

Belgian surrealism

Surrealism manifested itself in the interwar period in French-speaking Belgium mainly through two distinct groups, the Brussels group, around Paul Nougé and René Magritte, and the Hainaut group, around Achille Chavée and Fernand Dumont. In the immediate post-war period two ephemeral experiences took place: revolutionary surrealism, founded by the Belgian Christian Dotremont and the French Noël Arnaud, and the Haute Nuit group, which attempted to relaunch surrealist activity in Hainaut. Subsequently, the members of the former groups found themselves in various groupings or collective publications, more or less close to the surrealist spirit: Cobra, La carte d'après nature, Naked Lips, Phantomas, Mixed times, Daily-Bul, Edda, The Vocal, etc.¹.

Relations with the Paris group

Belgian surrealism stands out compared to other countries where surrealist groups were created (Czechoslovakia -Surrealist group, Romania, England, United States, etc.) by the often conflicting relationships maintained with the Breton group. While elsewhere, any disagreement with the founding group leads to abandoning any direct reference to surrealism (Paalen, for example), in Belgium, criticism of the Parisian group will often be made in the very name of surrealism, such that some others are considering it.

The content of these disagreements will vary over time, but certain consistencies are found from one group to another: distrust regarding the inclusion of surrealism in literary history, doubt regarding of automatism (Nougé) or on the contrary the return to pure automatism (Cobra).

To this is added an often political dimension, the commitment of the numerous Belgian surrealists, particularly with the Communist Party of Belgium, being a source of friction and ruptures.

History of surrealism in Belgium

Early established in the country, surrealism never really left it, through a wealth of journals and attempts at regrouping, often ephemeral. Unlike Paris or Prague, in Belgium there was no continuous, long-term collective adventure, but a fragmentation and great variability of expression. The conflicts of people, perspectives or opinions make approaching the history of surrealism in this country all the more difficult since the traces left behind - often minimalist journals, marginal works, etc. - have rarely retained the attention of art and literary historians, which moreover would not have displeased most.

This results in the impossibility of drawing up an exhaustive and coherent portrait of surrealist activity in Belgium, any more than it is possible to hope to set clear and objective limits to what, in this uneven proliferation, relates or not surreal adventure. This is simply a matter of giving an overview, as detailed as its subject.

The two centers of surrealism (1924-1940)

The Brussels group

The series of leaflets entitled Correspondance, by Paul Nougé, Marcel Lecomte and Camille Goemans, whose publication began in November 1924, is generally considered to be the first manifestation of surrealism in Belgium. However, it was in the years that followed that episodic collaborations began to take place between Parisian and Brussels surrealists, while the group expanded, with the entry of André Souris, ELT Mesens and René Magritte, then by Louis Scutenaire and Irène Hamoir.

Apart from the three issues of the magazine *Distance*, in 1928, the Brussels surrealist group did not publish its own magazine. Their participation in surrealism is indicated by the signing of various leaflets from the Paris group (*The revolution first and always*², *The Aragon Affair*, *Violette Nozière*), through special issues of magazines bringing together Belgian and French surrealists (*Varieties: Surrealism in 1929*, *Documents 34* (Editor-in-chief: ELT Mesens): *Surrealist intervention*) and finally by their participation in the first surrealist exhibition of international scope, the exhibition *Minotaure* organized at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in May and June 1934, by ELT Mesens, with the help of Breton and Éluard, under the patronage of Skira editions. On the other hand, Camille Goemans moved to Paris in 1925, where René Magritte joined him from 1927 to 1930.

Despite these numerous collaborations, the group's membership *Correspondence* to surrealism is not without reservation. Before joining Nougé and Goemans, Magritte and Mesens had published a review, *Esophagus* of Dadaist spirit and provocative towards the Parisian-surrealists³. The Dadaist spirit never quite left Brussels surrealism, and it is perhaps to him that we must attribute this "humor" specific to this variant of surrealism, a humor of which people were somewhat wary André Breton⁴. —

But it was above all Nougé, who gradually became the group's theoretician, who showed, at least at this time, serious reluctance towards automatic writing, then placed at the center of surrealism by Breton, and who is worried about the growing institutionalization of surrealism⁵. —

The Brussels surrealists were also distinguished by their interest in music, an art disdained by the Paris group. This interest is marked, among other things, by the presence of the composer André Souris. The latter was expelled in 1936 for having led an artists' mass. He nevertheless participated after the war in the journal *Naked Lips*⁶.

After the war, Nougé and Magritte refused to participate in the regrouping attempt made by Achille Chavée, because of the presence of Christian Dotremont, whom they criticized for an article laudatory of Jean Cocteau. Magritte, supported among others by Nougé, Joë Bousquet and Marcel Mariën who joined the group in 1937, outlines his theory of *Surrealism in full sun*, accentuating the divorce with the Parisian surrealists.

The Brussels group will still be found, almost complete, in the review *The map from nature*, directed by Magritte. Magritte's gradual break with his former friends, Nougé and Mariën, put an end to the existence of the group proper, although each of its members would continue to appear in various publications.

Main animators

- Pol Bury (1922-2005) painter and sculptor
- Paul Colinet (1898-1957), writer
- Goemans (1900-1960), writer
- Jane Graverol (1905-1984), painter and creator of collages
- Irène Hamoir (1906-1994), writer
- Marcel Lecomte (1900-1966), writer
- René Magritte (1898-1967), painter
- Marcel Mariën (1920-1993) writer, poet, essayist, editor, photographer, filmmaker, collages and unusual objects.
- ELT Mesens (1903-1971), writer and creator of collages
- Nougé (1895-1967), writer
- Louis Scutenaire (1905-1987), writer
- Max Servais (1904-1990)
- André Souris (1899-1970), musician
- Raoul Ubac (1910-1985), painter, engraver and sculptor
- Suzanne Van Damme (1901-1986), painter

The Hainaut group

Founded by Achille Chavée, Albert Ludé, André Lorent and Marcel Parfondry, the Louviérois group Rupture did not initially intend to intervene on an artistic and literary level. It was under the leadership of the Mons poet Fernand Dumont that he moved more clearly towards surrealism. Dumont, a former classmate of Chavée, discovered surrealist writings in 1931, met Éluard and Breton in September 1933 in Paris, and was in contact with the people of Brussels through his friend Max Servais⁷. —

On April 13, 1935, under the leadership of Dumont and ELT Mesens who came as guests, the group adhered to surrealism⁸. He then collaborated with the Brussels group, co-signing the *International Bulletin of Surrealism* and the exclusion of André Souris. _____

At the end of October, with the help of Mesens, the group organized an international exhibition of surrealism in La Louvière which met with little response. Immediately the notebook appears *Bad weather 1935*, intended to be annual, and which André Breton very favorably welcomes⁹. But in 1936, Achille Chavée left for Spain, joining the international brigades. His absence leaves the group to its dissensions, between "politicians" and "poets", making it incapable of publishing *Bad weather 1936*.

When Chavée returned, other dissensions, more clearly political, undermined the group: in Spain, he sat alongside the communists in the revolutionary courts, and he was accused of having participated in the execution of the non-Stalinist activists, anarchists and Trotskyists in particular. The tensions

between Trotskyists (Ludé, Lorent, Havrenne) and Stalinists (Chavée, Dumont, Simon¹⁰) caused the breakup of the group when André Breton asked them to join the FIARI (International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art) which he had just founded with Léon Trotsky.

1er July 1939, Dumont and Chavée and with the help of Benjamin Pavard, joined by Armand Simon, Pol Bury, Constant Malva, Marcel Lefrancq, Louis Van de Spiegele and Lucien André, founded the *Hainaut Surrealist Group*, provoking the negative reaction of ELT Mesens, a member of FIARI since 1938, and who considers the quality of *surrealist* and the Stalinist commitment of Chavée. War occurs, which puts an end to dissensions and activities in Hainaut¹¹.

Main animators

- Pol Bury (1922-2005), painter and sculptor
- Achille Chavée (1906-1969), writer Fernand
- Dumont, (1906-1945), writer Marcel
- Havrenne (1912-1957), writer Marcel
- Lefrancq (1916-1974), photographer André
- Lorent (1901-1981)
- Constant Malva (1903-1969) Armand
- Simon (1906-1981), designer Louis Van
- de Spiegele (1912-1971)

Position lights (1940-1945)

During the war, the activity of Belgian surrealists was divided between Paris, where several collaborated with the group *La Main à plume*¹² and Brussels, where René Magritte and Raoul Ubac published the review *Collective Invention*, which will only have two issues, in February and April 1940. This review will have as its main collaborators ELT Mesens, Marcel Mariën, Louis Scutenaire, Irène Hamoir and the members of the surrealist group in Hainaut¹³.

Under the occupation, two exhibitions, one by Raoul Ubac in May 1941, the other by René Magritte in 1944, both prefaced by Paul Nougé¹⁴, are denounced by the collaborationist press, among others through the writings of Marc Eemans, former short-lived member of the Brussels group from 1927 to 1929¹⁵.

In Hainaut, after participation in *Collective Invention*, all activity is suspended: Achille Chavée, wanted for his political activities, must go into hiding and Fernand Dumont, deported in 1942, will die in captivity in 1945¹⁶.

Short-lived revivals (1945-1950)

Revolutionary surrealism

The poet and painter Christian Dotremont discovered surrealism during the war and participated in the French magazine *La Main à plume*. Back in Brussels, he founded the magazine *The two sisters*, open to wide participation. In the no3, he signs an article *Revolutionary surrealism*¹⁷. After several meetings, in which many members of the former groups from Hainaut and Brussels participated, the birth

of the new movement was recorded on May 17, 1947, and a manifesto, written by Dotremont and Jean Seeger, incorporated the various remarks of the participants¹⁸. In June, the leaflet *No quarters in the revolution!* signifies the definitive break with the Breton group.

Noël Arnaud, one of the hosts of *The pen hand*, having resumed contact with Dotremont, brought together several artists, including Yves Battistini and Édouard Jaguer. The latter reads Dotremont's article. The participants nevertheless avoid attacking Breton, but he believes that he and the surrealist-revolutionaries "do not have the same conception of revolution, truth, righteousness and honor"¹⁹. The break with Breton is consummated by the leaflet *The cause is heard*, signed by the Belgian and French surrealist-revolutionaries.

If the importance given to political commitment is one of the causes of this rupture, the fact that, for all surrealist-revolutionaries, this commitment means alignment with the theses of the French and Belgian communist parties, constitutes the real point of no return.

The hope of reconciling surrealism and communist parties will be short-lived. The PCF, always attached in art to *socialist realism* summons Noël Arnaud and Edouard Jaguer, summoning them to put an end to their activities. They comply²⁰. The end of surrealist-revolutionary activity in France did not immediately signal the end of the movement, officially dissolved in 1950. But in reality, it gradually merged into a new movement, founded by two surrealist-revolutionaries, Asger Jorn and Christian Dotremont: CoBrA.

Main animators in Belgium

- Christian Dotremont (1922-1979), writer and creator of logograms
- Achille Chavée (1906-1969), writer
- Paul Bourgoignie (1915-1995), poet and designer

Cobra

Main animators in Belgium

- Christian Dotremont (1922-1979), writer and creator of logograms
- Pierre Alechinsky (1927), painter and engraver
- Joseph Noiret (1927), Poet and critic

High Night and Diagram

Main animators

- Achille Chavée (1906-1969), writer
- Marcel Lefrancq (1916-1974), photographer
- Armand Simon (1906-1981), designer
- Louis Van de Spiegele (1912-1971)

- Remy van den Abeele (1918-2006), painter and sculptor

Extensions, ruptures and dispersion (1950 to the present)

Mixed times

Main animators

- Jane Graverol (1905-1984), painter André
- Blavier (1922-2001), poet and writer Robert
- Willems (1926-2011), painter

Naked Lips

Main animators

- Marcel Mariën (1920-1993), writer, editor and creator of collages and objects
- Jane Graverol (1905-1984), painter
- Paul Nougé (1895-1967), writer Roger Van de
- Wouwer (1933-2005), painter André Souris
- (1899-1970), musician

Phantomas

Main animators

- Joseph Noiret (1927), poet and critic
- Marcel Havrenne (1912-1957), writer
- Marcel and Gabriel Piqueray, writers
- François Jacqmin (1929-1992), poet
- Pierre Puttemans (1933-2013) poet and architect
- Théodore Koenig (1922-1996) poet

Daily-Bul

Main animators

- Pol Bury (1922-2005), painter and sculptor
- Marcel and Gabriel Piqueray, writers

- André Balthazar, poet

Edda

Main animators

- Jacques Lacomblez (1934), painter, designer, poet
- Marie Carlier, (1920-1986)
- Jacques Zimmermann (1929), painter, decorator and designer
- Jacques Matton (1939-1969), painter, designer and poet

The Vocal

Main animators

- Tom Gutt (1941-2002), writer, creator of objects and publisher
- Yves Bossut (1941), painter
- Gilles Brenta (1943), painter Claudine Jamagne,
painter and illustrator Roger Van de Wouwer
- (1933-2005), painter

Movie theater

Some surrealist films have made history in the history of Belgian cinema.

For example, in 1929, inspired by the poet Pierre Bourgeois, the filmmaker Charles Dekeukeleire directed *detective story*, a surrealist-inspired collage-montage whose tangled story is shot with a subjective camera²¹. The detective will use a camera as an investigative instrument. The camera thus becomes the main character and its subjectivity, the essential subject.

The same year, Count Henri d'Ursel, born in Brussels, toured Paris, a bit like Louis Feuillade, *The Pearl*, based on the screenplay by the poet Georges Hugnet, a story with multiple twists and turns not devoid of eroticism.

A little later, Ernst Moerman, poet and friend of Éluard, also fascinated by Feuillade's episodic films, offers a dreamlike and subversive vision of the formidable hero of Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain, with *Mr. Fantômas*, a silent medium-length film which premiered at the Palais des beaux-arts in Brussels on October 12, 1937, when it was also screened there *An Andalusian dog*.

Marcel Mariën produced and directed the film in 1959 *Imitation of cinema*, in which Tom Gutt participates, an erotic-Freudian farce against the Church, which provokes scandal and the intervention of the public prosecutor's office in Belgium and will be screened clandestinely in France²² after being banned by the censors.

His follower Jan Bucquoy made the film Camping Cosmos in 1996 (with, among others, Jacques Calonne) which gives an imaginary vision of Belgians during their vacations.

Filmography

- 1970: *Introduction to Surrealism in Belgium* by Lucien Deroisy and Jean Dypréau
(Production of the Cinema Service of the Ministry of National Education, Brussels)

Artists often associated with surrealism

- Rachel Baes (1912-1983), painter
- Marcel Delmotte (1901-1984), painter
- Paul Delvaux (1897-1994), painter
- Marc Eemans (1907-1988), painter
- Jane Graverol (1905-1984), painter

Notes and references

1. Xavier Canonne, *Surrealism in Belgium*, 1924-2000, Mercator Fund, 2007.
2. Nougé adds the sentence: *It is important to see in our approach only the absolute trust that we place in a certain feeling that is common to us, and specifically in the feeling of revolt, on which the only valid things are based.* Paul Nougé, *Fragments*, Éditions Labor-Fernand Nathan, 1983, p. 251.
3. Cannon, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
4. *"This very particular kind of humor - at the same time I delight in it and I worry about it. [...] I worry about it, because it tends to subordinate everything else and, therefore, reduces the chances of poetry which are certainly also on the side of gravity."* Letter from André Breton to René Magritte, in Canonne, *op. cit.*, p. 196.
5. *"I would really like those of us whose names are starting to stand out a little, to erase them. They will gain a freedom from which we can hope for much."* Letter to André Breton, partially cited by him in the *Second manifesto*. André Breton, *Complete Works I*, Pléiade, NRF Gallimard, 1988, p. 821 and 1619.
6. Cannon, *op. cit.*, p. 224.
7. Dumont will remain the Belgian surrealist closest to Breton, to the point of being the only one, all groups combined, to embark on the exploration of objective chance dear to Breton, through his work *The dialectic of Chance in the service of desire*, written between 1938 and 1942, but only published in 1979. (Surrealism in Mons and Brussels Friends, p. 54-55).
8. Cannon, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
9. *A magazine like "Mauvais Temps" really responds, in all areas, to my greatest desire. [...] You must at all costs speak more often.* (André Breton, letter to Fernand Dumont, cited in Xavier Canonne, *op. cit.* p. 35).
10. The latter more out of friendship for Chavée than out of a real political choice. See *Surrealism in Mons and Brussels friends*, catalog of the exhibition held at the Museum of Fine Arts in Mons, 1986, p. 31.
11. Xavier Canonne *Surrealism in Mons and Brussels friends*, p. 21-37.
12. including Raoul Ubac and a newcomer, Christian Dotremont (see below), who settle temporarily in Paris
13. Adam Biro and René Passeron (under the direction of) *General dictionary of surrealism and its surroundings*, SA Book Office, Friborg (Switzerland), 1982, p. 218.

14. the 2^e under the pseudonym Paul Lecharentais.
15. Biro, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
16. *All is said. Games are made. Everyone is hastening towards their death. But me, I who am perhaps only one of the position lights of the eternal ghost ship, how, above the shipwrecks and the sad wrecks, how could I not try to make a sign to you, you whose every image is a star, whose each poem is a brilliant victory of life?* Fernand Dumont, last message to Achille Chavée, January 6, 1941 in Canon, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
17. Canon, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
18. Françoise Lalande, *Christian Dotremont, The inventor of Cobra*, Éditions Stock, 1998, p. 95.
19. Françoise Lalande, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
20. Canon, *op. cit.*, p. 54-56.
21. *Cinema: one hundred years of cinema in Belgium* by Jean Brismée, Éditions Mardaga, 1995, page 51.
22. During the opening of the Phases exhibition dedicated to the Edda painters, Jacques Lacomblez, Jacques Zimmermann and Marie Carlier, at Ranelagh, then, in the same place, at the same time as Viridiana by Luis Buñuel, also banned.

Magazines and editions




- 1924 -**Correspondence**(Goemans, Magritte, Nougé, Lecomte), 26 leaflets, November 1924 - September 1925, Brussels; Facsimile collection, Didier Devillez publisher, Brussels, 1993.
- 1925 -**Esophagus**, (Magritte, Mesens), one issue, March 1925, Brussels; Facsimile collection, Didier Devillez publisher, Brussels, 1993.
- 1926 -**Married**(Goemans, Mesens, Nougé), four issues, June 1926 - 1927, Brussels; Facsimile collection, Didier Devillez publisher, Brussels, 1993.
- 1928 -**Distances**(Goemans, Lecomte, Magritte, Mesens, Nougé), three issues, February-April 1928, Paris; Facsimile collection, Didier Devillez publisher, Brussels, 1994.
- 1929 -**The Proper Sense**(Goemans, Magritte), five leaflets, February-March 1929, Paris; Facsimile collection, Didier Devillez publisher, Brussels, 1995.
- 1933 -**Editions Nicolas Flamel**(Feel)
- 1934 -**Documents 34**(Mesens), 1934-1935, Brussels; Facsimile collection, Didier Devillez publisher, Brussels.
- 1935 -**Bad weather**(Chavée), a number, La Louvière; Facsimile collection, Didier Devillez publisher, Brussels, 1993.
- 1940 -**Collective Invention**(Magritte, Ubac), two issues, February-April 1940, Brussels; Facsimile collection, Didier Devillez publisher, Brussels, 1995.
- 1941 -**The magnetic needle**(Mariën), Antwerp. 1945
- -**Answer**(Goemans), one number, Brussels.
- 1945 -**The Earth is not a vale of tears**(Mariën), a notebook, Brussels; Facsimile collection, Didier Devillez publisher, Brussels, 1993.
- 1945 -**The blue sky**(Mariën, Colinet, Dotremont), nine issues, February-April 1945, Brussels.
- 1945 -**Public salvation**(Dotremont and Jean Seeger), Brussels. 1946
- -**The Supercurrent**(Dotremont), one number, Brussels.
- 1946 -**Lazy morning**(Dotremont and Jean Seeger), one number, Brussels. 1946 -
- **The Unfaithful Mirror**(Mariën, Magritte), 1946 - 1947, Brussels.

- 1946 -**The two sisters**(Dotremont), three issues, 1946-1947, Brussels. 1946 -
- **The Supercurrent**(Dotremont), one number, Brussels.
- 1947 -**Little Jesus**(Noël Arnaud and Christian Dotremont), eleven issues between 1951 and 1963, Paris.
- 1948 -**International Bulletin of Revolutionary Surrealism**(Dotremont), one issue, January 1948, Brussels.
- 1950 -**The loaded leaf**(Magritte and Mariën), one issue, March 1950, Brussels.
- 1952 -**The Map from Nature**(Magritte), ten issues and two special issues, 1952-1956, Brussels.
- 1953 -**Phantomas**(Théodore Kœnig, Joseph Noiret and Marcel Havrenne), sixty-three issues, 1953 - 1980, Brussels
- 1954 -**Naked Lips**(Mariën), twelve issues, 1954 - 1958 (first series); twelve issues, 1969 - 1975 (second series), Brussels.
- 1957 -**Daily-Bûl**(André Balthazar and Pol Bury), 14 issues, 1957-1983, La Louvière
- 1958 -**Edda**(Jacques Lacomblez), five issues, 1958 - 1964, Brussels
- 1960 -**After God**(Tom Gutt and Jean Wallenborn), 1960 - 1967, two issues in 1961 and 1962, Brussels
- 1961 -**Rhetoric**(Magritte and André Bosmans), 1961 - 1966, thirteen issues, Tilleur-lez-Liège.
- 1963 -**Vendonah**(Tom Gutt), 1963 - 1964, twenty-nine issues, Brussels.
- 1963 -**Strata**(Dotremont), 1963 - 1966, seven issues, Brussels. 1968 -**The**
- **accomplished fact**(Mariën), 135 issues, 1968 - 1975, Brussels. 1968 -**A**
- **paper gateway**(Tom Gutt), Brussels.
- 1972 -**The Vocal**(Tom Gutt), October 1972, [250 issues in December 1987], Brussels.

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📖 : Source used for writing the article

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- *René Magritte and Belgian Surrealism*, texts by Elle et Lui [Irène Hamoir and Louis Scutenaire], Marcel Mariën, Marc Dachy and Philippe Robert-Jones, Brussels, Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, 1982, 322 p.
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- *Surrealism in Mons and Brussels friends*, exhibition catalog, Mons 1986.

- *The surrealist movement in Brussels and Wallonia (1924-1947)*, Paris, Wallonie Brussels Cultural Center, 1988. 
- *Irène, Scut, Magritte & C°*, Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, 1996, 558 p. 
- Françoise Lalande, *Christian Dotremont, the inventor of Cobra*, Stock, 1998.
- *The Belgian surrealists*, "Europe", no912, Paris, April 2005.
- Xavier Canonne, *Surrealism in Belgium, 1924-2000*, Mercator Fund, Brussels, 2006 (ISBN 90-6153-659-6); Actes Sud, Paris, 2007, 352 p. (ISBN 9782742772094). 
- Christian Dotremont, *Complete poetic works*, Mercure de France, 1998, 549 p. Pascale
- Toussaint, *I live in Louis Scutenaire's house*, Plumes du coq, Weyrich, 2013. Achille Béchet
- & Christine Béchet, *Walloon surrealists*, Edition Labor, Brussels, 1987.

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- [List of reissues of magazines, published by Éditions Didier Devillez, presenting their covers \(http://www.devillez.be/dada.htm\).](http://www.devillez.be/dada.htm)
- ["The Belgian Surrealists", in "Europe", no912, April, Paris, 2005: presentation, "Homage to the incomptables" by Pierre Vilar and summary of the issue, on the magazine's website \(https://www.europe-revue.net/produit/n-912-surrealistes-Belgians-April-2005/\).](https://www.europe-revue.net/produit/n-912-surrealistes-Belgians-April-2005/)
- [Extracts and photographs from some of the surrealists of Brussels \(http://home.scarlet.be/~tsj05752/textes/prefacerevue.html\).](http://home.scarlet.be/~tsj05752/textes/prefacerevue.html)
- [Revolutionary Surrealism \(http://perso.orange.fr/karine.guihard/\) Karine Guihard.](http://perso.orange.fr/karine.guihard/)

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