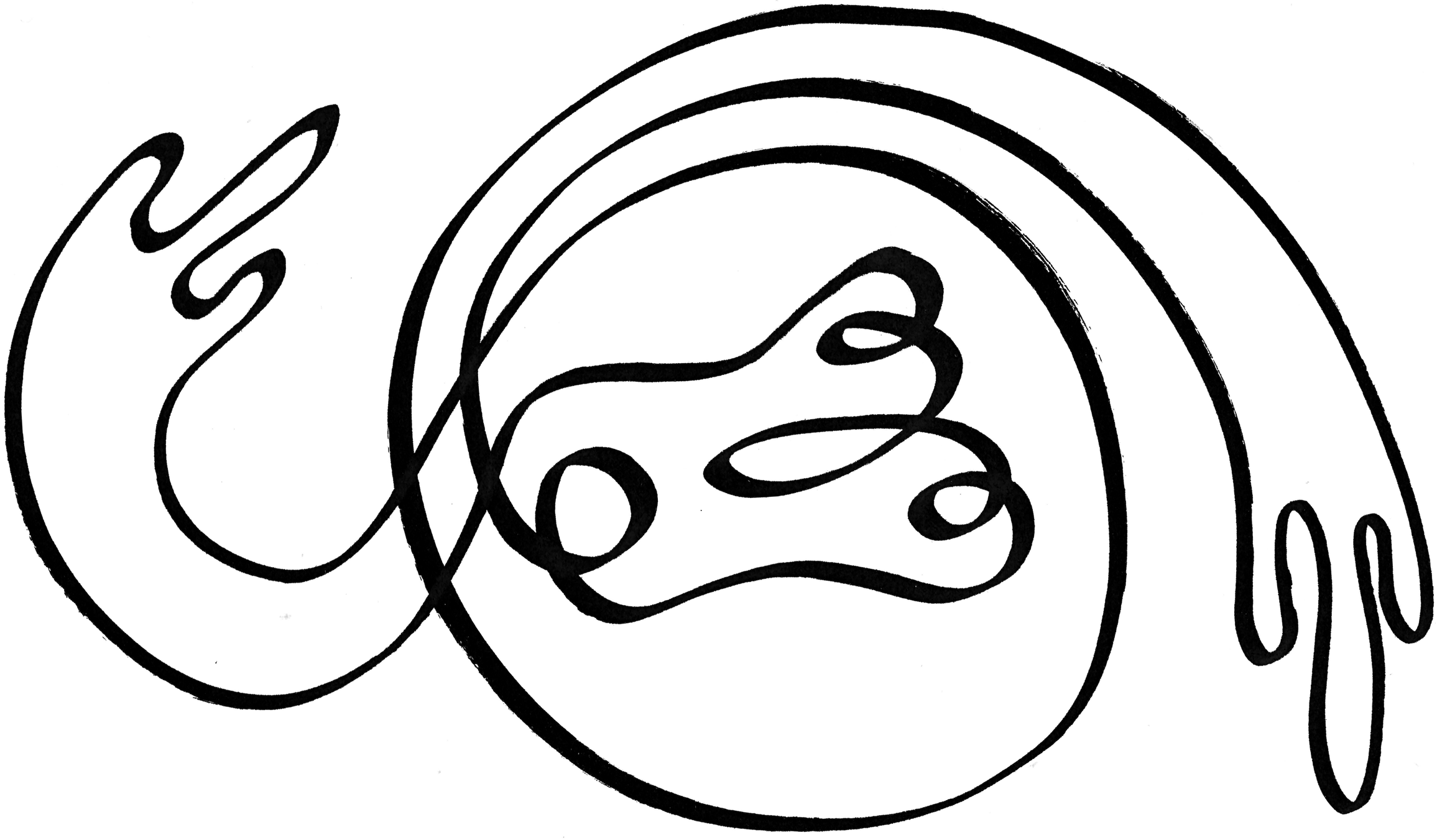

# Notes Penetrated by a Spiral

## 1. Imperfect Spiral

"There´s always an armed struggle; the thing is that, sometimes, they´re the only ones with the arms. What we need is to get our own..." Julio Garcia-Espinosa, *The Adventures of Juan Quin Quin* (1967).

Two files of rebels on horseback charge towards us across the plains and split the screen of the Yara Cinema in two. The horsemen in the right line change direction, coiling themselves backwards in a levogyre to join up with the very end of the left-hand column. Both groups form a stampeding *Spiral Jetty*[1] that unwinds and flies off the left side of the screen. Only the empty prairie remains. Juan Quin Quin, the leader of the guerrillas, bursts on screen in a medium shot and looks at the camera; his horse rears and we watch as its front legs, with their fur, bones and hooves, form their own fledgling spirals.

It would be best to end our search there; otherwise the film would become one big light-flooded screen peppered with coils, something dreamed up by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy. The first spiral alone is enough to justify these notes. Like all spirals (fledgling as they may be), it is an omen and a premonition—at least of itself (any one segment births the factor that modulates the whole); the equestrian choreography which opens *The Adventures of Juan Quin Quin*[2] (Julio García Espinosa, 1967) alerts us.

What we will witness as spectators is a Marxist film, a cinematic inquiry into the dialectic development of society, the awakening of class consciousness and the revolutionary function that the director himself will refer to two years later as "imperfect cinema": *A new poetics for the cinema will, above all, be a "partisan" and "committed" poetics, a "committed" art, a consciously and resolutely "committed" cinema—that is to say, an "imperfect" cinema. An "impartial" or "uncommitted" (cinema), as a complete aesthetic activity, will only be possible when it is the people who make art.*[3]

What García-Espinosa was left with, then, was the possibility of making art that is atavistic, what he called ¨transitional¨: the movie reel as a spiral of contradictions, distance, suicides, estrangement. A spiral that begins, in *Aventuras de Juan Quin Quin*, with a single night.

In the darkness, Juan and his men light fire to cotton rags tied to the tails of two cats who run, frightened, in circles that grow wider and wider, until they have set fire to the entire cane field. The flaming crops are the property of a North American who domineers the region. It is day now, and Juan Quin Quin hides from the mayor and the army squad that has been hunting him since last night. He buries himself in a hole covered by a bundle of dry cane to survive the fire the guards have set in the field with the express purpose of cornering him. He survives the blaze and sticks his head out of the hole to laugh to the camera. The screen goes black, and we see forty eight white spirals surrounding the words "Juan Quin Quin en la paz [Juan Quin Quin in times of peace].¨ Dressed as an altar boy, Juan stamps communion wafers in the courtyard of a Catholic church.

A grumbling priest chastises him, warning him with a *Watch it!* to not feed the leftover host dough to the beggar boy loitering on the other side of the church´s gate, which is made up of iron spirals. The priest, indifferent to the child´s hunger, furiously asks Quin Quin: *This is how you repay our father? Standing up there in church and at night going to the cock fights, standing up there in church and at night going to the circus?...In a small town there are no secrets!: Altar boy and circus man! Altar boy and trapeze artist! Altar boy and commie! Ashamed! You should be ashamed!* This is how we learn what Juan does with his days of peace in the Third World. This harmonious sequence is followed by others showing his days as a rebel, first in a skirmish with the town's mayor and the interests that influence local politics. Then we see him radicalized in the struggle against the system which has oppressed him. The structure of the film-turned-essay on the revolutionary hero is based on these parallel sequences of peace/war arranged in the form of narrative loops or spirals. *The character doesn't need a grandiose consciousness-raising moment in order to react when confronted by life, he doesn´t need consciousness-raising as if it were a bath in the waters of the Jordan [...] to come out of them pure and, only then, become a revolutionary*[4], director Julio García-Espinosa says of Juan Quin Quin in an interview. Through this Brechtian montage, which eludes the linear cause-effect presentation of the facts which García-Espinosa speaks of, he mitigates *...the traditional consciousness-raising moment characters [...] the usual tendency to justify their ethics for the audience [...] We believe that, today, positive characters in real life have no need for justification, or perhaps even our loyalty or encouragement.*[5] With *The Adventures of Juan Quin Quin* Julio, a Cuban Tatlin, erects his very own monument, coils his very own spiral.

## 2. Horn and Spiral

A spiral is always atavistic, a geometry of the vestigial. Its drawing or proposal in space is a sentence. As if one point had been condemned to perpetually follow the route of some ancestral golden ratio. A spiral, if it is algorithmic and cylindrical, can be understood as a circle that flees from the plane where its base rests. If it is conical, in theory, the spiral gives rise to a destination, it searches for an end. Even so, it is no stretch of the imagination to think of all conical spirals as infinite; we could even assume that they are more prone to be infinite than cylindrical spirals. The conical helicoids cross the universe of the visible to peer into the theater of miniscule material and traverse it in pursuit of the limit. Spiral horns, by this logic, are infinite.

The shape of horns, which some biologists presume to be atavistic organs, is in most cases that of gnomic or algorithmic spirals. The spiral horn, then, corresponds to a two-fold atavistic or vestigial condition: that which lies in the geometry of the spiral and that of the horn as an organ.

In the horn (or antler), the atavism links the "weapon" function that the organ held in the past with the new "decorative" function through which it conserves its presence in a variety of horned animals. Having primarily become a secondary sex characteristic, the horn functions as ostentation, a manifestation of self-sufficiency: I am such a successful specimen that I can dedicate resources and energy to this sculpture I carry on my head.

The horn is, like every spiral, a prophecy of the victory of energy.

## 3. Mollusk and Spiral

Even when they suffer deformations, shells are always successful as forms, not at all like what occurs with the deformations that befall other living bodies. For example, when the *Polymita*, due to a genetic affectation, develops a scalariform shell, it gives us quite the show, pure speculative geometry, spatial adventure; there is nothing grotesque about its deformation. And the shell's habitant is not a sick monster with twisted genes, mournful and solitary, but rather an architect with a feverish imagination. This outcome has to do with the spiral function, a bit like a curse that can only worsen, twist itself more, in the best sense of the word.

Snails gnaw on bones. They make their shells out of the fine dust they extract from our skeletons. One could say that they inhabit our ruins. Curiously, shells, in the majority of species, are dextrorotary, that is, they wind clockwise, in the same direction as the hands on our clocks. Few are the species, or members of a species, that curl their shells in the opposite direction, left. During the first few decades of the twentieth century, the *neotype*, or replacement type specimen, was a 1684 etching of a levorotary *Strombus Lucifer*. In the 1950s the illustration was rejected as the type specimen when someone discovered that the direction of the shell had been inverted in the printing, when the inked figure was transferred directly from the etching plate to the page. The symmetrical reflection between the etching plate and the printed surface results from a rare mating of two *Helix pomatia*, one dextrorotary and one levorotary, captured in the act by photographer Peter Leonhardt.

The snail's masculine sexual organ, located next to its female sexual organ (and closer to the eyes than is usual), projects itself straight out in a line to fertilize its mate's eggs. In turn, the latter also inserts its erect penis. Snails don't beat around the bush when it comes to passing on their genes. The mollusk's penis is an offshoot that escapes the spiral. It reminds us of the geometric relationship between helix and straight line, the old interpretation of how Stalin wished to interrupt the course of Lenin's spiral by slicing a line through it as a shortcut. Some species of snails penetrate their mates with a straight alkaline dart which provokes hormonal conditions hospitable to copulation. If you haven't witnessed snails mating, you may wish to refer to the Robert Smithson piece *Pierced Spiral* (1973), which perfectly illustrates the geometric-erotic formulation in question.

## 4. "Espiral espirada"[6] (reused)

As the Spanish captain circled the rock, he was jumped by a native in a dizzying movement. The conquistador caught on when he saw the three lightning bolts of pink mother of pearl that slashed the flesh on his face, the skin of his forearm raised in defense and his chest, now sliced up and airless. With his hands sunk inside the interior of the spirals of two giant *cobos*[7], the indigenous prizefighter—five centuries before Teófilo Stevenson, also from Las Tunas—cornered his opponent to deliver a lethal jab to the neck with the right *cobo*. This final blow sucked the life breath out of the Spaniard with a pop. As he fled, the Indian threw the left *cobo* into the Caribbean. He climbed up onto the dunes and blew into the bloodied *cobo* on his right hand. The tip of the shell, where he pressed his panting lips, had been cut off for this very purpose. A spiraling groan, deep like an island wail, issued from the shell and invaded the coast, and this is how he notified his brothers of his victory.

Three hours later, sleepy after binging on cobo and crabs, the Taino prizefighter rolled up a leaf of *cohoba* (tabacco) around a lump of dried strips of the same plant. He wraps the outer leaf, dry but flexible, tightly and cuts the edge with a mother-of-pearl colored shard of conch he found already sharp. He lights the vegetable spiral on one end with an ember and absorbs the smoke, expelling it slowly with his breath. To not miss anything he follows the smoke with his nose. He repeats the action various times, until letting himself be consumed by the dizziness. As he falls into the abyss of sleep he hears the far off groan of a conch. His brothers are calling him, but not even the strongest, most agile native of Cuba can interrupt his nap. A plant (tobacco) and a beast (the *cobo*), both spirals, filter the air we breathe on the island. Only the air of another leftward spiral can break the calm and accelerate the respiratory rate of the Caribbean. It was the most ungodly of enemies before the arrival of the colonizers. They do not name it; they are afraid that if they do, the wind they exhale from their mouths would swell up, giant, and lay waste to the island. One must not call on the hurricane.[8]

## 5. Vector and Spiral

In the year 1978, Ettore Sottsass, the Italian designer and architect, designed an ornamental pattern for plastic laminate for the maker of synthetic coverings Abet Laminati, which he called *Bacterio*[9]. The laminate, a background flooded with small sinuous shapes, reminds us of microscopic photographs and illustrations of the spirochete bacteria *Treponema Palludum*, the infectious agent that causes Syphilis. With this paradoxical design, which attempts to equate the pulchritude of plastic with an infested or dirty surface, Sottsass appealed to the potential of a vector agent to introduce critiques of the market into the market itself. *Bacterio*, as a model for expansion or a contagion, was employed primarily as a covering on many of the objects designed by the group called Memphis, which Sotsass led until 1985. In the early eighties, in the homes of the rich, plastic laminate covering was only used in the kitchen or the bathroom, and in these cases only because of its hygienic and sanitary properties. The creations of Memphis, consumed as luxury items, mixed plastic laminate with marble, boards made of sugar cane chaff with black poplar, aluminum with mother of pearl—they were mestizo Trojan horses in the interiors of the living rooms and bedrooms of the economic elite. This radical insertion of plastic laminate, which Sotsass punctuated by pairing it with a field of bacteria (possibly that of Syphilis), harks back to the Bauhaus era when aluminum pipes, common in bicycle handlebars, invaded the production of domestic furniture, a terrain up to that point reserved for more traditional or higher-quality materials such as wood, bronze and marble.

Memphis' collections were an attack on capitalist complacency. They didn't take the shape of a proletariat revolution, but these objects questioned the hierarchies of materials, habits of consumerism and the antiquated opinions that reigned in the bourgeois habitat.

In recent studies it has been suggested that Syphilis pandemics have been associated with urban growth[10], as if syphilis had been disseminated through bodies in the city, right next to the decorative patterns on the floors of their homes. *Bacterio*, Sottsass' field of spirochetes, foreshadowed this hypothesis.

## 6. Spiral

The primary mechanism in a vinyl LP record is the Archimedean spiral. The groove traps the needle on the edge such that it will travel a distance of approximately a quarter of a mile. The needle covers this distance until the spiral runs out, which it does, but its true movement is angular and in a straight line. From the outer edge of the disk towards the center of its rotation, the needle runs, pulled by a force comparable, in its mechanical cosmos, to the force of gravity. On this scale, where reality is hidden from sight, a logic and series of relationships that we may well extrapolate to other spheres are set into play. This is what Henry David Thoreau did in *Walden* when he described a bloody battle royal between two species of ants (red and black) that he found on his patio. With these thoughts trapped by and then dragged into the little tornado that is a record on a turntable, attentive to the microscopic scale and with Thoreau for company, we discover the way in which the needle, in its journey around the spiral, meanders. Yes, the sapphire needle is a saunterer, just like Thoreau himself! We can even observe in the needle's walk the same inclination that the wild philosopher mentions in Walking (in his case, the inclination was towards the west, or the southwest). The needle, here Thoreau the *saunterer*, also moves with a tendency towards the west of the turntable, as if towards the future (like, as Thoreau states, others before them, mentioning Columbus's journey West to Castilla). The planet shortening distances, rotating in the opposite direction, from the west to the east, confronting the sensitive hiker with the savage weeds, just like the vinyl record confronts the wild furrow with the sensitive sapphire needle.

I am trying to set these notes free from this spinning, microscopic scale they have fallen into, but it is impossible. The words are plastered down, as if they were spun up in a black tornado, an infinite vinyl drawing. The record in question is *physical graffiti (or synthesis we knew about)* (2016), a William Cordova album. The record, like any good tornado, collapses Archimedean spirals, sapphires, ants, two buildings in Chicago associated with Transcendentalism: the building that housed the Young Lords Organization (840 Armitage) and the Robie House (5757 S. Woodlawn Ave), designed by Frank Lloyd Wright between 1908 and 1909. I train my ear when an ant kicks the microphone, it doesn't matter if it's red or black.

-Ernesto Oroza, 2016

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1. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970.
2. Movie based on the book *Juan Quinquin en Pueblo Mocho* (1963), by the Cuban poet and folklorist Samuel Feijóo (1914-1992).
3. Julio García-Espinosa, *Por un cine imperfecto*, 1969 (Translated by Julianne Burton in Jump Cut, no. 20, 1979, pp. 24-26).
4. *Aventuras de Juan Quin Quin*. Guión de Julio García-Espinosa. Ediciones ICAIC, 2014. P. 160
5. Idem P. 152
6. Octavio Paz used the image of the "espiral espirada" [exhaled spiral] for his translation of "aboli bibelot" from Mallarmé's *"Sonnet in –ix"*. Regarding the creation of this sequence, he has stated that *"'espiral espirada' is a defendable choice, to a certain extent, because the conch shell is shaped in a spiral and is a wind instrument: inhalation and exhalation, appearance and disappearance. Emblem of the sea, music, and the ebb and flow of human life."* Interview with Octavio Paz. Rita Guibert, *Pasión critica*, Barcelona, Seix Barral, 1985, p. 81.
7. Common name in Cuba for the conch, also known as Strombus lucifer, Strombus gigas or Lobatus (strombus) gigas, a giant coast-dwelling snail.
8. On the cover recreation of a Taino hurricane representation. Use this poster as a hurricane charm (Ernesto Oroza, 2016).
9. Since its creation *Bacterio* was sold retail by Abet Laminati. It has recently been taken off the laminate market.
10. Lobdell, John E. and Douglas Owsley. *The Origin of Syphilis. The Journal of Sex Research*. Vol. 10, No. 1 (Feb., 1974), pp. 76-79.