

Riding with Death: Basquiat's Re-Possession of Aristotle

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Abstract

Thus far, most critical analysis of Jean-Michel Basquiat's work has placed it in either a category of naïve primitivism or one of unschooled celebration of black culture in America. Basquiat's final painting *Riding with Death* depicts a decomposing, dark skinned figure riding a white skeleton in the pose of a horse against a starkly flat, parchment- or hide-like background. This paper will argue that *Riding with Death* presents a nuanced and Carnavalesque reversal of Western hegemony's dehumanization and oppression of the subaltern. It will analyze Basquiat's use of African and Caribbean artistic tropes and the figural composition of Phyllis riding Aristotle, found in a 15th century aquamanile ewer. To do this, it will deconstruct the figure dynamics of the rider and the ridden using Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of unsettling the official cultural order through the practice of Carnival. It will utilize bell hooks' critical race theory, which calls attention to the failure of whites to recognize their own participation in maintaining an ideology of white domination, blinding the Eurocentric gaze to the signification of culturally unfamiliar images such as references to Maasai art's use of bones and Haitian voodoo gestures in Basquiat's work. It will also make use of Derek Walcott's New World poetics and his conception of "the New Adam," a figure reborn from a history of violence to the body, racial oppression, and trauma through a documentation for the historical record, a voicing of, this history of the culturally voiceless. Basquiat's work joins this dialog of historical and cultural recuperation by overturning the subject/object binary of Western Imperialism. He resituates the liminal body of the subaltern in a place of overwhelming power, as the rider and master of the ghost of Western philosophy, Aristotle.

Keywords: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Carnavalesque, New World Poetics

1. Introduction

Jean-Michel Basquiat haunts his body of work, staring out from every figure and vibrating from every twanged line. He guides viewers into the underworld. Sipping his blood sacrifice, Basquiat unmasks the ugliness of white supremacist¹ traditions by revealing their horror and subverting their power. Within critical response to his work, however, Basquiat's difficult imagery provokes critics to focus on his "primitivism"² and what they see as his artistic immaturity. Reviewers construe his decisive brushstrokes as "childlike scrawls"³ and proclaim his career a "novelty folk act."⁴ His content wanes, in the most audible critical descriptions, to an unschooled regurgitation of pop culture and art history. Robert Hughes cites Dubuffets and Picassos as what he calls Basquiat's "primitive conventions."⁵ However, bell hooks notes that Basquiat was open about the influence of Picasso, Duffubet, and other artists on his own work. In rebuttal to critics like Hughs, Jeffrey Deitch describes Basquiat as a "hybrid" whose paintings harness "modern art to portray the ecstatic violence of the New York street."⁶ While this evaluation leaves behind white supremacist notions of artistic valuation and approaches an acknowledgement of the isolation, the bitterness, but also the potential power of the hybrid man attempting to situate himself in an urban environment, Deitch views Basquiat's work through a solely contemporary lens and so fails to account for the temporal and cultural depth of Basquiat's visual language. If one abandons a defamation of Basquiat's visual dialect as derivative or refuses to limit oneself to a

singular critical lens, the complexity of Basquiat's work emerges. One must ask what effect Basquiat's European influences, as well as his own manipulation of the visual language of history, have on an interpretation of his work. Leaving aside Picasso, Dubuffet, and the graffiti and slang of New York streets, an examination of pre-modern and non-western imagistic influences becomes important for the illumination of the subversive within Basquiat's work. Specifically, the influences for his final painting, *Riding with Death*, serve as idioms that elucidate the revolutionary, post-modern language of his painting. Basquiat executes, in this painting, his ability to reverse the New World/Old World binary and conquer the mythology of colonial history by appropriating and absorbing its power structure into a hybrid visual language; one that makes audible the dissonance of the historical voices of the colonizer and the colonized. Basquiat records a new epic, in the style of what Derek Walcott calls the "New Adam," constructed from the tension created by the assimilation of the visual traditions of both the colonizer and the colonized. He combines Medieval European artistic tropes with those emanating from Africa and the Caribbean. He narrates this epic by humiliating the history of domination and presents such struggle caustically and unromantically. Laughing at the absurdity of historical authority, he overthrows this authority, manifesting a Carnavalesque disobedience that refuses to censor historical violence. He paints this violence onto the body because the body comprises the irrefutable evidence of domination and oppression for those whose voices do not dictate history. By revealing this evidence, he erases the naïveté of a pure, Manichean history. *Riding with Death* seats the subaltern in a place of overwhelming power as a bodily text that the eye cannot silence. The subaltern's body speaks as the rider of history, interminably wrestling with the history upon which it rides.

2. Visual Heritage

Riding with Death (fig. 1) demonstrates a reversal of governing binaries in its manipulation of visual power structures—the dynamic performed by the rider and the ridden. It shows a brown figure, emphatically fleshed and boned, seated with its foot in a stirrup. This rider sits atop a second, skeletal figure that raises his right arm, behaving like a horse raising its hoof. The gestures of both figures, as well as the contrasting styles with which Basquiat renders their bodies indicate their position as hybrid signs that signify their affiliation, their conflict, and their vacillation between domination and subordination. The rider spreads his arms above the body of the ridden. His right arm holds reins that control the skeletal steed. Viewed differently, these reins dangle nourishment to the steed's bony teeth, controlling his mortality/survival. This fragmented brown mass also censors the skeleton's speech, covering his mouth. It simultaneously represents nourishment and so a signal of the rider's benevolence. Conversely, it takes on the substance of the rider's decaying flesh, ripped from his body by the skeleton's cannibalism, which positions the rider as a victim of violence and the ridden as the perpetrator of that violence. A single eye tops the brown figure's brow, stylistically rendered to signal omnipotence or the obscuring of identity. The skeleton's eyes are crossed out, cartoonishly dead. The figures seem hung against the mottled and empty, light brown background.



Figure 1. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Riding With Death*, 1988, Acrylic, Crayon on Canvas, 98”x114”

Almost identically framed, Leonardo da Vinci’s allegorical drawing, *Illustration for his thoughts on Virtue and Envy* (fig. 2)—which Phoebe Hoban notes was a direct source for Basquiat’s composition. She cites a photograph showing Basquiat looking at Leonardo drawing in his studio⁷—shows a nude figure riding on the back of a skeleton on his hands and knees. The rider, however, is female. She holds a floral, manmade object close to the skeleton’s head in her right hand and she raises her left hand as if in victory. Like Basquiat’s composition, Leonardo draws a contrast between the gazes of the rider and the ridden. While the skeletal steed’s eyes sit hollow in his head, the rider’s eyes smolder darkly and smoke rises out of them in a way that suggests power.

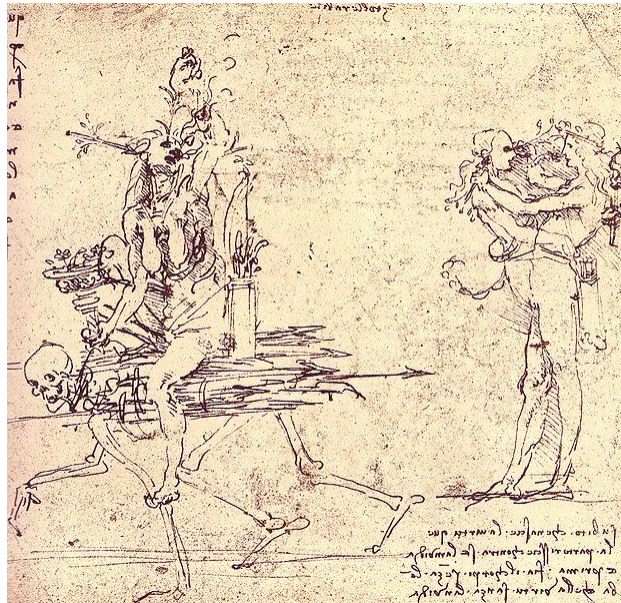


Figure 2. Leonardo da Vinci, *Illustration for his thoughts on Virtue and Envy*, 15/16th Century, Ink on Paper

This composition, as well as Basquiat's painting, mirrors the figure-positioning found in depictions of the medieval tale of Phyllis riding Aristotle (fig. 3)—accessible in the form of a 15th century aquamanile ewer on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Phyllis rides (here clothed and seated side-saddle) on Aristotle's back. She spreads her arms, controlling him by grasping his hair with her right hand as if she held reins and resting her left hand on his backside. It becomes important then, to investigate the story behind the figuration found in the aquamanile: A lay by Henri d'Andeli describes how Alexander the Great's consort, a woman named Phyllis, took revenge on Alexander's teacher Aristotle.⁸ Because Aristotle believed that Phyllis distracted Alexander from his studies and advised him to abandon her, Phyllis plotted to humiliate the "great, aging philosopher."⁹ Enraged at his presumption to interfere in her affair, Phyllis seduced Aristotle, promising that she would return his lust for her if he allowed her to ride around the courtyard on his back. He complied with her wishes. However, when spotted by Alexander from a window, Aristotle realized Phyllis's trickery, felt his own humiliation in being mastered by a woman, and tried to warn his student. Since Phyllis had fooled a wise philosopher like himself, Alexander was in even greater danger from this wily woman. The artistic interpretation of this tale was a common trope for illustration in the Middle Ages and appears in these images by the Housebook Master (fig. 4) and Hans Baldung (fig. 5).



Figure 3. Robert Lehman Collection, Aquamanile in the Form of Aristotle and Phyllis, Late 14th or Early 15th Century, Bronze, 12.7"x7"x15.5"

As in the Aquamanile, the Phyllis of the Housebook Master's image sits sidesaddle upon Aristotle, controlling his head with one hand, while the other hangs behind his backside. The right hand holds reins that Aristotle grinds in his grimacing teeth, evidencing his humiliation. Phyllis' left hand, however, clasps a slack whip that does not rise to harm her steed. This gesture, as well as Phyllis's demure expression tempers her dominance over Aristotle, leaving him to writhe under his own complicity in the demeaning activity. While men watch above the low wall in the background, Phyllis fails to exemplify any dangerous temperament that Aristotle suggests she possesses. Phyllis hides any trace of seduction or sexuality behind layers of cloth and the gaze of the spectators falls instead upon the ridiculous Aristotle, who exposes his own naked leg and foot—evidence of his weak flesh—in his animal performance. The Housebook Master's decision to render Phyllis as calmly composed echoes the earlier aquamanile figuration where both Aristotle and Phyllis maintain peaceful expressions. The Aquamanile Aristotle's expression suggests relaxation or erotic enjoyment, while Phyllis's face appears more detached from actual pleasure.



Figure 4. Housebook Master, Aristotle and Phyllis, c. 1485, Dry Point, 6" Diameter

When compared with Hans Baldung's woodcut, the significance of the later figures' gestures and expressions becomes more poignant. Baldung's Phyllis no longer masks her sexuality in cloth. Her nudity, as well as Aristotle's, calls attention to the element of desire in their power struggle. Phyllis turns her face downward, condescending to her steed, while his grimace highlights his masochism. In addition, Baldung's Phyllis cracks her whip as Alexander peers over the wall at Aristotle's humiliation. In contrast with the Aquamanile figures and the Housebook Master's figures, Baldung's portray more bawdiness and animality. Here, Aristotle's body hair and Phyllis's voluptuousness stand out to nakedly expose the physicality of their conflict. Whereas Phyllis' female sex would leave her subordinate under the social norms of her contemporaries, her dominance over Aristotle in this image reverses this paradigm, allowing for her temporary triumph.



Figure 5. Hans Baldung, Aristotle and Phyllis, 1513, Woodcut, 13"x9.3"

Baldung also emphasizes Aristotle's immanent mortality by detailing wrinkles into his face. His bald, bare head takes on the appearance of a skull, which links him to the ridden figure in Leonardo's drawing. Death and impotence—whether sexual or political and social—draw near to Aristotle until Leonardo takes up this figure positioning in his allegorical drawing. This skeletal figure must bear the weight of a raucous and bawdy woman in a dully subordinate, animal way. Her glory and fleshy detail, evident in Leonardo's work, contrasts with the skeleton's sparse rendering. Leonardo extrapolates his figures into the extremes of vitality and mortality. Like Leonardo's figures, Basquiat's grotesque but human rider bears an all-seeing eye and a halo, while the skeleton's eyes bear exes that signal their emptiness.

3. Subversion and Humiliation

The dynamic established by the narrative of Phyllis and Aristotle and its artistic renderings is one of a reversal of authority through laughter—a phenomenon of the Medieval psyche that Mikhail Bakhtin describes as the Carnavalesque. He tracks the evidence within the medieval cultural record—literature and art—a practice of release similar to the popular festivals during Carnival. In the middle ages, the folk humor practiced at these celebrations released or renewed individual and collective piety. As men and women parodied kings and popes and denied their year-round piety by behaving raucously, they were able to temporarily escape the tyranny that required their political subordination. According to Bakhtin, the universal laughter of Carnival acknowledged the inequality that regulated the rest of the year and became a consecration of equality: “People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations.”¹⁰ The voices of citizens became audible as people shucked the silencing and censoring of those in power. So when Phyllis mounts Aristotle, the respected teacher and philosopher, she humiliates him by exposing his vices and desires. She takes authority over him—over his position of social authority—and through her act, she presents them both as adversaries on an evenly matched plain. She initiates a dialog between herself and Aristotle, making her voice temporarily audible. Although this dialog ends as soon as she dismounts, Basquiat's rider sits frozen in time. He works within Phyllis' imagistic legacy and cements the dialog begun when the disenfranchised overturns the silencing absolutism of authority. We can see in Basquiat's painting that the hand of the rider silences the authority of the skeletal figure, this ghost of Aristotle. One cannot read Basquiat's laughter as solely celebratory, however. It is ultimately necessary—a grotesque laughter that undermines the romanticism of Western history through humiliation. It does not mask the horror of oppression, but exposes it. The mass of brown lines in the skeleton's jaw in *Riding with Death* matches a patch on the rider's chest of the same color that appears to have been torn off. Both patches reference Basquiat's habit of indicating censorship or erasure by crossing out. Taken one way, the rider's wound stands as a signal of the trauma inflicted upon his body and the censorship of that trauma by the recorders of history. However, taken in the other direction, the patch of lines painted over the steed's mouth represents a censorship imposed upon him by the rider so that the rider's own trauma becomes legible as he displays his ravaged body. Basquiat's rider wears his wounds openly. White, linear ribs slice starkly through the ruddy heat of his flesh. The prosthetic rigidity of the rider's arms contrast with and emphasize the grace and muscularity of his legs and draw attention to the resemblance of his arms to brooms or tools of labor. The framed, symbolic quality of the rider's head simultaneously signals a halo, an all-seeing eye, an obliteration of his face, and a hieroglyphic speech-bubble that records his existence. This masking of the rider's head suggests the existence of a face, a signal of humanity, behind the obscuring brushstrokes. Basquiat's rendering of the rider's head contrasts with the mortal and cartoonish clarity of the skeletal steed's head. The markings of both divinity, and trauma born by the rider map onto his body a history of oppression and anonymity over which he triumphs as he mounts Aristotle's skeleton. The skeletal figure, by contrast, possesses the tools of recording. Its jaw hangs open, suggesting the ability to verbalize. It raises its right hand delicately, in the manner of a horse lifting its hoof, but its articulated phalanges indicate fingers capable of the act of writing or recording history. This hand differs from the skeleton's other limbs as well, which end before they reach hands or feet and so they become more animal, so that its left front limb ends in a fingerless hoof. As their bodies vacillate between the markings of silencing oppression and the dominance inherent in an audible historical voice, Basquiat's rider bears his historical scars while triumphing over the censorship and domination in his position as the rider of the animal-man hybrid. Similarly, the skeleton's position as the steed forces it into a subordination to the rider at the same time that the anonymity of its bones obscures its historical identity. By appropriating the Phyllis and Aristotle image from its European context, Basquiat recasts it in light of racial struggles throughout American and world history, making audible the voices of the historically silenced.

He conjoins the European imagistic traditions of the rider and the ridden to what bell hooks identifies as Maasai and Caribbean visual traditions, creating a collage that destabilizes the historical hierarchy of the valuation of these influences. The Old World and the New World appear together. The language of the colonizer and the colonized create a patois or linguistic blending that lends voice to the post-colonial, de-historialized hybrid. In her analysis of the painting, hooks notes the compositional elements of *Riding with Death* that reflect Maasai art: the nakedness of the figures, the bareness of the background, the evidence of the figures' bones that become the "repository of personal and political history."¹¹ Not only do the bones of the rider visible through his flesh act as the repository of his personal history, but the skeleton's bones also act as a historical text. In their gestures and positioning, they emphasize the steed's connection to the humiliation of Aristotle and the authorities of Western history. Basquiat thus assimilates the Maasai's visual language with the medieval European language, depositing within the bones of the ridden the history of colonial oppression. The ridden figure becomes Aristotle, an ossified philosopher whose corpse or ghost writhes in contact with a fleshed and powerful, dark skinned rider who becomes the ghost of the New World. Hooks also mentions the Haitian *voudoun* implication of riding and being ridden where a demon rides and possesses a tortured soul. The affiliation of the figures in *Riding with Death* exemplifies a process of "possession . . . a process of exorcism, one that makes revelation, renewal, and transformation possible."¹² She asserts that through the act of exorcising the specter of white supremacy, Aristotle, Basquiat attempts to leave his rider's wounded body in the human world and explore to the peripheries of the imaginable. His Carnavalesque release allows him to revel in the possible, and to participate in what Derek Walcott calls a ritual of "recovery and return"¹³ in order to exhume and process historically censored wounds.

Hooks' idea corresponds to Walcott's discussion of New World poetics—the way that poetry and art manifest in the Americas and the Caribbean. Walcott posits the re-creation of the self, the New Adam, as a first step in processing, and developing within, a history of colonization, conquest, and enslavement. The New Adam, who eventually becomes a conglomeration of the victims and perpetrators of violence, must uncover the hidden corpses of violent history as if reading a text in order to begin to process such history. The poet or artist, in Walcott's description does not respond romantically to the actions of either the colonizer or the colonized. Instead, both sides of the Manichean equation, lightness and darkness, combine into a hybrid hero isolated from absolutism by his very hybridity. He asserts that the power struggle between the colonizer and the colonized implicates the bodies and histories of both parties and so one must not eradicate the other but exist, for the historical and personal record, together in the reality and bodily contact of their conflict. Lightness, in the mythology and history of the New Adam does not supersede darkness, on the contrary—the writing of the New World epic performs a reversal akin to the Carnavalesque. It constitutes a release through "a philosophy of elation"¹⁴ that revels in the potentiality of future visibility and audibility. However, this future cannot be romantic either; the New Adam tastes the bitterness as well as the sweetness of experience within the fruits of the new Eden, which is Walcott's moniker for the New World. Like Walcott, Basquiat marks his figures with the wounds of a violent conflict, the flesh torn from the chest of the rider by the teeth and hands of the ridden. All these marks rest visibly on the bodies of both Basquiat's rider and his steed. The frailty of the steed's bones contrast with his ability to bear the weight of the rider. Likewise, the rider's body maintains both powerfully muscled, elegant thighs and a decaying torso. Parts of both figures fade into the background of the painting or remain invisible to the viewer. Basquiat exposes the carnal exploitation and destruction of the black body by the Western colonizer. However, the representative of the Western colonizer, Aristotle, must also bear the weight of this living corpse and cannot extract himself from the position of the ridden as he does in his affiliation with Phyllis.

Basquiat "mocks the Western obsession with being on top, the ruler"¹⁵ As the beast of burden becomes Aristotle, a paragon of Western philosophy the steed also stands as a symbol of its civilization and dominance. Here Basquiat reduces Aristotle to a frail and subordinated steed, dominated by the rider whose body is exposed, as hooks writes, "worked to the bone,"¹⁶ destroyed by the hunger for power, the blood thirst of Imperialism. Basquiat's rider repossesses this representative of Western authority. By presenting the violence and power reversal between the rider and the ridden, as hooks posits, Basquiat,

demands the acknowledgement of the brutal reality [Western Imperialism] masks, not only in its implication of the role of white supremacy, but also . . . participation in a bourgeois white paradigm that perpetuates the cycle of violence and the binary of the master and slave.¹⁷

His rider revolts against authoritarian domination. However, instead of absolute substitution of the triumphant subaltern obliterating the oppressor, Basquiat renders the struggle for dominance between the bodies so that both

remain in evidence, leaving no room for a wholly romantic triumph. This rider's victory hangs as fragile and temporary as the reversal of authority in a celebration of Carnival—a raucous and bodily unmaning.

4. Conclusion

Through his conflation of images, ideas, and contexts, Basquiat “[gives] equal attention to exhuming, exposing, and cutting up the nation’s deep-sixed racial history, in all its nightmarish, Neo-Expressionist gory.”¹⁸ He guides open-minded viewers through his forensic layers of signification in order to subvert the dominant narrative paradigm of white supremacy. His rider humiliates his steed and forces it to remain in submission. Through the documentation of the bodily trauma of New World history, he performs a Carnavalesque exhumation. The bodies of the rider and the ridden represent the dialog between the ghosts of history, by giving voice to trauma like the bones in Maasai art act as the cite of personal history. He visually represents the erasure of violence to the black body in the space of white supremacy as the bones of Aristotle consume and hold the rider’s flesh, cannibalizing the text that serves as the evidence of experience. These figures are frozen, however, for our sight; the repository of bones on display, outliving any physical decay. Basquiat’s dissective figures document history, resurrecting the corpses and voices erased histories repressed through historical domination. In *Riding with Death*, the contrition of the master, found in his own humiliation, does not replace the vengeance of the slave, nor does the vengeance of the rider dominating the ridden heal the wounds of history through idealism. Instead, Basquiat exorcises the ghosts of history, making them visible. He assimilates and reverses the humiliation of Western Imperialism into his final painting, allowing for the viewer’s temporary release from the tension of conflict at the sight of the victorious rider. However, this rider also forever carries his wounds, as the New Adam must grapple history or the possessed must ride with his ghosts.

5. References

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