

<p><b>Max Ernst,</b> <b><i>Oedipus Rex,</i></b> 1922, oil on canvas, 93 x 102 cm (37 x 40")</p>	<p>initial analysis</p> <p>This initial analysis does not provide a clear answer to the riddle proposed by the painting, that is to say, what is this about? but it does begin to attempt an unravelling of that dilemma.</p>	<p>The facture uses oil on canvas, but appears to derive from a number of different images that have been brought together in the disparate manner of a collage.</p>
<p>On the left a hand appearing from a rectangular hole in a wall extends into the exterior area holding a walnut and what could be a medical implement which appears to include a fine saw, in any case the saw handle penetrates the thumb and the rod part of the implement penetrates the fore finger, the saw itself begins to cut open the walnut. I think that the walnut could be a metaphor for the brain. Also penetrating right through the walnut is an arrow. There is a pressure on the forefinger from another implement underneath the same finger that produces an indentation.</p>		<p>In the depicted sky a distant dark balloon. On the right two animal heads ascend through holes in a platform. One is a green bird's head, it has elements of a fence around part of its neck. The second head has small horns and is not identifiable. The horns are attached by a wire or line which ascends and disappears into a depicted sky. On the right the edge of a box or building.</p>
<p>A feature of the image produced by Ernst, appears to not only pay attention to two realities, that of outward reality and that of dream, but clearly also appeals to ideas of the uncanny and more disturbingly, to physical pain or damage. This has been brought about by using what appear to be existing graphic forms from different disciplines, from, for example, medical practice and zoological illustrations</p>	<p>Ernst's work in this period can initially and best be understood in the context of one of his exhibition essays. 'The belief in an absolute time and space seems to be vanishing. Dada does not pretend to be modern. It regards submission to the laws of any perspective as useless. Its nature preserves it from attaching itself, even in the slightest degree, to matter, or from letting itself be intoxicated by words. It is the marvellous faculty of attaining two widely separate realities without departing from the realm of our experience; of bringing them together and drawing a spark from their contact; of gathering within reach of our senses abstract figures endowed with the same intensity, the same relief, and other figures; and of disorienting us in our own memory by depriving us of a frame of reference.' (Max Ernst, <i>Beyond Painting and Other Writings</i>, translated by Dorothy Tanning, New York: George Wittenborn, Schulz, 1948.)</p>	<p>The collage painting appears to propose the vocabulary of Breton's surrealism, a state of two realities. Max Ernst articulated this as bringing about 'the culture of systematic displacement and its effects.' (Ernst, 1948: 13.)</p> <p><i>Oedipus Rex</i> would usually refer to a fifth century BCE play by Sophocles. Literal and metaphorical references to eyesight appear throughout the Theban <i>Oedipus Rex</i>. Clear vision serves as a metaphor for insight and knowledge, but the clear-eyed Oedipus is blind to the truth about his origins and inadvertent crimes.</p>
<p>Referring to Sophocles' <i>Oedipus Rex</i>, Sigmund Freud's over-determined emphasis notes that Oedipus' destiny '...moves us only because it might have been ours — because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so.' (Sigmund Freud, <i>The Interpretation of Dreams</i>. 1899, page 279-280.) The use of 'our' and 'us' are now, of course, presumptuous and difficult. In the same book, Freud also indicates that the 'primordial urges and fears' that are his concern are not found primarily in the play by Sophocles, but exist in the myth the play is based on; he refers to the play as a 'further modification of the legend', one that originates in a 'misconceived secondary revision of the material, which has sought to exploit it for theological purposes.' (Freud: page 247.) These dualistic proposals by Freud and those subsequently elaborated by Jacques Lacan as triadic, may now seem out of date or over-prescriptive, but in the early twentieth century Freud's proposals were thought to be appropriate and revelatory.</p>		