

All That is Beyond Hearing: A Life of Arturo Ott

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I FOUND

I cannot stop thinking about that thing at the bottom that resembles a crab.¹

I am traveling backwards through time in enforced tranquillity, just above a turbulence of cloud. In my hand is the talisman of this return from east to west, from Berlin to Los Angeles: a tiny photograph taken just after World War II. On the balcony of an old stone apartment building a man sits huddled in an overcoat, his feet resting on a second chair. His hands are folded over his lap, giving a perhaps false impression that he has been sitting in the same position for quite a long time, and there is a slight interrogative tilt to his head. His name is Arturo Ott, and I had gone to Berlin to find out about him. When I set out, however, I had not been sure he really existed. But it is a circuitous story, and I think I must begin by going even further back in time.

Most of what I thought I knew about Ott came from an anonymous, typewritten manuscript found in a trunk half a century ago. That trunk had landed on the doorstep of the Institute of Cultural Inquiry in 1955, to the great perplexity of then-ICI curator Charles P. Schmidt. A trainmaster and former vaudevillian, Schmidt was no stranger to lost luggage and at first thought the trunk must have been delivered to him in error. But although traumas of travel had rendered the shipping stickers partially illegible, it was clear that the trunk had been deliberately dispatched the 4400-odd miles from Germany to Hannaford, North Dakota. Locked and corded, large and black, it was at once utterly mundane and vaguely worrying, evoking something like the feeling that comes over you in a train station just at the moment a stranger says, 'Excuse me?' and before you have nerved yourself to say 'Yes?' instead of hurrying away.

When opened—the key was neatly taped to the front, next to the lock—the trunk was found to contain a motley collection of objects, including a globe of the earth, a torn piece of dark crimson velvet, some shell casings from a high-caliber field gun, and, oddest of all, a cast-iron, hand-operated machine for embossing the Masonic emblem on paper. Occupying almost half the trunk and carefully wrapped in tissue paper was a manuscript—more precisely, a pair of manuscripts. One of these consisted of a loose stack of images from diverse sources—drawings, photographs, paintings, and collages—while the other was a typed commentary on this assemblage written (it was later discovered) by Arturo Ott. The first page of Ott’s commentary refers to the assemblage as “a manual of lost ideas,” and it has been known by this enigmatic title ever since.

Inside the trunk, on top of everything else, was a brief note written in German and saying that the trunk and its contents were an anonymous bequest, sent to the ICI because they were ‘historical documents of possible value’ (*möglicherweise wertvolle historische Dokumente*).

II GALT

It is not by choice that one becomes a fox in a world of wolves.

After its arrival at the institute, the trunk was put in temporary storage and (as so often happens) ended by lingering in that dusty limbo for years. Sometime in the 1980s, however, the trunk and its contents were unearthed by a man named John Galt, who is an ICI research associate. Galt became obsessed with the Manual of Lost Ideas and its associated commentary, and he carefully photographed the manual, page by page. It was Galt who first raised many of the questions that have dogged subsequent researches into the manual and its history: For whom was the commentary written? Who created the manual itself, and over what period of time? Why were the two manuscripts sent to the ICI?

John Galt’s photograph of the trunk with the Manual of Lost Ideas and Arturo Ott’s commentary, shortly after it arrived at the ICI.



This meticulous photodocumentation gained enormously in importance when Galt later stole most of the manual, together with a number of other valuable items from the institute archives. He stage-managed his thefts so well that they were not discovered until quite some time after he had stopped showing up at the institute. After Galt disappeared, ICI staff found references to several other John Galts in his locker; for instance, he was clearly quite taken with a John Galt of Williamsburg, Virginia, who was the first psychiatrist in the New World. He also had books by the Scottish author John Galt, as well as Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged*, which famously opens with the sentence 'Who is John Galt?' It remains unclear to this day whether the ICI's John Galt was operating under a pseudonym or had simply been born to the unlucky fate of bearing a name that would be both embraced and maligned by strangers.

Although I never met him myself, Galt strikes me as a quintessentially American character type, a blend of the con man and the fanatic. It is curious that even as he absconded with the manuscripts, Galt appears to have deliberately left his photodocumentation in the institute archives, although it would seem to have been in his own best interests to have taken that, too, in order to make it more difficult for the documents to be recognized should they ever turn up. Was this a swindler's desire to leave clues or a compulsive urge to protect the beloved object, however indirectly? Or is the obvious inference—that Galt planned to dispose of the Manual of Lost Ideas—simply wrong? There are those at the institute who believe it is just possible that Galt took the documents for further research, as a kind of unauthorized loan, intending to return them one day.

I became an associate of the ICI myself in 1989—by which time it had moved to Los Angeles—and I have since become almost as fascinated with the manual and its commentary as Galt apparently was. In the mid-1990s, I joined a research team that the current ICI director Lise Patt put together to try to settle some of the unresolved questions around the two manuscripts, especially those relating to their origins and authorship.² With the loss of the primary documents in the Galt theft, we were forced to rely on Galt's mostly black-and-white photographs instead, together with the Ott commentary. For my part, I found I could only study the photos for a short time before becoming paralyzed by a feeling of acute sadness. What evoked this tenderness was not just the documents for whose very existence they stood witness, and which at moments I felt I could reach out and touch in some impossible present-past just beyond the picture plane, but the elusive Galt as well, who had expended such care to memorialize them. I wondered when the idea of stealing them had first occurred to him, and whether he could possibly have brought himself to sell them.

Arturo Ott's commentary on the Manual of Lost Ideas is written largely in the third person and consists of rather pedantic descriptions of individual Manual pages interpolated with cryptic assertions, disjointed quotations, and autobiographical snippets. A typical entry reads: 'Photograph clipped from a newspaper showing 8 birds on the wing, identified as large snipe or willets. It is said that these birds are seldom caught on film as they are swift, sharp-eyed, and shy. Being thought slow and stodgy may also serve.' Of a photograph of Thomas Paine, one of the conspirators executed for assassinating Abraham Lincoln, Ott writes: 'Such a souvenir might have been placed in the Manual by a relative, or by a Confederate sympathizer, or merely by someone entranced with the assassin's youth and beauty. One is reminded of those young men of much the

same generation killed in the Paris Commune uprising of 1871. Youth is that messenger who brings the rest bad news, for which one cannot forebear exacting the highest price of all.'

At one point, Ott warns the reader to 'be advised that this is neither a memoir nor a confession but a history.' Evasive and irregular as this 'history' is, Ott does reveal a good deal about himself—his occupation, the sector of Berlin where he lived, family details—enough that the research team, after many false starts, was eventually able to identify him and to locate his closest living relative. This turned out to be his niece Anna Felix Ott, who lived with Arturo for the last half of his life and sent the trunk with Ott's commentary and the Manual of Lost Ideas to the ICI after his death in 1955. When I went to Berlin to interview her in 2003, the 78-year-old former schoolteacher gave me the tiny photograph of Arturo Ott, one of a very few he ever allowed to be taken.

III COMMENTARY

Query: Do angels have phalluses?

In the living room of Anna's flat she showed me an old-fashioned drop-front desk. It is here that Ott typed his commentary on the Manual of Lost Ideas—Anna inherited his old German Torpedo typewriter—and here that Anna has saved an assortment of items that, for various reasons, didn't get included in the trunk sent to the ICI.

Anna told me that Ott usually worked on his commentary in the evenings after he got home from work. He would pull out some piece of the manual and then 'just sit there and just stare at it.' Eventually, he would begin to type in a slow, precise fashion that Anna said made her think of a child learning to play the piano. Then he would fall silent again. Anna missed nothing about her uncle so much as those evenings filled with the intermittence of silence and staccato.

I comment that Ott seemed oddly hostile to the manual, even as he took care to write up his exhaustively detailed notes. On the very first page of his commentary, he grumbles: 'Evidently grammar was a lost idea for the soul who created this leaf.' Elsewhere: 'Lately one notices that the Manual stinks.' 'Why would anyone want to document such a thing?' 'this absurd drawing' 'such tripe' 'such irrational doodles' 'slovenly thinking.'

'It upset him,' agreed Anna.

'But do you have any idea why?'

'I think, maybe, because it was art,' Anna told me in the fluent English she learned from her uncle, adding: 'Sometimes he thought of it as art, other times he said it was just junk. And he used to say that "no one needs art" or "there is no place for art nowadays." Look, you can see in his albums.'

Anna pulled from the desk a collection of ancient black-paper photo albums, each neatly numbered and dated. Within each album is an assortment of amateur photographs, watercolors, and captioned images cut out of newspapers and magazines and arranged according to categories. Ott called these albums his "research," and Anna says that whenever he found an error in a caption, he would immediately write to the publication concerned. He seemed especially satisfied if he found more than one error—a multiplication of falsity.

I counted 37 numbered albums, many of which are only partly filled. Most appear to be thematic, with images from vastly different eras meeting in a categorical no-man's-land such as 'Maps' or 'Mythology' or 'Winter.' There is an album labeled 'Mirages' that is filled with pictures of twilight scenes in tones of faded blue and purple and black and sepia. 'Catacombs and Mazes' features palaces and pleasure gardens, while 'The Language of Scents' contains mostly ads for postwar luxury goods. Unlike typical photo albums, which are filled sequentially and thus remain placidly chronological, these albums give the impression that Ott added to them according to some internal logic, excavating and backfilling to give each page its own history and meaning within his larger enterprise.

In addition to notating errors in captions, Ott has added his own remarks next to some of the images in neat white ink:

Art just gets in the way.

Women have multiple souls. [*This is not a compliment; Ott's judgments of women are notably harsh; in the commentary he writes that women 'require no heads' since their chief role is to be inseminated by men.*]

One prefers a good wallpaper.

One sees one's face.

If one were religious, art would be worrisome.

One's intelligence speaks for itself.

The album notations set me wondering again about Ott's idiosyncratic use of the archaic third person pronoun "one": 'One notes that...' 'One notices...' 'One asks...' Was this perhaps a habit of mind taken over from the German "*man*" into English? Or did it reflect some need to dissociate himself from authorship of the commentary, and thus perhaps from the manual itself?

I ask Anna: 'Do you know why he disliked—or maybe the word I want here is "resisted"—art so much?'

'He said to me once something like this: "It's good for nations when they are in their infancy but we aren't children anymore".'

'But somewhere in the commentary—I don't know if he wrote this himself or he found it somewhere—he says: "Through art we attune our eyes to all that is beyond hearing."'

Anna shrugged. 'I think he was—he wished it had never come to him. It made him almost angry. He would put it away sometimes for weeks at a time, but then he couldn't keep away from it.'

'Is it true, what he says, that he found it in the back of a file cabinet at the Deutsche Reichspost where he worked?'

'I don't know. I don't. He had it with him one day when he got home from work. But I have wondered...' she paused.

'Did he make it himself?'

'Not that, but—did he add to it? He was always cutting things out for the albums, and between the albums and the manual, it is hard to tell one thing from another.'



I ask how, in that case, Anna had decided what to send to the ICI and what to keep; and she tells me that she sent everything Ott wrote about in his commentary, as well as all the loose items except the albums and some private letters.

‘Why did you send it to the ICI? How did you know about it?’

‘My uncle had a friend—he had very few friends, but there was an inventor he knew before the war, a man named Arbogast. I don’t know much about him, I never met him myself. I remember my uncle saying that he experimented with some sort of flying machines. And this man Arbogast, he knew Mr. Schmidt in the United States. I think that is how my uncle found out about Mr. Schmidt’s collection. He said to me: “I want Schmidt to have it.” He said this to me more than once; he would say, “Send it all to Schmidt, this is a man one can trust.” I found Mr. Schmidt’s address in his things after he died.’

‘Did you read it before you sent it? Or did your uncle ever show it to you?’

‘I did look at it, yes, but after my uncle died. He didn’t like me to look at it.’

‘What did you—what do you think of it?’

‘I thought my uncle was mistaken in believing it was all one thing. That it was supposed to be *something*. I think it was one of those jumbles that the war—all sorts of things from all different drawers that got thrown together. Just another—just an accident.’

‘Do you have any idea *why* he wrote the commentary? What got him started?’

‘No, I—no—I think he saw it as a responsibility. Well, one he hardly accepted, but still—I really don’t know.’

Although Ott rarely discussed the manual with Anna, she said that the one subject he was most likely to bring up was the question of who made the manual. Was it all done by one person? Was that person playing a game with him, Ott? Had the manual actually been made *for him*? It was as if being able to put a name to the ghostly contributors would settle something, would finally authorize the manual in his eyes.

I mention that I suspect Ott may have willfully misidentified certain of the manual pages. I’m thinking in particular of a weather map in which Ott claims to see a pornographic drawing, and a certain ‘miniature landscape’ in which Ott sees two men fighting in surf, entirely invisible to the ICI research team.

‘Perhaps he was trying to correct the painting,’ observed Anna. ‘Like the captions. Putting in what should have been there.’



The ‘miniature landscape’ in the Manual of Lost Ideas in which Ott saw human figures, as photographed by John Galt.

the wet sands sink to each step / tracing a known past / to a clean future

The question of what should have been echoes in Anna's account of Arturo's parentage and childhood. The Ott family to which Arturo and Anna belong can be traced back at least to the 16th century and spread out from Switzerland across middle Europe over the succeeding centuries.³ Anna told me that Arturo's grandfather (her own great-grandfather) was a 19th century Swiss dramatist and doctor named Arnold Albert Ott. Born in December 1840 to Louise, a milliner, and Hermann, a lathe operator who drank heavily, he was sent to live with an uncle when the family began to disintegrate. Years later, Arnold Albert wrote a memoir in which he recounted Hermann's own bitterness about having been sent to an orphanage because he was thought to be uncontrollable. The involuntary separation of children from their parents is a leitmotif of the Ott family, a kind of ongoing exodus repeated within succeeding generations.

Arnold Albert and his wife Anna Maria had six children and four grandchildren. But Anna's uncle claimed there were also two unacknowledged grandchildren: himself, born Arnold Arthur Ott (and only later known as Arturo) and his twin sister Bertha Virginie. Arturo believed (but was never able to conclusively prove) that he and Bertha were the illegitimate offspring of Arnold Albert's son Georg Hermann, who never married. The twins were adopted and raised by Ott cousins in Germany; Arturo always asserted that they were sent away shortly after their birth in 1907 because—as with their grandfather and great-grandfather—the family could not cope with them.

The identity of the twins' mother remained a mystery that preoccupied Arturo for many years. He propounded a number of different theories of the matter but leaned toward two in particular. Arnold Albert had no less than three sons named Georg, one of whom (Georg Hermann) may have been the father of Arturo and Bertha. Another of the three, Georg Albert, was married twice. He had one son, Arthur Felix, by his first wife, Bertha, and no children by his second wife, Rosina. Arturo Ott believed that he and his sister had been born illegitimately to one or the other of these two women.

'It didn't matter that they could not both be true,' Anna Ott told me. 'He would turn in circles. I don't mean argue—if you made an objection to one, he would agree and switch to the other. But I think what he really wanted, I don't know why, he wanted to be Arthur Felix's brother. He used to call him "my other brother," which always seemed to me odd because there was no "other brother," just his "sister."'

'Your mother, Bertha.'

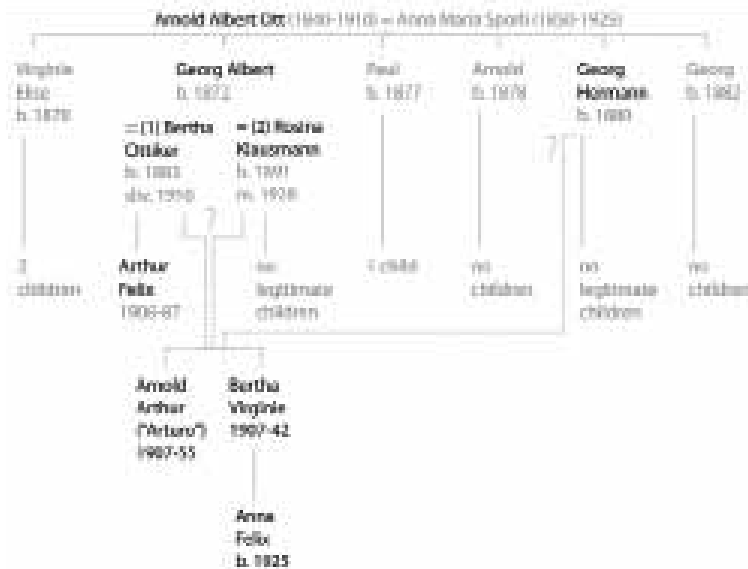
'That's right.'

'Did he know Arthur Felix, the real Arthur Felix?'

'*Nein*. But he acted as if he did. Once when we were talking about him—the name, Felix, it means happy—he said, "Of course he's happy, he's the oldest. But I should have been the oldest." Arthur Felix was a year older than the twins, you see.'

Anna herself believed that Arturo's speculations about who his mother was 'could hardly be correct,' although she did accept that the twins' father was someone in Georg Hermann's generation of Otts whose identity—given the passage of time and the losses of two intervening wars—simply could not be established beyond doubt. And she pointed





to Arturo’s genealogical digging as the origin of his nickname. Arturo and Bertha were closer even than is usual with twins because both were sent to live in England as children during World War I, where they learned English along with an aversion to the company of strangers. Later, in the 1930s, when the twins lived apart for several years, they supported the difficult separation by writing each other often, and Arnold Arthur, as he was then still known, took to signing his letters “Arthur in parvo”—Arthur in miniature or little Arthur—that is, not the happy older Arthur he ‘should have been.’ Eventually this shortened and shifted through “Arthur parvo” to “Arturo.” It was then, as an adult, that Arnold Arthur began insisting on being called Arturo, despite (or perhaps because of) the quite un-Germanic sound of the name.

‘People think I’m German. But Ott is a Swiss name,’ Ott liked to say.

Arturo Ott’s fixation on bastardy and incest threads throughout his commentary on the *Manual of Lost Ideas*. He quotes the proverb that ‘Truth is the daughter of Time,’ but goes on to add: ‘Her bastard half-brother is Death, and their incestuous offspring is History.’ Anna Ott has more than once wondered whether Ott intended this as an epitaph for their whole family. For she, too, in line with Ott traditions, does not know who her father was and was not raised by her own parents. Since her mother—Arturo’s twin sister Bertha—was 18 and unmarried when Anna was born in 1925, Anna was left to be raised by the twins’ foster parents. Anna knew her mother only from fleeting visits until 1939, when she went to stay with Bertha and Arturo in the Berlin flat they shared and was caught there by the outbreak of the war. After her mother disappeared during one of the Allied bombings in the brutal winter of 1942, she lived with Arturo for the rest of his life. Anna thought Arturo might know who her father was since he was always close to his twin sister, but she was never able to get the truth from him. In part this was because, during the last ten years of his life, Arturo Ott refused to acknowledge her as his niece, or indeed as any relation of his at all.

*There is no middle part of life; one passes from young to old with nothing in between.
Nothing to be lived; nothing to be said.*

One day in late 1943, Ott came home from work and instead of greeting his niece as usual, he stared at her and said, 'What are you doing here?' 'I live here, uncle.' 'I'm not your uncle.' 'It's Anna, I'm Anna.' 'But you're not.' '*Also, wer bin ich?*'

Anna remembers her uncle seeming enormously perplexed by this question. Eventually he just said, 'Please, whoever you are, just get me a cup of tea.' She did as he asked and left him to sit quietly, thinking he must be exhausted from overwork. He said nothing more that evening—they seldom talked much even in normal times—but before he went to bed he said suddenly, 'Perhaps they have removed my brain.' The next day she was his niece again and he acted as if nothing unusual had happened.

In the two years that followed, similar episodes recurred at intervals. Once, Arturo thought Anna was a houseguest and said, 'I wish Bertha had warned me that she had a friend coming.' (This was more than a year after Bertha disappeared during the air raid.) Once he thought Anna had come about a problem with their ration cards, and once about a problem with the files he was in charge of at work. 'He thought I had come to accuse him of stealing from the files,' Anna told me. 'He kept saying that the document, I don't recall what it was exactly, was just misplaced. "It would all be put right in the morning".'

'Do you think he was referring to the Manual of Lost Ideas?'

'I don't know. I did wonder about that.'

This anxiety about work is a notable theme in Ott's commentary, which is filled with more or less oblique allusions to his job with the Deutsche Reichspost—which he refers to in the commentary as his "Ministry"—and to the recent war:

One can admit that fingerprints in the Ministry were more often mixed up or lost than should have been the case in a well-run office.

Will history acquit one of having cooked the books in the Ministry?

No one likes to sit with their backs to the files or, since the War, the windows.

Why must they be lined up? one asks. That is how it is done. Why not leave them as they lie? It is not done.... Terrible things are done every day but IT is not done.

War is not won or lost, it just moves on.

They say war is an art, war is a science, war is inhuman; but they lie. War is the very essence of the unscientific, inartistic human, sloppy, miserable, disorderly, impulsive, and badly paid.'

One is tired of skulls.

Perhaps the most intriguing of these entries is one that seems to conflate Ott's despair over his missing sister with what must have been equivocal feelings about his imposter niece:



Almost imperceptibly these young girls of perhaps 10 years vanished during the War. One year they'd be running down Unter den Linden with their schoolfriends; a year later standing with their mothers in bread lines [*as Anna did with Bertha before she disappeared*]; another year and one would look for them in vain. They have finally come back, but as changelings, ugly and rude and shrilly complaining. Yet who can deny that this is justice? Those who were sent to die have come back as a plague on all hearts.

By the summer of 1945, Ott's rejection of Anna as his niece was complete. He referred to her as his housekeeper, seeing her solely in terms of the role she had played in his household for the past several years. He accepted that she looked like his niece, but he also saw differences: housekeeper Anna was a little thinner. Or her eyes were a different color. Or she dressed differently ('Well, we all did after the war,' Anna remarked drily). She didn't act like herself. She made the tea too strong. She rearranged the furniture when Ott was out of the house ('But I never did; it would have upset him too much').

Apparently Ott thought the "real" Anna must be lost, but he never made any serious effort to find her. He sometimes seemed to think housekeeper Anna knew where the "other" Anna was and would ask 'Have you seen Anna lately?' or 'When is she coming back?' Once Anna came home and found that Ott had boxed up a batch of her own clothes and left a note telling her to send them to Anna "because winter is coming" (it was then late July).

Although Ott made it clear to housekeeper Anna that he believed her true motive in staying with him was to gain possession of the apartment after his death, he never tried to make her leave. He simply reminded her regularly that the apartment had been left to the "real" Anna in his will. He carefully hid his money and his identity papers from her, but on a daily basis he was, she says, reasonably courteous and even kind, although often irritable.

Once in a great while—Anna can recall three instances of this kind—Ott would come home and tell housekeeper Anna that he thought he had seen his sister Bertha crossing the street or turning into a doorway, and he would always say that he must go out and look for her tomorrow; but he never reported seeing the "missing" Anna this way. And the next day he would simply go about his usual occupations.

VI SOSIES

Men afloat in a milky sea, dark heads bobbing along, and all with their backs turned to the dreamer.

Anna did not find out what was wrong with her uncle until years after he died, when she read an article in a newspaper about a disorder called Capgras delusion. Sufferers from this delusion believe that someone they know—usually a close friend, a relative, or a spouse—has been replaced by an exact double. Originally called '*l'illusion des sosies*' (illusion of doubles), it was later renamed after French psychiatrist Jean Marie Joseph Capgras, who first described the syndrome in a 1923 paper.⁴ Capgras's patient, 'Mme M,' believed that certain people she knew—principally her husband and daughter—had been replaced by imposters so often that she'd lost count. She termed them *sosies*, using a

French word derived from Plautus's play *Amphitryon*, in which the god Mercury assumes the appearance of Amphitryon's servant Sosia; thus expressing both aspects of looking alike: the doubling and the imposture.⁵ Mme M believed that she was herself a changeling who had been switched at birth and was really an Argentinian heiress named Princess Mathilde de Rio-Branco.

During World War I, as her daughter was replaced over and over by new doubles, Mme M had the further delusion that the displaced children had been shut up in cellars below the streets of Paris—she could hear their screams as she walked around.⁶ In those catacombs were also to be found others of the war's missing: lost regiments, mutilated soldiers.⁷ These accounts echo with another that haunts me, this one from the next great war: a 1943 account of a refugee from the Hamburg firebombing who was seen many miles and days later still carrying her dead child, a burnt *sosie* from whom she could not bear to be parted.⁸

I myself first came across Capgras delusion some years ago in the context of yet another war: the story of a Frenchman who believed that his own head had been cut off and replaced with that of a double. Logic places this story during the Terror, but that may not be the case since I have not so far been able to backtrack the story to its source. I think of this man, whoever he was, as the image of the writer, and I think also of Ott writing his endless sentences beginning 'One thinks...' and 'One sees...', as if he is struggling to speak through some other mouth and see through some other eyes. And it occurs to me also that if the classic doubling metaphor of the 19th century—doppelgangers and evil twins—is a problem of surplus, two where there should have been only one, then Capgras delusion may provide the classic doubling metaphor of the 20th century, since it is a problem of deficits: the one who is doubled is still one. Half of the pair is always absent. 'One notices...', writes Ott, and it may be that with that spectral 'one' he speaks also for his lost twin.

Capgras delusion is not very common—fewer than a thousand cases have been described so far—but it seems somehow less strange than many more common mental disorders. One woman who thought her roommate had been replaced by an imposter



intent on killing her also threw away her health insurance card because she suddenly did not recognize herself in the ID photograph anymore.⁹ Was the latter truly a delusion or a moment of acute clarity? We are all faced, sooner or later, with a photograph's failure of resemblance, a moment when a sidelong glance at a mirror reveals a total stranger. It may be that Mme M felt peculiarly helpless to hold back time's displacements for her young daughter, who already lived under a temporal shadow as the sole survivor of five siblings.

Oddly familiar though it seems, Capgras delusion arises from brain abnormalities, especially damage to the right rear hemisphere, where face recognition tasks are performed. It is often seen in conjunction with other neurological disorders, such as schizophrenia and paranoia. It is interesting in this regard that Ott may have suffered from a mild form of obsessive-compulsive disorder: many entries in the commentary record things that Ott has counted or measured. His commentary on a stylized drawing of orange flowers consists mainly of such enumerations: 'There are eight large and 14 small flowers.... four major stems (three of which are broken) and two minor stems...between 13 and 32 minor [bloomless] stems.' A penciled addition in capital letters, 'COUNTING AGAIN!,' indicates that he both recognized and was bothered by this habit.

The most plausible current hypothesis for the underlying mechanism was put forth by the neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran in 1998.¹⁰ Ramachandran postulates a disconnect between the areas of the brain involved in the ability to perceive and recognize faces (such as certain areas of the inferior temporal cortex and hippocampus), and other areas (especially the amygdala) that are involved in managing emotional responses to visual stimuli. Normally, the sight of a familiar face triggers an affective response, which is itself subject to a double-check (you would be surprised if, out of the blue, you felt extreme hostility at the sight of a friend's face). If the expected affective response is not produced, a contradiction is set up between the "familiarity" of the face and the "unfamiliarity" of the emotional response.





In other words, the person with Capgras delusion is put in the position of making the following inferences: since I usually feel a certain way when I see my mother, and I don't feel that now, this can't be my mother. On the other hand, she looks exactly like my mother; therefore she must be an imposter. This also helps explain why Capgras delusions always involve someone close to the sufferer: a feeling of indifference is normal towards most people and would not set up a sense of internal contradiction.

Pondering this, I found myself wondering if Ott's Capgras delusion played any role in his equivocal relationship to the *Manual of Lost Ideas*: was it for him, metaphorically speaking, somehow an imposture of art? It looked like art, but it wasn't really art? Or the reverse: It was real art, but it didn't look like it was supposed to? (If the latter, it would be more like a syndrome that is often considered the mirror image of Capgras: Fregoli delusion, the belief that someone you know is hidden under a disguise.)

Individuals with Capgras delusion are aware of the implausibility of their perceptions. They will agree that it is absurd that an imposter could have replaced their wife—in Ott's case, their niece—but they will cling to the idea despite all evidence offered to the contrary and in the face of all attempts at dissuasion. They appear curiously detached about the delusion; they don't try to convince their hearers, nor do they try to provide a reasonable explanation for how the imposture came about. Moreover, they don't always act on their delusion in predictable ways: Arturo Ott was typical in not trying to drive Anna out of his apartment once he decided she was an imposter.

Anna did not seek psychiatric help for her uncle mainly because she was afraid he would be institutionalized and she believed he was better off at home, even if she could only be his housekeeper. Also, any mention of seeking help greatly upset Arturo, who was certain that if he went to see any kind of mental health specialist ('they're not real doctors'), they would take away his identity papers and substitute a double for him. Ott, himself, would be made to disappear. Ott guarded his identity documents carefully because he "knew" this was the only thing keeping such a substitution from being made.

In the months before a heart attack ended her uncle's life at the early age of 48 (his heart and lungs had been greatly weakened by several bouts of pneumonia and other illnesses before and during the war), Anna made several attempts to get her uncle to sign a power-of-attorney so that she could act for him in legal matters. However, Ott would not give housekeeper Anna such powers; and he was in any case averse to signing documents. Whenever the question of a signature arose he would say, 'It is not necessary. I have always had a good character.'

VII LOST

*Good boys stay at home
bad boys love to roam;
catch me later, catch me never
now I'm gone I'm free forever.*

Early in 1955, Arturo Ott began to tire frequently and stopped working on his commentary. One evening as he was walking to the kitchen, he suddenly jerked his head around sharply and said, 'Who's there?' or 'Who's that?' When Anna heard nothing more, she came into the hallway and found Arturo looking in the mirror and swinging his head back and forth in a curious way. 'Why is he staring at me like that?' 'Who?' 'That—person.' 'It's just you, that's your reflection. Look, I'm there too.' There was a moment's silence and then Arturo turned away saying, 'Tell them to go away. They can't have any.'

Later, he asked: 'When did they put in that window?' Realizing it would be futile to argue with him, Anna said she would see if the building manager could take it out. The next day when she got home from work she discovered all their mirrors stacked in the hallway, faces turned to the wall.

Afterwards, every few weeks through the remaining months of his life, Arturo would say, 'Those refugees weren't very smart. I hope they're gone.' Or: 'Have those people moved out yet? They were bad types.' And Anna would just say, 'They've gone home.'





All uncaptioned images are from Arturo Ott's albums except for the photograph of Ott himself. They are reproduced here courtesy of Anna Ott. I am deeply grateful to the Institute of Cultural Inquiry for making my trip to Berlin possible, and to Anna Ott for her generosity with her time and for her patience with my many questions.

- 1 Italicized texts at the beginning of each section are quotes from Arturo Ott's commentary on the Manual of Lost Ideas.
- 2 Preliminary research results pertaining to the Manual of Lost Ideas (including numerous excerpts from the Manual and Arturo Ott's commentary) were published in *Benjamin's Blind Spot: Walter Benjamin and the Premature Death of Aura*, ed. Lise Patt (Topanga, CA: ICI Press, 2001).
- 3 More about the extensive Ott family can be found online at <linkage.rockefeller.edu/ott/OttFamText.html>.
- 4 Jean Marie Joseph Capgras and J. M. J. Reboul-Lachaux, 'L'illusion des "sosies" dans un délire systématisé chronique,' *Bulletin de la Société de Médecine Mentale*, 1923. Other information about Capgras delusion comes from the following sources, among many others. Philip Gerrans, 'Refining the Explanation of Cotard's Delusion,' in *Pathologies of Belief*, ed. Coltheart and Davies (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Andy Hamilton, 'Against the Belief Model of Delusion,' in *The Philosophical Understanding of Schizophrenia*, ed. Chung, Fulford, and Graham (Oxford University Press, 2004); Henry M. Kwok, 'A Case Report of Capgras Syndrome.' <unzi1.lib.hku.hk/hkjo/view/21/2100488.pdf>; J. R. Shea, 'The Fragile Orchestra,' *Pennsylvania Gazette* web site, 1998: <www.upenn.edu/gazette/0398/neuro.html>; and Ben Watson, 'Capgras Speculations,' 2004: <terriblework.co.uk/capgras_speculations1.htm>.
- 5 M. David Enoch and Hadrian N. Ball, *Uncommon Psychiatric Doubles* (London: Arnold, 2001).
- 6 Richard Klein, 'Delusional Misidentification Syndromes,' *Mental Online* vol. 12, 2003: <www.mental-nls.com/MentalOnline12.pdf>, 22.
- 7 Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 73.
- 8 Described by Frederick Reck in a diary entry for Aug. 20, 1943, as quoted in W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003), 29.
- 9 'Capgras Syndrome in the Modern Era: Self Misidentification on an ID Picture.' Letters to the Editor, Canadian Psychiatric Association web site: <www.cpa-apc.org/Publications/Archives/CJP/2005/January/letterGrignon.asp>.
- 10 V. S. Ramachandran and S. Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 158-173.