specifically human is to evolve through specialization and reification, even if it were *against nature*. And thirdly, they fully disclose the inherent sensuality of some Epstein texts (for instance his descriptions of close ups); one of the major subjects of *L'autre ciel* is male homoeroticism. These unpublished writings shed new light on Epstein's film writings and must be considered in order to do a complete account of his work and thought.

Keywords: Jean Epstein's writings, film theory, body, sensuality.

Jean Epstein's work is varied, complex and hard to catch in too literal a sense (it is a matter of libraries and archives more than of bookshops and DVDs, even if in 2013 things are stirring up). Descending that mirrored staircase in a hotel near Mount Etna, Epstein saw himself multiplied many more times than in a three-sided mirror. Each reflection revealed something different and unknown about himself, and the sum of reflections revealed the multiplicity, elusiveness, and illusory nature of identity itself (Epstein, 1926). If those mirrors represented his work, and not his person as they did, we could say that there are still many more reflections awaiting. Some of these beautiful and carefully polished surfaces are

not out of print but unpublished, luckily not lost for us but preserved in the Fonds Jean et Marie Epstein at Cinémathèque Française.¹ Far from being reprises of published writings they constitute truly a dark side of his *oeuvre*; not dealing with cinema directly but constructing a corpus of thought and literature on multiple themes.

In this paper I will approach some of his unpublished writings focusing on one major motif of his work and thought: the human body. As these texts are unpublished and therefore not quite known, I'm obliged to try and develop an exegesis of them, even if in a restrained scope which no doubt will reduce their richness. The reason for studying these books is first of all because they are of interest in themselves, but secondly because they help to disclose – or at least to make more complex – meanings and motifs in Epstein's film writing and film practice.

1. Jean Epstein's Film Writings and the Body

Before we plunge into those unpublished writings, and in order to better understand their importance for Epstein's studies, I will briefly touch on some aspects of his published work. The body and the organism are key concepts in Epstein's writings, even if their importance decreases as we advance in his published bibliography.²

His early writing focuses not on cinema but on literature, philosophy, and the modern experience and subjectivity.³ In these writings he develops a thesis in which humanity is approaching a new form of knowledge called *lyrosophie*. This new knowledge is a rebalancing of subconscious thinking and rationality, vindicating the former as a valid form of thinking and fighting against the idea of the latter as universal truth. For Epstein any mentality is related to the organism, he writes: "We should treat history as a biology of regimes of consciousness, and states of mind as organic states." (Epstein 1998b: 121).⁴ The organic change

1 I thank all the staff at Bibliothèque du Film (Cinémathèque Française) for their knowledge, good work, and kindness. And the institution itself for preserving and making available to researchers those documents.

2 For a recent overview of Epstein work see the essays and the short reader included in Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (2012).

3 His early writings are mainly composed by two books (*La Poésie d'aujourd'hui, un nouvel état d'intelligence* [*Poetry Today, a New State of Intelligence*, 1921] and *La Lyrosophie* (1922), both published by Editions de la Sirène) and some essays published in *L'Esprit Nouveau* [*The New Spirit*], like the series of articles entitled "Le phénomène littéraire" (numbers 8, 9, 10, and 13 of the journal in 1921 and reprinted in Epstein [1998a]).

4 All translations are my own.

taking place in us and which announces the future advent of *lyrosophie* is due to the incrementation of fatigue in modern experience, caused by labor and social changes. Fatigue was a key concept for 19th Century physiology; one of its researchers was, for instance, Angelo Mosso, who was quoted by Epstein in his writings.⁵

In one of his very first writings on cinema, *Bonjour Cinéma* (*Good Morning Cinema*, 1921), film and particularly spectatorship are described in terms of nervous energy. Characters like Chaplin or Gish have a “photogenic neurasthenia” (Epstein 1921b, 102) and are one of the focus of the nervous energy that is irradiated in the movie theater. Moviegoing affects the nervous system and even creates a kind of dependence in its public, unlike other aesthetic experiences (Epstein 1921b, 107). Characterized in these terms, the movies become a privileged place for modern people, since that demanding nervous experience is something they all know very well from their everyday life. But the importance of the body in *Bonjour Cinéma* is not only related to a nervous experience but also to a carnal experience in a manner akin to the metaphors of tactile reception. The experience of seeing a face in close up is described as surpassing even tactile limits: “It is not even true that there is air between us; I eat it. It is inside me like a sacrament” (Epstein 1921b, 104). Spectatorship is conceived then – but not only – in his first approach to cinema as bodily reactions.

In his major theoretical film writings – books like *L'Intelligence d'une machine* (*The Intelligence of a Machine*, 1946) or *Esprit de cinéma* (*The Spirit of Cinema*, 1955) – this importance of the body is reduced. The main feature is to understand cinema as an alien thinking that smashes up anthropocentrism. Cinema sees the world differently and this alterity is its secret propaganda to which the masses are exposed. Spectatorship is conceived more in psychological than in physiological terms. However, the body is still important: it is one of the privileged subjects of cinema's experimentations. Slow motion reveals that the human body can have reptile qualities or even be like a stone. The close up penetrates inside the face, revealing its thoughts. The montage of different bodies reveals superhuman identities like familiar resemblances or illness. So the body is in front of the movie camera and is again and again scrutinized, by a camera that reveals unknown truths about it.

5 For an analysis of Epstein's early writings see Stuart Liebman *Jean Epstein's Early Film Theory: 1920–22* (PhD Dissertation, 1980). For an attempt to read Epstein's fatigue in its cultural context see also my essay “Estetas neurasténicos y máquinas fatigadas en la teoría de Jean Epstein” (2009).

2. Jean Epstein's Unpublished Writings

The Fonds Jean et Marie Epstein preserved at Cinémathèque Française is full of documents and drafts that help to understand Epstein's work and also contains several unpublished books. Focusing on these documents would be helpful to comprehend the importance of the body and the organism for Epstein's thought, quite particularly in relation to his early writings. There is, for instance, a bibliography (Epstein 1921c) related to *La poésie d'aujourd'hui* (*Poetry Today*) which quotes physiology books like *Physiologie du plaisir* (*Physiology of Pleasure*, 1886) by Mantegazza.⁶ There is also a brief trace of an unfinished project called *Esculape*, which was intended to be a reader on medicine and physiology, and which was announced as "en préparation" both in *Bonjour Cinéma* and *La Lyrosophie*. Of this project there is only left, to my knowledge, a draft of the prologue, of which long passages will be reused in "Nous Kabbalistes" ("We Kabbalists"). Another field of study could be some literary manuscripts of his youth which could help relate Epstein to symbolist aesthetics, and its particular dialectics between *spleen* and strong sensation (see for instance the text entitled *Caritas Vitae*).

But much more important than this is, in my opinion, to highlight the fact that there are finished books there, and that they are not juvenilia but works written in his later years.⁷ Here I will focus on the topic of the body and the organism in three of these unpublished books: *Ganymède*, *Contre-pensées* and *L'autre ciel*. *Ganymède* is dated by Marie Epstein as being written in the 1930s–40s (as she wrote on the cover of the document preserved). And she is quoted by Pierre Leprohon (1964, 66) saying that during his last years Epstein worked on *Contre-pensées* and *L'autre ciel* among other books. Of course we could argue if these are finished or unfinished projects, but their extension and their quality helps to defend their validity as works in their own right.

6 For an approach to a physiological aesthetics in fin-de-siècle France and its relation to some popular culture see, for instance, Rae Beth Gordon *Dances with Darwin, 1875–1910. Vernacular Modernity in France* (2009), particularly chapter three: "What is Ugly?"

7 To my knowledge the only approach to one of those unpublished books has been by Christophe Wall-Romana (2012) in his very rich essay "Epstein's Photogénie as Corporeal Vision: Inner Sensation, Queer Embodiment, and Ethics." In this essay certain aspects of *Ganymède* are discussed and used in order to re-read some of Epstein's film concepts, which are also read in the light of other theorists (like Walter Benjamin) or contemporary audiovisual practices (like the ones by Bill Viola).

2.1 *Ganymède: essai sur l'éthique homosexuel masculin* par Alfred Kléber

Ganymède: essai sur l'éthique homosexuel masculin par Alfred Kléber (*Ganymede: An Essay on the Male Homosexual Ethics* by Alfred Kléber) is a book on male homosexuality, written by Jean Epstein under the pseudonym of Alfred Kléber. It is a long essay of almost 300 typed pages, a fact that in itself shows the importance of that subject for Epstein.

The essay is mainly a vindication of male homosexuality and an attempt to delegitimize the public discourse against it. First of all *Ganymède* is a book on social rights, as it argues for allowing homosexuality to be a public and normal life, appropriating a “right to love” (1930–40, 274) that penal codes and society deny. Epstein’s argument understands homosexual love in a Greek way, as an education of the young by the adults and dividing the couple into the lover and the loved. This classic and mythical understanding of male homosexuality is surrounded by other arguments maybe not that common. Artificiality is an important keyword in *Ganymède*. Epstein advocates that what is specifically human is to transform nature, to evolve through specialization. Homosexual love is an example of this as it completely separates procreation and love and also, in another sense, reifies procreation in an intellectual way. Homosexual love is then, for Epstein, a very human creation, a specialization of instinctual characteristics that lead to their transformation.

In the development of the essay we find some topics related to physiology and medicine.⁸ In his early writings, Epstein had already criticized the concepts of health and illness as being too stable and Manichean, as both are intertwined with each other. Here the criticism has clear social and personal consequences. Of course *Ganymède* is against the medicalization of homosexuality and the discourses that treat it as an illness. First, even if it were an illness, Epstein criticizes the moral dictum against homosexuality, since illnesses have no moral character. Secondly, he writes against the pathological prejudice that medicine adopts, seeing illness and pathologies everywhere and extrapolating its patients to represent homosexuals (as heteronormativity – and Epstein almost adopts this term

8 The arguments on physiology and medicine are found mainly in chapters two (*Determination anatomique et physiologique de l'homosexuel* [Anatomic and Physiological Determinants of the Homosexual]), three (*Determination psychologique de l'homosexuel* [Psychological Determinants of the Homosexual]), and eight (*L'homosexualité n'est pas de l'hétérosexualité travestie* [Homosexuality is not Transvestite Heterosexuality]).

– is incapable of understanding homosexuality outside the masculine–feminine pair). Speaking of degeneration in relation to homosexuality is also contested by Epstein. He conceives it as being closer to some atavism using arguments by psychoanalysis – related to bisexuality in young desire – and embryology – related to the differentiation of the sexes. This atavism of homosexual desire found in our personal history (both physiological and psychological) is used by Epstein in order to argue for a naturalization of homosexual love. But, as I said before, he is much more interested in artificiality than in nature, considering the former as what is truly human. Consequently, he mostly conceives homosexuality against any degeneration as a future sexuality, because of its novelty, specialization, and complication of human functions. Epstein readers will recognize how his broad scope full of civilization and Utopian arguments is also adopted when thinking on sexuality, love, and desire. We find again, as in his philosophical and film writings, this particular juncture of past and future (atavism and Utopia) against the present. This formula can be rationally defeated by fatigue, actual cinema by its future form or heterosexuality eroded by homosexuality. Lyrosophy, cinema, and homosexuality approach us from the future.

Homosexuality is in *Ganymède* a biological condition, an identity of the self. This is another argument against medicalization: being congenital, it has no cure. And this is something maybe unfamiliar to Epstein readers, as cinema is mostly the realm of unstable identities (as one of his essays claims it is a liquid world: *Le monde fluide de l'écran* [*The Fluid World of the Screen* 1950]), but of course fighting for social rights demands stable identities from where to fight. Epstein claims that “every human fact is an indivisible triad: anatomical, physiological and psychological” (1930–40, 42), refusing a psychological understanding by thinkers that “push the contempt for the human organism, and want nothing to do with it. Wherever this mistake of separating matter and spirit prevails, any knowledge of man is impossible” (1930–40, 42). So we find again, as in his early writings, the importance of the “organic bases” and physiology for understanding the human self. This leads Epstein, for instance, to talk about endocrinology in relation to homosexual desire. And also about heredity, claiming that there is a common consanguinity among homosexuals that reveals its hereditary character and its deep rooting in the soma. This physiological thought is sometimes used for misogynous arguments, claiming that differences between the sexes make it impossible to adopt the particularities of homosexual love in heterosexual couples (even if in some paragraphs we can understand that this will be possible in the future, but still there are long misogynous passages not to be

overlooked).⁹ Because homosexual love, as Epstein theorizes it, is not only a love radically separated from human procreation but a reification of desire in which physical pleasure needs intellectual satisfaction. It is a neurosis, a kind of illness in Epstein's sense – i.e. a natural condition, – shared by a particular elite of sensibility: “One can compare this more complete love, love not only by the senses, but also by the mind, to some neuroses, like brain-cardiac ones, characterized by the growing and sensible interdependence of an organ of the vegetative life, like the heart, with the brain. The love we are talking about is a brain-genital neurosis, an influence of the brain over the automatism of sexual function, in brief, an illness as a well known aphorism says.” (1930–40, 61.)

The argument on homosexuality as a specialization and a kind of Utopian sexuality¹⁰ leads Epstein to think of procreation in two senses. The first one is understanding the existence and the importance of an intellectual procreation (as being conscious and more human – i.e. artificial – than the procreation of the species). Secondly, ruminating about artificial reproduction, as a kind of pathogenesis in humans that will lead to a future epoch that will look back at us as primitives: “Our time, in which mating is necessary for procreation, will seem then farther away than for us the age when presence was needed to see or hear someone.” (1930–40, 119.) The imbrication of technology and humanity allows us to overcome some conditions of human experience. Eroding what can be thought of as fundamental conditions, now superseded by their technological reifications (be it the conditions for sharing and space or for biological procreation).

Ganymède shows us how physiology, the body, and the material side of the self were important for Epstein's thought throughout his life. If we include *Ganymède* in his complete works, the lack of physiological arguments in his film writings is balanced by its presence in this and other unpublished works. It helps as well to better understand his early thought on fatigue and his ruminations on medicine and pathology, making clear that medical discourses can be against fundamental personal characteristics like desire and sexuality. Finally, this book points to artificiality and humanity in a paradoxical way at first glance. For Epstein what

9 Epstein's misogyny is also related to symbolist and fin-de-siècle literature (the fracture between women and the ideal expressed by Lord Edwald and Edison in *L'Ève future* (*Future Eve*, 1886) by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam that leads them to love an android where they only talk to themselves or the disdain for the real Sibyl Vane by Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's novel). Epstein's discourse on artificiality could be related to symbolism, as well, particularly his comparison with flowers and gardeners as perfecting nature present in *Ganymède*.

10 See for instance *Ganymède's* last chapter entitled *Le présent et l'avenir de l'homosexualité* (*The Present and Future of Homosexuality*).

is more human is artificial and somehow *against nature*. Cinema as a prosthetic perceptual organ falls inside the realm of artificial, and therefore of the human and of the future.

2.2 *Contre-pensées*

Contre-pensées is a work composed of 239 short texts on a wide variety of topics and in a style close to the essay. Full of acute observations and wit, the text does not follow a straight argument like *Ganymède*, but develops a kind of personal dictionary of thoughts, arranged alphabetically in the book. It is a text open to interpretation – with ironic fragments and ambiguous propositions – with some recurrent motifs. One of the various motifs in *Contre-pensées* is, once again, the organism and the body.

The materiality of spirit or thought is emphasized again and again. Some texts deal with physiological motifs. He writes on the pituitary gland as commanding the whole organism (influencing his psychological and rational side) and being affected by visual and olfactory sensations (*Hypophyse [Pituitary Gland]*).¹¹ Maternal love is said to depend on this gland and on the presence of magnesium in the organism (*Amour-maternel [Motherly Love]*). In a text entitled *Pisser (To Pee)* thought itself is understood as a secretion of the nervous system: “psychic life is a residual product of any physiological activity.” Any medium of expression is understood consequently, in this short text, as a hygienic measure in order not to be intoxicated by our own waste.¹² As in *Ganymède*, Epstein emphasizes the influence of physiology on every human act and takes for granted that mental superstructures are consequences of physiological equilibrium. In a text entitled *Feu (Fire)* he says that the discovery of fire and its consequences on our diet evolved our thought. The history of mentalities is, again as in the former quote of his early writings, a matter of biology and mutation (see as well the text entitled *Mutations*). Even our personal history is marked by these mobile ties between the psychological and the physiological. Epstein concludes that the identity of the self is only an illusion, as biology explains that our organism is renewed completely every seven years (*Prescription*).

Sensation is also present in *Contre-pensées*. In *Anesthésie (Anesthesia)* sensation is separated from consciousness and memory, as anesthesia somehow

11 Since this is an unpublished book, it is non paginated and arranged alphabetically. I will give as a reference the title of each text.

12 For similar arguments also see the texts: *Entropie*, *Mots-croisés* and *Saint-Janvier*.

is capable of blocking the memory of pain but the body in a surgical operation still reacts even if in a numbed and slowed way. In *Musique (Music)*, Epstein conceives music as capable of a sensual relation with the organism. Music can exalt our instincts and feelings, seduce the organism or break its nervous system; in a similar way as cinema was conceived in his early writings as a distributor of nervous energy, and spectatorship in terms of bodily reactions. When talking about the senses (*Sens [Senses]*) Epstein includes introspection or coenaesthesia, the inner sensations of our own body. This could be as diverse as the classification by Alexander Bain that is quoted in his text: muscular sense, muscular pain, nervous pain, respiration, circulation, digestion, hot and cold, and electrical sensation. Epstein includes also “la cénesthésie cérébrale” which is not the content of the thinking but the sensation of being in the process of thinking. Consciousness is also one of our senses; it has its material side.

Our body constructs our psychology and thought not only in a physiological way, but also in giving us our basic scale for understanding. Abstract constructions like the decimal system arise from the scale of our body and our ten fingers (*Nombres [Numbers]*). “All abstractions of the human spirit [...] are functions of the corporeal size of the species,” writes Epstein in *Dimensions*, and “they are only valid at human scale.” This is a key concept for Epstein and his fascination for what is *infiniment petit* or *infiniment grand*, what exceeds the human world. The interior of our body is also an example of this *infiniment petit*. Physiology is then doomed to face the unknowable, as it faces an ultramicroscopic world (*Libre arbitre [Free Will]*). This conjunction of understanding and the body stresses the importance of cinema (or other technologies), as they can show us a non anthropocentric reality.

Artificiality is also a concept we can find in *Contre-pensées*, as was found in *Ganymède*. Spirit, psychology, etc. are not only related and arise from human physiological features, but they are also derived and present in any complex system, be it organic or technological. Epstein claims that quantity leads to quality (the combination of material parts creates immaterial characteristics). A car, or a plant have their own psychology derived from the relation between its composition, an immaterial function due to its material parts (*Automobile* and *Esprit [Spirit]*).¹³ Speaking about a non human psychology or understanding is not a metaphor for Epstein but a reality.

13 Even in my restrained thematic approach, *Contre-pensées* overflows the extent of this essay. We can find there thoughts on medicine, pain, progress, or imitation which are of interest for us. For instance, imitation (conscious and unconscious) is conceived by Epstein as one of the motors of artificiality and imitation was as well a key feature of 19th Century psycho-physiology.

Contre-pensées gives us a compilation of Epstein's broad knowledge and interests in his later years. Again we can see that physiology was important for him during his whole life. Here too the material side of the organism is vindicated as being very important for his psychological or rational side. Of course the interest of a text like *Pisser* [*Piss*] is to incarnate thought even in a scatological way, echoing a transmutation of values and a fight against rationality as universal knowledge, present in his early writings and in his film writings (*Le cinéma du Diable* [*Devil's Cinema*, 1947], for instance). We could have this in mind in order to think about cinema. How cinema affects us, also means how cinema affects our body. Of course Epstein wrote on cinema during the same years and did not use, at least explicitly or in a central way, these kinds of arguments. How these arguments are implicit in his film writings or not, is a task that must be undertaken, but falls unfortunately outside the extent of this essay. What is explicitly present in Epstein's film writings is the conception of cinema as an "intelligence" (as expressed in the title itself of his book *L'intelligence d'une machine* [*The Intelligence of a Machine*, 1946]). *Contre-pensées* makes even more clear, as I have already said, that this is not a metaphor for Epstein but something literal: any complex materiality creates an intelligence and a psychology.

2.3 *L'autre ciel*: Adored, Ecstatic, and Sacred Bodies

Unlike the other unpublished works I deal with here, *L'autre ciel* is a literary piece. It is composed of short non-narrative independent texts. The main focus of the book is the human self, conceived as bearing an interior secret that constitutes his most intimate truth and structures his whole self. This secret must be found "inside, and in the flesh, because the soul is incarnated" (EPSTEIN229-B89, 39). The human (male) body is celebrated in the whole book through desire. Overtly homoerotic, the vocabulary regarding otherness (the title itself) is a common feature as it is also a kind of personal subtext (evident, for instance, in a text entitled *Évangile de Jean* [*Gospel of John*]). The poetic powers of Epstein are here at their height and his celebration of an ecstatic and sacred body sheds new light on his insistence in the body in his film writings.¹⁴

14 As with his other unpublished writings, there are many aspects that could be related to his film books. One of the texts composing *L'autre ciel* is entitled *Le mystère de Narcisse* (*The Mystery of Narcissus*). In this text Narcissus experiences a multiple mirror gaze, where he sees himself "as he has never seen before" (EPSTEIN229-B89, 5). Personal revelation echoes the filmic revelation present in his film writings.

One of the key features of *L'autre ciel* is ignorance. The conscious knowing of not knowing anything is one of the revelations human beings must face. The text *Le cirque des vains martyrs* (*The Circus of Vain Martyrs*) describes a kind of ritual or show with characters like the goddess of Reason, God, the Devil, or Nero. One of the last performances is by a Dionysian troupe commanded by Orpheus and composed by all kind of ecstatic bodies: "There were mujiks, American shakers, epileptic deacons, turning dervishes, ecstatic nuns, venerable killers, masturbated lamas, all the fanatics of all drunkenness, screwing each other, mutilating each other, eating their sexes, celebrating love's mysteries." (EPSTEIN229-B89, 27.)

After that a Sphinx discloses the secret dictum: "The only mystery is that there is no mystery. The only answer to all riddles is that there is no answer. The secret of everything is nothing. That is why one is obliged to keep it. There is nothing to say, because nothing can be known. All truths are nothing but symbols. In pain, pleasure is canceled, and conviction, and even sincerity are faded. There only remains one desire: the desire of nothingness. And no one has ever been able to satisfy it." (EPSTEIN229-B89, 28.)

The male body is closely and exhaustively celebrated in, by far, the longest of the texts composing *L'autre ciel: Le tribunal de l'adoration* (*The Tribunal of Adoration*). This text travels around the body describing its limbs one by one, in a description full of eroticism echoing the lover's gaze. In a style close to Epstein's description of filmic close ups, every part of the body is seen isolated and revealing equivalences with landscapes, architecture, vegetal, or animal life, or machinery.¹⁵ This slow and close description stops at and underlines every entrance of the body, be they closed (like the eyes or the navel) or open (like the mouth). Usually disgusting aspects of the body (for instance strong odors of the feet, the mouth or the armpit) are not refused but celebrated as inebriating. Of course the end of the trip around the body is the phallus and the anus.

The phallus is an atavistic and monstrous organ, which makes any civilization of love only a surface effect (*Ganymède* is an Apollonian celebration of homosexuality, *L'autre ciel* its Dionysian side): "The true merit of love, if there is one, is to love knowing completely this ugliness of love, accepting that the

15 Some of this equivalences are for instance: breasts that move like waves (EPSTEIN229-B89, 6), the teeth form a "*sainte-chapelle* of a crystal-animal *flamboyant* style" unrivaled by any building (EPSTEIN229-B89, 12), "the tongue is the only leaf, fleshy and carnivorous, sensitive and prehensive, of the most voracious plant" (EPSTEIN229-B89, 11–12) or the inside of the body that makes its synthesis "in stills and pipes, which have the colors of dawn and the shapes of abyssal monsters" (EPSTEIN229-B89, 17).

sublimity of the beloved includes or erases all that is disgusting in the flesh, such a piety supposes a state of grace, a trance, an archaic state; going back in human history to a more pure animal level, which persists better in sexuality than anywhere else and refuses any idealization of voluptuousness.” (EPSTEIN229-B89, 19.) The semen is its fruit, described in its color, flavor, and smell.

The anus is the logical conclusion of the text, the place where any learned shame must be broken: “This crater signals the extreme border, that which the piety for the integrity of a god incarnated can not surpass in physical explorations [...]. Here, total devotion breaks any learned shame, in order to reach true human respect, against which the only mortal sin will be to despise whatever it was of man.” (EPSTEIN229-B89, 20.) And where one can face the sacred: “There is no more severe prohibition than that on excremental lava [lave excrémentielle]. The most powerful horror is related to it. In a censorship so profoundly rooted, universal and absolute, one must recognize the character of the sacred [le caractère du sacré].” (EPSTEIN229-B89, 20.)

Le tribunal de l'adoration (*The Tribunal of Adoration*) celebrates the whole human (male) body and ends with: “One must learn to revere both left and right sides of divinity, the evil as much as the good, and to obtain rapture [ravisement] where ordinary people does not derive anything but fear and shame.” (EPSTEIN229-B89, 21.)

Both motifs highlighted here (the knowing of ignorance and the celebration of the whole body) form a third text entitled *Evangile de Jean* (a title which evokes, as was said, personal resonances). This text explains a cult that teaches “that we know nothing of what we think we know, neither about things, others, or about ourselves. In the human soul and body, they venerate the highest expression of the mystery of this ignorance which becomes conscious of itself.” (EPSTEIN229-B89, 23.) Guarded by cyclops, they search in the body the roots and reflections of this secret. The movements of life are “all studied, all, even the most modest, by the set of normal, accelerated and slow-motion cadences, by variable enlargements, by discovering unusual angles” (EPSTEIN229-B89, 23). The cinema – cyclopean eye capable of all these powers – seems explicitly called up here.

The last paragraph of *Evangile de Jean* is again a close description of the body where everything is transmuted to the entire realm of nature; and this transmutation – experienced through framing and studying the body – achieves the realm of values and the moral: “everything is changed, avoiding conventions, enriched by new values, by uncountable truths.” Concluding that “God is everywhere in man, and mostly in this center of consciousness which notices

him but does not understand him; which is in itself the Holy and gets scared of himself as if it was a stranger.” (EPSTEIN229-B89, 25.)

In *L'autre ciel* we can see many of the main strands of Epstein's thought in a new light. The absence of universal truths and the relativity of any knowledge is something that cinema teaches us, as Epstein theorizes it. But it is something that can also be known in an ecstatic approach to the body of the other, as that Dionysian troupe or the close adoration of the body suggest. Values are transmuted, learned shames are broken, right and left confused, and all becomes lovable, adored, and sacred.¹⁶ *Évangile the Jean* links both ideas to cinema. Its role is then to teach and show us our mystery, discovering it first in our body. The erotic, inebriating, and revolutionary role of detailed and close viewing in desire, contaminates one of Epstein's major themes in his film writing: the close up. *L'autre ciel* fully discloses the inherent eroticism of his theorization and film practice.

3. Conclusions

The three unpublished works of Jean Epstein discussed here are of significant importance for our understanding of his work. One can see that his early interest in physiology and the organism was not lost but remained very important in his entire lifetime, and this knowledge makes possible a new reading of his film books. A second conclusion regards the importance of artificiality for humanity. Cinema is sometimes described by Epstein as a prosthetic organ and as having a spirit (as this is an immaterial function of related material fragments). In that sense it is, as homosexuality may be, an artificial human creation (something at the core of humanity itself and something approaching us from the future). Thirdly, the sensuous resonances of some fragments of his film writings (its description of human bodies seen through cinema) or of his films can be fully illuminated. After having read *L'autre ciel*, the lover's gaze echoes the film's gaze. And finally, Epstein's unpublished writings give us many reflections on the organism and the self, and a celebration of the body in all its aspects that forms a corpus of work of interest in itself, even if he were not the important filmmaker and film theorist that he is.

16 The sacred was a very important concept in Epstein's thought, influenced by readings such as Mircea Eliade. Chiara Tognolotti's dissertation traces a path through Epstein thought, using his "notes de lecture" preserved as well at Cinémathèque Française, and the idea of sacred turns to be the final conclusion in her narrative of Epstein writings and even filmography (referring to *Le Tempestaire*). The sacred, as *L'autre ciel* shows, is not only what the word recalls in common language but includes in an explicit way all that is forbidden, all that is rejected and low like bodily excretions.

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