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Article

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On Georges Seurat's *The Gleaner*

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THE CURIOUS FIGURE OF GEORGES SEURAT'S *THE GLEANER* stoops in a dark field of dense conté crayon strokes (Figure 1).¹ This mysterious work, also known as *A Man Gleaning*, was executed between 1881-3, early in Seurat's short career.² The drawing is an ambiguous abstraction of an important figure in nineteenth-century French culture, which pushes the motif of the bending subject in Seurat's work to a dramatically curved extreme.³ Yet in spite of being included in several major exhibitions and available in the British Museum's public collection, this fascinating work remains barely documented and demands further research.⁴

To dwell in detail upon the specificities of a single drawing throughout the form of an extended essay is an uncommon approach in the Anglophone literature on Seurat's work on paper.⁵ This study will address the imbalance in the field by offering a sustained critical account of one drawing by the Neo-Impressionist artist: *The Gleaner*. With reference to contemporary optical theory and comparative approaches, this piece argues that Seurat's plant-like gleaner fathoms the surface of visual anatomy; intervenes as an entoptical phenomenon; blurs the bounds of legality; enacts a metaphor for information and evokes vitality. The drawing is a troubling, multivalent assessment of what it might mean to glean; to gather what reapers have left behind.



Figure 1. Georges Seurat, *The Gleaner*, Conté crayon on paper, 314x237mm, c. 1881-3, de Hauke 559. © Trustees of the British Museum

Consider the gleaner's sturdy silhouette (Figure 1). His line of sight falls into the field. He sees vegetation: a densely-layered mesh of vigorous marks. He is vegetative: from the ground where he is rooted by blended crayon his robust limbs grow, trunk-like. Legs loom with curious curvature; their ill-aligned and anatomically alien joints appear arboreal and his gnarled knees sprout. Under raking light and magnification, silvery graphite marks amongst the crayon create a glistening link between lower legs and sheaves.⁶

The straws at which he clutches are fertile: a nest that nestles under an arm, or a parasitic protuberance. Against an abdomen, the strands suggest an arcane gestation: a male pregnancy that simultaneously naturalises this human-tree metamorphosis and renders it more strange, improbable.⁷ The uppermost stroke of the bundle continues the curve of the body. Grain springs or spills from his centre: a rupture that reveals what he gleanes to be the making of the man and for the man to be made of what he gleanes.

The fixedness of Seurat's figures was often deplored by his contemporaries. Teodor de Wyzewa remarked that his human forms are generally marred by a 'stiffness and rigidity' that 'prevent us from appreciating the magisterial purity of their design'.⁸ Similarly disappointed, Camille Pissarro wrote to his son Lucien: 'there is a kind of stiffness that I find disagreeable'.⁹

Karl Huysmans regretted that 'human armature becomes rigid and hard'; 'everything is immobilized and congealed'.¹⁰ Félix Fénéon isolated the immobile limbs of Seurat's subjects in this abrupt and acerbic jibe: 'one would like the people [...] to be less rheumatic'.¹¹ Joining them in their critique, Émile Verhaeren invoked the substance of trees to lament that 'one thing displeased me [...] all those almost wooden figures'.¹²

A bough bending downwards, *A Man Gleaning* is an arboreal figure on the 'almost' of decline into wood: into stasis. The scratchy bundle that appears to fall from him, as much as it is clutched to his person, lends literal force to the comment of French painter Jean Hélion that 'Seurat's personages look like pictures of dummies full of straw'.¹³ Verhaeren and Hélion's manner of articulating Seurat's style of figures as 'almost wooden' and straw-filled is more than incidental: several of Seurat's forms are wondrously linked with plant matter.

In the early 1880s, perhaps about a year before he began work on *The Gleaner*, the artist produced a small oil panel entitled *Man on the Parapet* (c.1881).¹⁴ The foreground to the far left of the piece features the towering, smooth, branchless trunk of a tree, which leads the eye upwards until the viewer finds foliage in the uppermost part of the image. The back of the tall human figure against the parapet compositionally reprises not only this vertical movement, but as Richard Thomson rightly notes, 'the natural forms of tree and figure both echo each other's undulations'.¹⁵ Each silhouette is further executed in identical tone and with parallel irradiation: there is a visual equation between bark and back. The angle between the man's back and arm mirrors that between the tree's trunk and leaves along the same diagonal. Thomson's reading unites tree and figure 'against the stark geometry of the city'; the geometry of the panel, however, reveals an equally remarkable relation between figure and tree.¹⁶ The man is situated precisely the tree-trunk's width to the right of the horizontal centre of the image, as if shifted across by a tree-like space. In the figure's act of leaning, as Seurat would soon explore in the act of gleaning, man becomes displaced by tree.

The arborescence of man evoked on the parapet and epitomised by the gleaner continues as a motif later in Seurat's career. The 1886-7 divisionist canvas *The Bridge at Courbevoie* shows a considered distinction from the earlier study on paper: an additional figure on the bank of the Seine.¹⁷ This figure, exactly equidistant from the next, which is, in turn, exactly equidistant from the bare tree in the foreground on the right, creates a startling rhythm: we discover a tree where the geometrical patterning leads us to expect to perceive a person. Human-animal and arboreal-vegetable are allied, via the wooden masts, as regular verticals. Unlike the man on a distant jetty, neither of the two figures in this foreground trio of forms possess clearly rendered lower limbs and their feet are disconcertingly concealed, as if rooted. The artist plants people.

In *A Man Gleaning*, *A Man on a Parapet* and *The Bridge at Courbevoie* Seurat's men vegetate in the act of absorptive solitary observation: in a watchful moment of bending; a *rückenfigur*'s contemplative gaze into the metropolis; and a rigid stare out to the Seine.¹⁸ Wilhelm Genazino, in a recent remark upon *The Bathers*, begins to evoke the spirit of these three works, which lend further weight to his words: 'when they're looking, people come to resemble the natural world around them'.¹⁹ This connection with sight sheds light upon Seurat's intricate, mysterious, man-tree alliance; an alliance informed by contemporary optics.

Late-nineteenth century optical theory is imbued with tree metaphors. As Jonathan Crary argues in his award-winning study *Suspensions of Perception*, ‘arborescent vocabulary was a pervasive feature of scientific and medical literature on the eye in the 1880s’.²⁰ Hermann Helmholtz’s much-consulted *Treatise on Physiological Optics*, which appeared in French translation in 1867, indeed describes the retinal blood vessels precisely as a vascular ‘tree’ (Figure 2).²¹

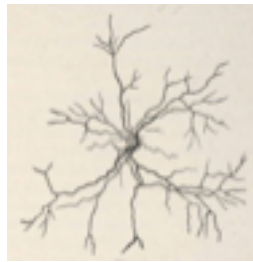


Figure 2. Vascular ‘tree’, Hermann Helmholtz, *Physiological Optics*.

Helmholtz’s anatomical recourse to plants, with such rhetoric as ‘vascular arborization’, continues in contemporary medical textbooks.²² The elements of vision are like vegetation. Vegetation is the language of the structure of sight.

The eye’s vascular ‘branches’ possess an unnerving capacity to branch out—to intervene extravagantly in the process of vision – rendering the organ’s own apparatus present to sight in perceptions known as entoptical phenomena. ‘The most dramatic instance of an entoptical phenomenon’, Crary argues, ‘is Helmholtz’s account of how an observer can see the blood vessels of his or her own retina’:

Researchers in the mid-nineteenth century discovered that the retinal blood veins were in a position to cast shadows on the rear surface of the retina, if certain luminous conditions were created. Helmholtz describes three methods of controlling the entrance of light into the eye that will render visible to itself its own retinal blood vessels. After detailing these instructions Helmholtz writes: “Now where the eye looks at a dark background, the latter will appear illuminated with a reddish yellow glow, and against this will be seen the dark retinal blood vessels ramifying in various directions like the branches of a tree... As the focus of the lens is moved to and fro [...] the branched figure accompanies the motion”.²³

Our arboreal organs of vision become partially opaque and under the sway of a ‘branched figure’, we cannot, as it were, see the world for the trees.

As part of the period’s ‘most celebrated and influential book on vision’, this startling element of Helmholtz’s *Optics* would have been available for Seurat to engage with in his practice in the 1880s.²⁴ Hippolyte Taine, a long-standing professor at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* whilst Seurat attended as a student in 1878, had disseminated Helmholtz’s theories.²⁵ In Taine’s much-read work *On Intelligence* of 1869, the discussion of ‘internal visual phantoms’ is clearly indebted to the *Optics*, which is granted multiple citations.²⁶ During the 1880s, exploration of Helmholtz’s entoptical phenomena would further emerge in mainstream cultural publications, such as *Revue des deux Mondes*.²⁷ While to

connect Seurat's and Helmholtz's work interpretively does not require positing a direct influence, Crary nevertheless argues persuasively that it is 'difficult to reject the possibility of Seurat responding creatively' to this important aspect of Helmholtz's study.²⁸

The vegetative turn of Seurat's watchful figures can thus be read as an artistic projection of the tree-like composition of the eye, which Helmholtz's entoptical phenomena had particularly made manifest. This is, of course, not to say that Seurat's figures are themselves vascular in appearance. Rather, to become arboreal in the act of looking is to recall the arboreal structure of looking: the metaphor of the vascular tree, with all its complications. The trunk-like corporeal forms of the watchful figures hint at optical tree-rhetoric: tree-like body links to tree-like body. Seurat's arborescence enacts vision at its most aberrant: by evoking the eye's interior trees in the body's exterior, the figures suggest that seeing has its own skin, a visceral density. Helmholtz's scholarship overturned an ideal, unobstructed model of the organ of sight with a formulation that dwells on its susceptibility to errors and inconsistencies: in Crary's words, the *Optics* 'embeds the eye within the thickness and opacity of the body'.²⁹ The arboreal affinity to the entoptical in Seurat's forms is Helmholtz's corporeal vision writ large. The implications of this association are unsettling. When Seurat's tree-like bodies reflect a tree-like, bodily critique of the transparency of sight, we cannot perceive them without an awareness of the vulnerability of our vision.

Let our eyes return to *A Man Gleaning*. The arboreal gleaner is surrounded by the apparatus of vision. Wiry shading on the right of the sheet creeps into the sky in a scurry of non-representational marks.³⁰ Working from the periphery of the paper, the artist's light crayon lines straggle towards the centre. This is a distinctly vascular mass, branched and bloodshot (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *The Gleaner* (detail).

The forked lines would not be entirely out of place as part of Helmholtz's representation of the entoptical vascular tree. Cast a vertical sight-line from beneath the gleaner's brim to the horizontal horizon: the man's gaze intersects with a rough curve articulated in wispy strokes. Underneath this curve, at an even distance, lies half of a dark, black semicircle. Here is a dilated pupil surrounded by a delicate iris, filled with vessel-like marks (Figure 4).



Figure 4. *The Gleaner* (detail).

The upper curve of this watchful quarter-circle falls towards the man's hand, enabling curious hand-eye coordination. Seurat's gleaner is a gatherer of messy, vegetative vessels; an extractor of optic tissue from the corner of an inflated eye. He is both a collector of verdant optical phenomena and an entoptical phenomenon personified as the branched strands are incorporated into the centre of his opaque bodily form. The gleaner not only looks like that at which he looks, but that at which he looks appears like looking: in other words, both resembling vegetation and watching vegetation that resembles an eye, the gleaner is an arboreal figure in an optical field. The gleaner is an irregular entoptical interruption in the structure of vision.

As a magnified mote in an eye, perceived between the organ of sight and the seen, the gleaner suggests other stages of mediation at work in the artist's own vision. Seurat's gleaner is mediated by Jean-Francois Millet. Millet was one of the only major artists of whom Seurat kept a reproduction.³¹ In spring 1881, during or just before Seurat worked on *A Man Gleaning*, numerous pictures by Millet were sold on the open market.³² Alfred Sensier's highly-illustrated biography of the artist, *La Vie et L'oeuvre de Jean-Francois Millet*, was published in Paris the same year.³³ As Thomson makes clear, 'the Barbizon master's work was thus readily available for Seurat at this crucial stage of his career'.³⁴ In the early 1880s, Zimmerman argues, 'no other painter influenced Seurat so strongly'.³⁵ In particular, Millet's celebrated 1857 canvas *The Gleaners* cast such a powerful impression upon the eye of the artist that he would purloin the picture's main motif for his 1882-3 oil panel *Farm Women at Work* to depict not gleaning but the weeding of a market garden.³⁶ Millet's *Gleaners*, Zimmerman claims, 'was the only work by this artist which Seurat quoted literally'.³⁷

If Seurat's *Farm Women at Work* quotes the figures of Millet's *Gleaners* 'literally' - a mirroring of the artist's two bending women - *A Man Gleaning* quotes *The Gleaners* laterally. Seurat's perspective on Millet in his drawing is a sideways glance. While the figures in the works of the two artists still share a stooping stance, the man gleaning is comparable to the Barbizon painter's central gleaner viewed in profile from the diagonal bottom right of the canvas. Seurat places the viewer under the gleanings of Millet's standing woman, looking left and skywards. On the horizon, beyond the arch of the other gleaner's back and before her own bent head, there are tower mounds of harvested grain. Seurat adopts and adapts the form: his peripheral quarter-circle is also Millet's mound.

Seurat's appropriation of this element of Millet's composition is complex. The artist antagonises the quotation of this shaded section by the upper unsteady curve, which appears not quite to belong to the same pictorial style as

the rest of the image. Like the 'partly formed curve' that Robert Herbert observes in the same period of his career in *Under The Bridge*, it wavers.³⁸ Too insubstantial to indicate the second harvest heap depicted in the work of the older artist, Seurat's curve hints at a larger gathering that was not to be; a potentially greater influence downplayed. Instead, in a mark of independence, the curve, we will recall, troubles the shading into suggesting sight. The dark part-circle is at once a pile of reappings and a grotesque pupil.

Excess and emptiness oscillate in Seurat's Millet-like mass of harvested vegetable matter.³⁹ Seemingly comprised of vegetation, the centre of the eye-like form is an autumnal mound of ample substance made comparatively insubstantial. As convex pile becomes pupular hole, the artist's work on paper converts Millet's suggestion of plenty into a kind of absence.

In conversation with the critic Gustave Kahn, Seurat described his method as 'the art of hollowing out', or, 'fathoming', a surface: '*l'art de creuser une surface*'.⁴⁰ For Richard Shiff, 'creuser', 'refers to excavation, digging into something, emptying it out, that is to say, thinking it through, pondering it thoroughly, fathoming it in an intellectual way'.⁴¹ 'Fathoming' the surface of an eye, *A Man Gleaning* hollows out what Millet's harvesters heap.

Seurat's drawing is the Millet vacated. Unlike Millet's canvas, which juxtaposes harvesters and officials in the background with women in the foreground who gather what has been left behind, Seurat's sheet offers little around the efforts of his solitary man. Seurat's spare style depopulates his horizon of Millet's harvest-workers, houses and horses. Rehearsing the terms of a familiar binary in Seurat scholarship, John Russell and John Hutton assert that such 'simplification' empties Seurat's interpretations of Millet of their social significance in favour of the 'formal'.⁴² In *A Man Gleaning*, however, it is precisely formal 'simplification' that encapsulates critique. The optical excavation or 'fathoming' of Millet's mound of bulging abundance generates productive irresolution. As a pupil is an enabling gap – the not-there that allows the perception of what is – the fluctuating form of the pupil/mound suggests that lack and excess are dialectically intertwined.

It is with ambivalence that Seurat borrows from Millet a formal connection between the shapes of mankind and mound. In Millet's canvas the curves of the backs of the two rhythmically bending women are reprised by the curving lines of the two major mounds. This feature is rendered more acutely in one of the Barbizon artist's 1857 studies for *The Gleaners*: here grain and gleaner share exactly parallel diagonals.⁴³ Executed in the common medium of black conté crayon, Millet's study also has an affinity with Seurat's drawing in its focus upon figure and bounty as its almost sole features; their echoing forms animate the mounds and reciprocally render the gleaners like vegetation. In Seurat's drawing the dense blacks of the figure and quarter-circle likewise share curves. Yet Seurat interrupts Millet's patterning. The single mound is cut. The allusion to the Barbizon master is split. Seurat under-mines Millet's mound: not only optically 'hollowing out' his quotation, but also working stealthily against its associations in the work of the earlier artist.

Seurat's refusal to include the entire mound ruptures Millet's visual logic and invites the viewer's interpretation not to be overdetermined by his precedent. In both canvas and study, Millet structures his composition around the continuity of form between bending figure and tower of grain: an alliance that emphasizes the pathos of the gleaners' distance from harvested plenty. Indeed, in the words of Alexandra Murphy, the women in the oil are

'dramatically removed from the bounty of the harvest [...] isolated from the activity beyond'.⁴⁴ By bifurcating the mound, Seurat slices through its visual echo of the shape of the gleaner in order to complicate this distance; to dissuade the viewer from automatically applying the same spatial relation.

The familiarity of Millet's canvas at first predisposes the perceiver to presume that the mound in Seurat's sheet is similarly at a remove from the gleaner, a reading aided by the later artist comparably locating its hump on the horizon line. Halving the hump, however, not only disrupts the mankind-mound curve connection Millet constructed across space, but replaces its visual rhetoric with a right angle: the edge of the image dissects the mound as the horizon's stark horizontal dissects the sheet. Between Millet and Seurat, the involvement of the mound in the composition shifts from remotely mirroring whole curves that do not join, to linking lines that meet at a point.

Consider Seurat's horizon. Mound, arm and legs all intersect with this regular line. Spatial relations are ambivalent.⁴⁵ Foreground-background and near-far are troubled by this horizontal: it is unclear whether the gleaner is significantly in the foreground relative to the mound in the background; at a remove or nearly adjacent. At one perceptual limit, the line collapses depth. All is flat, proximate. Here, as Herbert explores elsewhere in the drawings, the artist exploits the 'ambiguity which results from [...] forms being locked in one plane'.⁴⁶ Whilst in Millet's canvas the distance between the echoing curves of gleaners and mounds articulates a bold critical juxtaposition between possession and dispossession, Seurat, eliminating this distance, radically changes Millet's meaning. Seurat's gleaner himself may possess this mound: his proximity to the pile might indicate that he is amassing a plenty of his own; included in, rather than excluded from, more of the abundance of harvest. Troubling the meaning of gleaning, the horizon's flattening level levels in levelling.

It is also, from the perspective of rural landowners, threatening. If close to a mound belonging to another, Seurat's gleaner could pick from this rather than from the ground: shifting, away from surveillance, from sanctioned gleaning to illicit stealing.⁴⁷ This subversion of gleaning rights was exactly the finale of Jean Richepin's contemporary verse 'Glaneurs', published in Paris in 1881: '*En passant auprès des buriots, /Volez un peu les proprios*' [So when you're passing by the sheaves, /A little from the owners thieve].⁴⁸ Due in part to such concerns, gleaning rights had become closely circumscribed in nineteenth-century France: gleaners were permitted to gather in unenclosed fields only after the entire harvest had been gathered and before twilight.⁴⁹ Seurat's image offers nothing to indicate that these conditions have been fulfilled. Millet illuminates his masses of vegetation with golden yellows, suggesting the richness of both grain and sunlight. Neither Seurat's silhouettes nor his symmetrical shading in either of the upper corners reveal an obvious internal natural light source. Millet's harvesters are out of the picture; the artist also declines to disclose in the tangle of strokes that form the ground whether or not harvest wholly has taken place. A man gleaning might glean illegitimately.

This murmur of an unauthorized reclaiming of wealth is amplified by the artist's portrayal of the gleaner's hand. Where the gathering hands of the gleaner are we cannot make out precisely, as Bridget Riley has recently noted.⁵⁰ Unlike the defined grasping of Millet's women, the touch of Seurat's gleaner is furtively concealed. The artist might have rendered the tone of the gleaner's hand above the horizon line, a technique recently deployed in an 1881 drawing

of another bending rural figure in a composition based upon dense parallel lines.⁵¹ Instead, like the hands of the women in *Farm Women at Work*, the gleaner's hand begins to merge with the ground. The competing blacks of the straight horizon threaten to amputate this left limb, leaving the gleaner stumped: the lower limbs are trunk-like; the upper limb is truncated. Incidentally, Seurat's father had lost part of his left arm early in life and used a prosthetic limb so adeptly that Paul Signac would recall to Félix Fénéon the ability of Seurat senior to carve with alarming, 'acrobatic' dexterity.⁵² Around the gleaner's blurred appendage, part of the process of gleaning is disarmingly opaque. For Riley, this is a reflexive gesture: 'the handling of the drawing', she writes, 'is in itself an equivalent to the gathering action of the gleaner as he searches for the barely visible ears of grain.'⁵³

To handle gleaning in a manner that does not wholly divulge how gleaners handle their gleanings partially distances the figure's act from manual process. The piece elides the environmental markers of permission and makes the practice occur where gleaners in fact could be barred. This does not merely indicate gleaning in its controversial physical sense alone. The drawing also estranges the custom from its expected show of hands and surroundings pace Millet, lending force to the interpretation that this gleaning figure is also figurative.

The French verb 'glaner', like the English 'to glean', has the additional metaphorical meaning of gathering immaterial objects of knowledge, a sense current in nineteenth-century discourse.⁵⁴ These multiple senses of 'glaner' parallel the contemporary concept of the ragpicker as a marginal assimilator, engaged in gathering abstract ideas alongside cultural leftovers – an idea evoked by the scratchy, non-representational detritus in Seurat's *The Ragpicker* (1882-3).⁵⁵ Posing, perhaps, the making of a *glaneur-philosophe* as a counterpoint to the bohemian, poetic ragpicker – the more celebrated *chiffonnier-philosophe* who, in Walter Benjamin's words, 'fascinated his epoch' – *The Gleaner* hints at the beginnings of a heroic poetics of gleaning.⁵⁶ A gleaner of facts or information, Seurat's man reaches to separate the conjoined clump of the pupil-mound into distinct, discrete conté strands: to refine a mass of sight into the defined and perceptible. The agency attributed to the gleaner is re-evaluated: the mound is not that from which the man is excluded, but something he has chosen to disregard. What the gleaner does not gather is figuratively ignorable. In another overturning of Millet's relation between mankind and ample mound, Seurat's gleaner shows his ascendancy by out-scaling the sheaves and filling half of the format; the pile is comparatively slight and slighted. This man gleaning is selective, discerning: at liberty actively to leave his own remainder. In a reversal that extricates the man from an oppressive nexis, the mound becomes what the gleaner has left behind.

A Man Gleaning depicts a figure free from surveillance, free to handle or mishandle, free in his ambiguous environs to transcend the proper bounds of the practice, seemingly free for heroic appropriation. He is not, however, entirely free from constraint. Compare Henry Daras's contemporary oil *Sufficient unto the Day is the Evil Thereof*.⁵⁷ Exhibited at the Salon of 1883, Daras's work has several affinities with Seurat's drawing: its portrait format and single bending subject with distant vegetation and its almost flat surface and high horizon - features taking common inspiration from the work of Puvis de Chavannes.⁵⁸ Both Seurat and Daras fill around half of their compositions with

field, but while Daras's reaper, located towards the bottom of the piece, is offered canvas to alter his posture, for Seurat's gleaner there is no standing room. As Herbert observes of some of Seurat's other figures, he is 'squeezed within his rectangle'.⁵⁹ The diagonal scythe of Daras's harvester allows movement that Seurat's man, arboreally joined to the earth, is denied. The man has flexibility to glean only within fixed and predefined parameters. The gleaner is enclosed by symmetrical shading at the very top of the sheet, constrained by the edge of the paper to curve downwards, look groundwards.

Look at the ground. The eye is rapt by a disorder of firm blacks and airy patches; absorbed in a deep sensuous mess of curls, swirls, crosses and tactile scratches. Figural and straw-like only in snatches, its disorienting chaos expresses the pathos of a fertile field on the point of autumnal decline, as bold marks merge into scattered lattices. Seurat captures the gleaner in the bend of maximum exhalation and deflation: a suspenseful turn of the breath.⁶⁰ Alfred Barr admired Seurat's 'strange, almost breathless poise'; Brendan Prendeville concurs that 'so much in Seurat seems the negation of breath'.⁶¹ The equilibrium of air is part of the pictorial ecology of *A Man Gleaning*. Balancing the gleaner's expiration, the vegetation's porous dark marks gasp and absorb – they are 'agitated', in the term that Thomson justly adopts for the terrain as part of a brief and rare critical remark on this image.⁶² Zimmerman notes that Seurat's process of composition often 'brings into the picture no more landscape than the viewer would see if he bent down in a similar way'.⁶³ This is a landscape from the gleaner's point of view: an overwhelming mass of plant matter with an inflating, expanding force that almost threatens to push the person out of the picture, or to attempt to elevate the man beyond the bounds of the frame.⁶⁴

This perspective encourages the perceiver to empathise with the plight of those pressed to the margins. Yet, contrasting the uneven jabs that surround *The Ragpicker*, the regularity of *The Gleaner* appears composed rather than polemical. The drawing shares with Daras's canvas the strictly horizontal horizon line. The horizontal is 'calmness' 'in terms of line', Seurat set down in a letter to Maurice Beaubourg, epitomising the straight epigrammatic staccato that lent him a reputation for 'telegraphic' terseness and 'oracular brevity'.⁶⁵ Dominated by the horizontal, *A Man Gleaning* seems tranquil. Additional significance, however, can be allotted to this line.

Seurat's epistolary outline of his aesthetics of line accords this element of an artwork an intriguing autonomy: as Herbert observes, an ability for 'abstract structural components' to articulate meaning 'almost independently of the objects they conjure up'.⁶⁶ Seurat's exploration of the agency of line abounds in the comments of his contemporaries. Verhaeren states that it was the artist's 'goal [...] to determine the esthetic and intellectual expression of lines, be they straight, horizontal or curved'.⁶⁷ Fénéon observes that Seurat 'well knows that a line, independently of its topographical role, possesses a measurable abstract value'.⁶⁸ 'Line is the idea', Alfred Paulet puts pithily, reprising Seurat's syntactic directness.⁶⁹ Line can mean without referent. Mysteriously, de Wyzewa writes that in the work of this artist 'lines, too, have in them a secret power'.⁷⁰

A powerful secret is suggested in the lines of *A Man Gleaning*. Seurat reported to Fénéon that in 1881, the earliest date offered for this drawing, the work of the American physicist and colour theorist Ogden Rood had 'been brought to my attention'.⁷¹ Rood's *Modern Chromatics with Applications to Art and Industry* appeared in French translation that year and Seurat purchased a

copy.⁷² The study of the production of colour by absorption in the *Chromatics*, from which the artist would take notes, offers particular analysis of 'the green colour of vegetation'.⁷³ In Rood's representation, the light reflected by green leaves is notated by a shaded half-curve that falls briefly, rising into a greater parabola, before declining towards the horizontal (Figure 5).⁷⁴

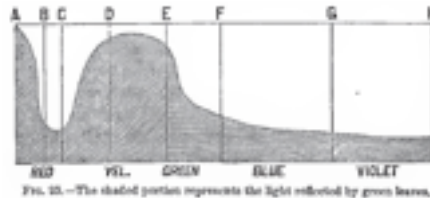


Figure 5. Light Reflected by Green Leaves, Ogden Rood, *Modern Chromatics*.

A Man Gleaning adopts much of the 'measurable abstract value' of Rood's graph: the contours of the silhouettes in the drawing describe an initial dropped half-curve, followed by a large parabola that returns to the level, featureless right of the image. Seurat's flat graphic work is a graph-like work, evoking the diagrammatic in addition to the pictorial.

Reading between the lines, the straight horizon is not simply a calm horizontal, but the x-axis of a provocative parabola. The representationally arboreal man is also abstractly comparable to vegetation: the 'intellectual expression' of the curve is the spectrum of the colour of foliage mapped in monochrome. The arc that forms the gleaner's back relates to Rood's shaded section DE: a reflection of yellow-green leafy light. In the bent back, the drawing bends back, or reflects, a graphical representation of reflection. Holding up a mirror to the marginal, a figure commonly overlooked becomes once again linked to the conditions of possibility of looking.

In a final revaluation of what it means to glean, the hunch of the gleaner is a curve at its peak, which suggests at the centre of the sheet the green apex of plant light. Whilst Seurat's arborescence roots the gleaner, it also naturalises transformation. The 'idea' of this colour in curve and line associatively transport the gleaner out of time, apart from brown decline – the remainder of the harvest, the end of the year. *A Man Gleaning* is latently verdant: the spectrum of a lively, leafy resurgence.

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Notes

¹ I am grateful to The London Spatial Theory Reading Group, Birkbeck College; Michael Baldry; Charlotte Knox-Williams; Fiona Johnstone; Edwin Evans-Thirlwell; Daniel Eltringham; Carol Watts and Kirstie Imber for valuable comments on an earlier draft. Georges Seurat. *The Gleaner*. Conté crayon on paper, 314x237 mm, c.1881-3. de Hauke 559. British Museum, London. Cesar de Hauke, *Seurat Et Son Oeuvre*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1961), II, no. 559, p. 142. Here the drawing is dated 1883.

- 2 On the relative unreliability of titles of works early in Seurat's oeuvre see Michael F Zimmermann, *Seurat and the Art Theory of His Time* (Antwerp: Fonds Mercator, 1991), p. 74. This article will deploy both of these English titular variants, in accordance with the interpretive tradition established at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford by curators Christopher Lloyd and Richard Thomson, *Impressionist Drawings from British Public and Private Collections* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), plate 81 and recently continued at MOMA, New York, in *Georges Seurat: The Drawings*, ed. by Jodi Hauptman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), plate 82. The drawing is dated 1881-2 and alternatively titled 'Peasant Gathering Plants', lending itself to interpretations that encompass and transcend the act of gleaning in Robert Herbert, *Seurat's Drawings* (London: Studio Vista, 1962), p. 175. It was first exhibited posthumously in 1932. For exhibition history, see online catalogue entry at The British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings, which dates this drawing c.1883: www.britishmuseum.org/research/ [accessed 5 March 2012].
- 3 For accounts of the roles of French gleaners up to and including the nineteenth-century see Liana Vardi, 'Construing the Harvest: Gleaners, Farmers, and Officials in Early Modern France', *The American Historical Review*, 98 (1993): 1424-1444; and Gabriel Weisberg, 'Jules Breton's *The Gleaners of Courrières*: A Traditional Aspect of Regional Life', *Arts Magazine* (1981): 104-107. Whilst there is scope only to discuss those most germane to the present argument, eighteen paintings and eleven drawings in Seurat's work explore the labour of bending subjects, see Robert Herbert, *Seurat: Drawings and Paintings* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 78.
- 4 For a brief comparative comment on this work see Richard Thomson, *Seurat* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), p. 28. Richard Schiff touches in passing upon its technique in Hauptman, p. 22. Recently, The British Museum's fine collection of Seurat's draughtsmanship itself has been sadly forgotten by Brian Sewell, 'Mantegna to Matisse: Master Drawings, Courtauld Gallery', *Evening Standard*, 14 June 2012, pp. 47-8: 'I can recall nothing [of Seurat's work on paper] in public ownership in London' (p.47). Thanks to John Montgomery for bringing this article to my attention.
- 5 This study will largely focus upon the Anglophone critical tradition and contemporary comments available in English translation.
- 6 For access to materials and the sharing of expertise I am grateful to Hugo Chapman and the staff of British Museum Prints and Drawings Room.
- 7 Aside from this isolated reference to being with vegetation as one might be with child, Seurat, unlike Breton and Millet, renders his gleaner with masculine contours: without skirts. Whilst the most well-known gleaner in western culture is the biblical figure of Ruth, as outlined in Jennifer Koosed, *Gleaning Ruth: A Biblical Heroine and Her Afterlives* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2011) gleaning in France was not solely a female practice. See Vardi, p. 1428.
- 8 Teodor de Wyzewa (1891) anthologized in *Seurat in Perspective*, ed. by Norma Broude, trans. by Norma Broude (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1978), p. 32.
- 9 Camille Pissarro quoted in John Rewald, *Seurat: A Biography* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), p. 190.
- 10 Joris Karl Huysmans (1887) anthologized in Broude, p. 44.
- 11 Félix Fénéon (1889) quoted in Paul Smith, "'Souls of Glass": Seurat and the Ethics of "Timeless" Experience', in *Seurat Re-Viewed*, ed. by Paul Smith (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), pp. 199-221 (p. 204).
- 12 Émile Verhaeren (1891) anthologized in Broude, p. 26.
- 13 Jean Helion (1936) anthologized in Broude, p. 81.
- 14 Seurat, *Man Leaning on a Parapet*. Panel, 250x160 mm, c 1881. de Hauke 12. Metropolitan Museum, New York.
- 15 Richard Thomson, p. 39.
- 16 Thomson, p. 39.
- 17 Seurat, *The Bridge at Courbevoie*. Conté crayon on paper, 240x305 mm, c 1886. de Hauke 653. Private Collection. Seurat, *The Bridge at Courbevoie*. Oil on canvas, 464 x 533 mm, c 1887. de Hauke 178. Courtauld Gallery, London.
- 18 For an account of absorption see Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1980).
- 19 *Georges Seurat: Figure in Space*, ed. by Kunsthaus Zürich and Kunstgesellschaft Zürcher (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009), p. 63.
- 20 Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), p. 216.

- 21 Jonathan Crary, pp. 215–6; For the context of the diagram, see Hermann Helmholtz, *Physiological Optics*, trans. by James Southall, 3 vols. (Washington, DC: Optical Society of America, 1924), I, pp. 27, 213.
- 22 Crary, p. 216; Helmholtz, I, p. 28.
- 23 Crary, p. 216.
- 24 Crary, p. 217.
- 25 Zimmermann, p. 135; Herbert, *Seurat*, p. ix; Hippolyte Taine, *On Intelligence*, trans. by H.D. Haye (New York: Holt and Williams, 1872), pp. 285–337.
- 26 Crary, p. 217.
- 27 Crary, p. 217.
- 28 Crary, p. 217.
- 29 Crary, p. 215.
- 30 Seurat's technique is not dissimilar to the balanced background border of a contemporary drawing, such as *Woman Carrying A Sack*. Black conté crayon, 310x240 mm, c.1882-3, de Hauke 493. Formerly Henri Matisse. Yet the right-hand portion of the sheet directly above the gleaner's horizon line invites particular attention due to its substantial depth.
- 31 Herbert, *Seurat*, p. 59.
- 32 Zimmermann, p. 80.
- 33 Alfred Sensier, *Jean-François Millet*, trans. by Helena de Kay (London: Macmillan, 1881).
- 34 Thomson, p. 30.
- 35 Zimmermann, p. 78.
- 36 Jean François Millet, *The Gleaners*. Oil on canvas, 83.5x110 cm, 1857. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Seurat, *Farm Women at Work*. Oil on canvas, 384x464 mm, c 1883. de Hauke 60. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Thomson, p. 60.
- 37 Zimmermann, p. 79.
- 38 Seurat, *Under the Bridge (The Tramp)*. Conté crayon on paper, 248x327 mm, 1883-4. de Hauke 645. Private Collection, Paris. Herbert, *Seurat*, p. 45.
- 39 For the interplay between 'something' and 'nothing' in Seurat's work see Bridget Riley, 'Seurat as Mentor', in *Georges Seurat: The Drawings*, ed. by Jodi Hauptman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), pp. 185–95 (p. 191).
- 40 Gustave Kahn (1891) anthologized in Broude, p. 23; Richard Shiff, 'Seurat Distracted', in *Georges Seurat: The Drawings*, ed. by Jodi Hauptman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), pp. 16–29 (p. 18).
- 41 Shiff, p. 18.
- 42 John Gary Hutton, *Neo-Impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science, and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), pp. 159–60; John Russell, *Seurat* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965), p. 107.
- 43 Millet, *The Gleaners*. Black crayon on buff paper, 165x267 mm, 1857. Musée Louvre, Paris. Reproduced in Roseline Bacou, *Millet, One Hundred Drawings* (London: Phaidon Press, 1975), p. 80.
- 44 Alexandra Murphy, *Jean-Francois Millet* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), p. 77.
- 45 Erich Franz and Bernd Growe, *Georges Seurat: Drawings* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983), p. 35.
- 46 Herbert, *Seurat's Drawings*, p. 120.
- 47 For a study of the growing importance of surveillance in nineteenth-century French gleaning practices, see Ione Crummy, 'The Subversion of Gleaning in Balzac's *Les Paysans* and in Millet's *Les Glaneuses*', *Neohelicon*, 36 (1999): 9–18.
- 48 Jean Richepin, 'Glaneurs', in *La chanson des gueux* (Paris: M. Dreyfous, 1881), pp. 26–27 (p. 27); Howard Sutton, *The Life and Work of Jean Richepin* (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1961), p. 98. Verse translated for the author by Thomas Dyer.
- 49 Weisberg, p. 105.
- 50 Personal communication from Bridget Riley, 3rd October 2012. I am grateful to Riley for sharing her thoughts on this drawing.
- 51 Seurat, *Harvester*. Conté crayon on paper, 310x241mm, 1881. de Hauke 456. Collection Andre Bromberg.
- 52 Paul Signac to Félix Fénéon (1934) quoted in Rewald, p. 145; Herbert, *Seurat*, p. 30; Crary, p. 224.
- 53 Riley, 3rd October 2012.
- 54 'glaner', v, Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, 6th Edition (1835) and Émile Littré: Dictionnaire de la langue française (1872-77). For a nuanced cinematic exploration of the

- French concept of gleaning, see Agnès Varda, *Les Glaneurs Et La Glaneuse; Plus, Deux Ans Après* (Cine Tamaris, 2002).
- 55 Seurat, *The Ragpicker*. Conté crayon on paper, 240x310 mm, 1882-3. de Hauke 520. Formerly Paul Signac. Jodi Hauptman, 'Medium and Miasma: Seurat's Drawings on the Margins of Paris', in *Georges Seurat: The Drawings*, ed. by Jodi Hauptman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), pp. 107–17 (p. 115).
- 56 Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973), p. 19. For Jean-François Raffaëlli's idea of the *chiffonnier-philosophe* in the context of Seurat's work, see Hauptman, 'Medium and Miasma: Seurat's Drawings on the Margins of Paris', p. 114.
- 57 Henry Daras. *Sufficient Unto the Day Is the Evil Thereof*. Oil on canvas, 180x140 cm, 1883. Private Collection. Reproduced in John Leighton and Richard Thomson, *Seurat and The Bathers* (London: National Gallery, 1997), p. 125.
- 58 Leighton and Thomson, p. 124.
- 59 Herbert, *Seurat*, p. 80.
- 60 Brendan Prendeville, 'Seurat and the Act of Sensing: Perception as Artifact', in *Seurat Re-Viewed*, ed. by Paul Smith (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), pp. 149–62 (p. 158).
- 61 Alfred H Barr quoted in Glenn Lowry, 'Foreward', in *Georges Seurat: The Drawings*, ed. by Jodi Hauptman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), pp. 6–7 (p. 6); *Seurat Re-Viewed*, ed. by Paul Smith (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), p. 158.
- 62 Thomson, p. 28.
- 63 Zimmermann, p. 87.
- 64 Herbert, *Seurat*, p. 80.
- 65 Seurat, letter to Maurice Beaubourg (1890) anthologized in Broude, p. 18; Rewald, p. 147; Crary, p. 152.
- 66 Herbert, *Seurat*, p. 14.
- 67 Verhaeren (1891) anthologized in Broude, p. 29.
- 68 Herbert, *Seurat*, p. 14.
- 69 Alfred Paulet (1886) quoted in Paul Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 9.
- 70 de Wyzewa (1891) anthologized in Broude, p. 32.
- 71 Seurat, letter to Félix Fénéon (1890) anthologized in Broude, p. 16.
- 72 Herbert, *Seurat*, p. ix.
- 73 Robert Herbert, *Georges Seurat, 1859-1891* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991), p. 391.
- 74 *Ogden Rood, Modern Chromatics, With Applications to Art and Industry* (New York: D Appleton and Company, 1879), p. 82. For the same figure in French translation, see Rood, *Théorie scientifique des couleurs* (Paris, 1881), p.67

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