

Surreal Dreamscapes: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades

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Abstract

This article examines Benjamin's theoretical writings on the dream as a crucial aspect of his engagement with Surrealism. Given his ambivalence towards Surrealism's potential for mystical thinking, it addresses Benjamin's encounter in the *Arcades Project* with the work of Louis Aragon, and its resonances with the writings of vitalist philosopher Ludwig Klages, whom Benjamin had known in his youth. The article traces the ways in which Benjamin's dream theory formed part of his understanding of the revolutionary project of Surrealism, only to lose its critical force in his later 1930s work, and it suggests ways in which Benjamin might have developed this project more successfully.

Sometimes, on awakening we recall a dream. In this way rare shafts of insight illuminate the ruins of our energies that time has passed by.

These lines are typically Benjaminian. In a sense, they might stand as a brief exposition of a critical insight to which he would attempt to give concretion in the *Arcades Project*. However, they are taken not from Benjamin's mature work, but rather, from the unpublished early text 'The Metaphysics of Youth,'¹ written in 1914. Appropriately, Benjamin (above all writers) is stubbornly resistant to any smooth, teleologically-driven linear chronology of intellectual development. Likewise, Susan Buck-Morss uses the analogy, again peculiarly apposite in Benjamin's case, of 'development' in the sense of photography: 'Time deepens definition and contrast, but the imprint of the image has been there from the start.'² Hence, I ought to qualify at the outset the sense in which it is possible to speak of Benjamin's interest in the dream as a 'legacy' from Surrealism. The nature of this relationship is not akin to a printer leaving an impression on a passive surface, as though Benjamin uncritically assimilated a series of previously alien positions.

Nor incidentally (by way of excursus) can we describe unproblematically his relationship with Surrealism as a 'dialogue', since with respect to the mainstream Surrealists at least, there appears to be scant evidence that any sustained personal links were developed, and no sustained attention appears to have been paid to Benjamin's work. Things are slightly different with the circle around Bataille in the Collège de Sociologie and *Acéphale*. Of course, the very fact that we possess Benjamin's notes towards the *Arcades Project* is in no small part down to the efforts of Bataille in securing their safe hiding in the vaults of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Benjamin was drawn within the orbit of the short-lived anti-Popular Front group *Contre-Attaque*, in which Breton and Bataille managed to work alongside each other for a time, but, in itself, this appears to have been a somewhat temporary and insubstantial arrangement of convenience. Benjamin, for his part, had read the work of Bataille and his circle quite widely, recognising a number of shared concerns, although I am not aware if any corresponding assessment or direct consideration of *his* work by Bataille or his colleagues exists. Quite a direct role in Benjamin's work was certainly played by Pierre Klossowski, who was employed on the French translation of the 'Work of Art' essay, but this is said to have been a



frustrating experience for all concerned.³ In the end, relations between Benjamin and Bataille's circle appear to have become somewhat strained,⁴ perhaps as a consequence of the former's deep scepticism towards what he regarded as their politically suspect surrender to mysticism and ecstatic intoxication. However, whilst it is certainly not out of the question that a certain exchange of ideas or influences took place, to suggest that a properly dialogical relationship existed between Benjamin and the Surrealist movement (more widely conceived) seems to be putting it a little strongly.

Rather, I am proposing that it should be characterised as an important 'critical encounter': a designation that helps to convey serious intellectual engagement, without implying the uncritical acceptance of Surrealist tenets or, indeed, minimising the significance of Benjamin's previous work. The first fruits of this encounter can be traced back to as early as 1925, when in a letter to Rilke, Benjamin remarked:

In particular what struck me about surrealism...was the captivating, authoritative, and definitive way in which language passes over into the world of dreams.⁵

Thus, we can see that Benjamin's reception of Surrealism from the beginning circled around a fascination with their treatment of the dream. In a sense, though this is to beg the question, rather than answer it. *Why, we are still left asking, do such ideas strike him as being so significant?*

For although Benjamin himself privately put forward the argument that Louis Aragon's work *Le Paysan de Paris (Paris Peasant)* 'stands...at the very beginning' of the *Arcades* research,⁶ this intimation of a new direction in his work should perhaps be read in dialectical tension with the passage in the *Trauerspiel* study in which he argues that the process of thinking 'tirelessly[...]makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object.'⁷ What lies behind the sheer intensity of Benjamin's reading of Aragon (he related that: 'I could never read more than two or three pages in bed at night before my heart started to beat so strongly that I had to lay the book aside')?⁸ On the one hand it could reflect excited anticipation of future possibilities, but on the other (as Benjamin appears to recognise retrospectively), it painfully struck a nerve: the excitement with which he consumed Aragon's work, was simultaneously 'a warning' of the years which, in Benjamin's words, would have to be invested 'between myself and such a reading', if he was to 'work through' the legacies of the past.⁹ Why did Aragon's writing evoke such a response, so fraught with danger as well as opportunity?

As Sigmund Freud had pointed out, intellectual history had mostly hitherto been divided between an Enlightenment scorn for the dream as mere mental detritus, and inversely, its unqualified celebration in the eyes of the Romantics. While far from being liquidated, such approaches would at least now have to contend with a certain cross-contamination of categories between 'dream' and 'waking reality'. In Benjamin's essay of 1925 entitled 'Dream-Kitsch', his first published treatment of Surrealism (then at the height of its first flourishing), he stresses that this inter-penetration of the two realms is not a 'natural' constant, but a historically specific phenomenon.¹⁰ Kitsch objects, the banal by-products of culture subsumed under the logic of industrial production, are assimilated into dreams, thereby obscuring the oneiric 'blue horizon' of the Romantics, with a 'grey coating of dust'. Correspondingly, as Marx first diagnosed with his analysis of the commodity fetish, at the height of



capitalist modernity, 'ordinary' commodities become invested with a magical, quasi-religious and dreamlike aura. As such, Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* offers a remarkably prescient evocation of the arcades as a world where the everyday is saturated with the marvellous, a lyrically intense dream-world in which arises the basis for a 'mythology of the modern'. Hence, the arcades appear as:

...places where men go calmly about their mysterious lives and in which a profound religion is gradually taking shape. These sites are not yet inhabited by a divinity. It is forming there, a new godhead precipitating in these re-creations of Ephesus...¹¹

The earliest part of the text, 'The Passage de l'Opéra' dates from 1924, the same year as the 'First Manifesto of Surrealism', and is very much animated by the same concerns. The pseudo-rational repudiation of dream-life is countered by its positive affirmation, a recognition that everyday life is permeated with qualities of fantasy and imagination which, it is argued, can only be repressed at the expense of a seriously diminished quality of human experience.

Benjamin, on first reading the 'First Manifesto', could hardly fail to be struck by a brand of Romantic idealism which he himself had once espoused. For, as early as 1914, he had written:

For the sake of what prelude do we cheat ourselves of our dreams? With a wave of the hand we push them aside into the pillows, leave them behind, while some of them flutter silently about our heads. How do we dare carry them into the brightness of the day, as we awake? Oh, into the brightness!¹²

For Benjamin, therefore, the re-emergence of 'dream' in Surrealism was inevitably evocative of his identification with the Youth Movement. This was still a profoundly painful memory: it had ultimately been a traumatic experience in which an epoch of wistful dreaming had been abruptly awoken by the outbreak of the First World War. In this context a note from the *Arcades Project* files is particularly revealing:

Awakening as a graduated process that goes on in the life of the individual as in that of the generation. Sleep its initial stage. *A generation's experience of youth has much in common with the experience [Erfahrung] of dreams.*¹³ [my emphasis]

Hence the intensity of Benjamin's fascination with Surrealism's re-iteration of dream experience can be seen as doubly symptomatic, both of the traumatic nature of this intellectual identification, *and* of the unrealised desires which this repressed episode yields. Another way of expressing this, is to say that, as with the conception of the 'dialectical image' itself, Benjamin's critical negotiation with Surrealism represents a re-configuring of the old in order to make apparent new possibilities. Yet there is always the danger that such a utopian potentiality will turn out to be only the compulsive repetition of past traumas. This is why the critical stakes are so high. If the forces that prevented Benjamin's expectations from being fulfilled previously once again emerge victorious from the encounter in the 'time of the now', then the painful experiences of the past will be replayed once more.

The extreme ambivalence with which Aragon's work was received was bound up with its failure to distinguish itself from trends which Benjamin had run up against in the past: the mysticism



and vitalism which festered in certain strains of Romanticism. In his passive acquiescence to the dream realm, Benjamin detected serious dangers. In his notes he stressed:

Delimitation of the tendency of this project with respect to Aragon: whereas Aragon persists within the realm of dream, here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening. While in Aragon there remains an impressionistic element, namely, mythology (and this impressionism must be held responsible for the many vacuous philosophemes in his book), here it is a question of the dissolution of 'mythology' into the space of history.¹⁴

Behind this assertion of the need for distance with respect to Aragon, we might well detect, as John McCole has suggested, a hidden interlocutor in the shape of vitalist philosopher Ludwig Klages.¹⁵ The latter figure, on the periphery of the Youth Movement and whom Benjamin had met in 1914, had written a phenomenology of dream-life arguing that it was essentially rooted in the archaic, 'original totality' of experience. Essentially, for Klages, the dream represented a pre-conceptual mode of pure 'Schauen' or seeing which is bound up with a passive surrender of the ego alongside a characteristic feeling of distance and regress. Here, where the boundaries between the location of ego and the object of contemplation are dissolved, arise ephemeral glimmerings of the 'Urbild' or primal image. As Richard Block explains:

...in its pure non-relationality, in the mode of seeing freed from the conceptual paraphernalia as *Geist*, the ...*Urbild* has '*ein[en] leuchtende[n] Schimmer*', a nimbus or numinosity, or as Benjamin might refer to it, an aura. The nimbus results from calling into prominence the distance of the image in relationship to the nearness of the perceived object.¹⁶

Crucial to the realm of *Schauen* is the ecstatic release from the structured world of *Geist*. Dreaming thus becomes figured as the intoxicated reception of a timeless world characterised by the rhythmical fluctuation of appearances.

Hence, like Aragon, Klages celebrates dreaming as a repository of mythic consciousness. In Klages this is coupled with an extreme hostility to progress as *such*, in which all human history had manifested a catastrophic tendency to break from the 'circular path of events', a kind of pagan state of worshipping the magically given, in favour of the endless strivings of an instrumental-purposive relation to a cosmos now conceived as fundamentally alien. Hence, for Klages, the whole course of Western civilization represents an endless process of decay, in which the archaic consciousness is sundered and man begins:

...to sacrifice an *interwovenness* in the imagistic plurality and inexhaustible fullness of life for the homeless *standing above things* of a *spirituality* detached from the world.¹⁷

History, from this perspective, needs to be dissolved back into the mythic. It was precisely such a vitalistic ideology that had led large parts of the Youth Movement into welcoming the First World War under the guise of a mythical heroism and sacrifice, which so appalled Benjamin in its irrational validation of the merely empirical under the guise of the archaic. Moreover, such mystical philosophies had not been exhausted after the war: rather, as Benjamin would have been only too well aware, they continued to find an echo for their highly reactionary ideas, one which would play a key part in Nazi ideology.



How then, to wrest from Aragon's work (and from his own earlier affiliations) a moment of validity, away from the clutches of the dark forces which threatened to overpower text and past alike? How could this desire find a critical methodology equal to it, one which would allow history to be free from premature foreclosure? Benjamin's gambit, characteristically, was to step into the strengths of his opponents' arguments. With respect to Klages, this meant accounting for the role of the image in human perception while trying to cut the ground from under the feet of those who would see dreams *not* as the 'royal road to the unconscious', so much as a 'one-way street' back to the archaic mists of time.

In Benjamin's view, the account of Klages had one significant merit, namely (contra the historicists) that time is not conceived of as rigidly linear, but the past continues to pulsate into the present, under conditions of 'ecstatic anamnesis', while the present is not a simple cumulative addition to a fixed store of past experiences, but a radical *displacement* of the past. Benjamin used the same term as Klages had, *Rausch*, to describe the sense of intoxicated trance with which such 'intercourse with the cosmos', was said to be enjoyed by ancient societies. Far from dismissing such a claim as myth, as perhaps we might have expected, Benjamin goes so far as to argue that:

...it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us, and never of one without the other...It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights.¹⁸

Benjamin conceded that in the purely optical relation to the cosmos characteristic of modern astronomy, a damaging instrumental rationality was already prefigured. Hence, a critique of a narrow conception of 'reason' based upon the natural sciences was an urgent task. Yet how could he prevent what was valuable in the context of a critique of *this* idea of progress, from toppling into a rejection of progress *in principle*?

Another way of asking this question might be: how can Surrealist experiments into states of intoxication be prevented from merely falling into reactionary mystical idealism? We must remember that, although in his essay 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1927) Benjamin characterised its ambition as 'to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution,' he then went on seriously to delimit the parameters in which such a project should be undertaken.¹⁹ As this qualification was uncommon in other critical writings of the period, I will quote at some length:

...to place the accent exclusively on it [the intoxicating component in each revolutionary act] would be to subordinate the methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution entirely to a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance. Added to this is an inadequate, undialectical conception of the nature of intoxication. The aesthetic of the painter, the poet, *en état de surprise*...is enmeshed in a number of pernicious romantic prejudices ... histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic...²⁰



Hence, 'extremes' of experience such as the dream, are valuable insofar as they reveal elements of the marvellous which pervade the everyday. In refuting Klages and his ilk, Benjamin suggests that the 'dream' does not open up a vista on the archaic as a promised horizon of lyrical escape, but is already saturated with the mundane objects of modern everyday life.

Moreover, for Benjamin as well as Klages, the past is not inaccessible in any chrono-'logical' sense (as nineteenth-century historicism would have it), but only in the sense that it is displaced, 'out of reach', not in the immediate vicinity of our grasp. The vital difference, however, is that for Benjamin the past is not just comprised of timeless, archaic images which flare up only as spectacle, always at a distant remove from the immediate presence of the now. Benjamin offers the figurative illustration of a child learning to grasp by trying to catch what is manifestly 'out of reach', namely the moon: a utopian gesture, it may be, but not necessarily worthless. Analogously, he argues for the politically emancipatory significance of the image for the way we develop the capacity to actively intervene in and shape the world around us, a process that comes no more naturally to the collective than it does to the infant:

The collective is a body, too. And the *physis* that is being organised for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, be produced only in that image space to which profane illuminations initiates us. Only when technology, body and image space interpenetrate so that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*.²¹

It is significant, surely, that Benjamin articulates this important expression of the revolutionary project in the context of a discussion of Surrealism. Here he saw the need for an urgent intervention as especially pressing (imagining himself as a 'philosophical Fortinbras'²²) in order to prevent the surrender of the image's power to the forces of reaction. In his counter-thrust, Benjamin offers a dialectical reading of the image, one which is simultaneously rooted in the archaic, but which is also bound up with a progressive, *future*-oriented dimension. The dialectical image appears at a moment in which elements of past experience flash tantalisingly into the 'now-time', retroactively disclosing unknown layers of significance which have been secreted in the object; a moment capable of uniting with concerns in 'our time' to be apprehended as revelations of futurity. In this way, 'politics attains primacy over history.'²³

It is in this sense that utopian 'wish images' play a crucial mediating role in the interface of technology and human development, stimulating research into how we might learn to achieve the not-yet-possible; one side of a dialectic which also sees the development of new technologies reciprocally offer possibilities for radically *new* forms of perception and cognition. In the *Arcades Project*, which represents an attempt to trace how such a dialectic plays itself out concretely, Benjamin returns to the scene of Aragon's compromised depiction of a reality suffused by dream - the arcades of Paris - and, armed with the conception of the dialectical image, he returns to the project of a properly critical assessment of such dream processes. In 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', Benjamin cites a motto from Jules Michelet, 'every epoch dreams the one to follow', followed by this formulation:



Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the old and new penetrate. These images are wish images; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social order of production.²⁴

Just as Freud had argued that dreams were the 'fulfilment of a wish', in however disguised a form, so, Benjamin claims, everyday life is also permeated by 'wish images.' In these, the desires of the collective, which the forces of production are not sufficiently developed to realise in reality, are able to find expression.

A passage from Marx's *Capital* is cited in support of this claim, in particular an illustration of the earliest experimental locomotives, which before the requisite technology had been developed, began life with 'two feet that raised it up alternately, like a horse.'²⁵ Clearly, here, an older form of production, before a new form was ready to take its place, nevertheless bodied forth a pre-figurative 'wish image', 'to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social order of production.' In their fascination with dreams, the Surrealists again helped to engender such a materialist insight or 'profane illumination,' as they strove:

...to blaze a way into the heart of things abolished or superseded, to decipher the contours of the banal as rebus...Picture puzzles, as schemata of the dreamwork, were long ago discovered by psychoanalysis. The Surrealists, with a similar conviction, are less on the trail of the psyche than on the track of things.²⁶

'To perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded",²⁷ such was the crucial project with which this avant-garde movement was engaged. In its output were manifested the latent energies invested in objects we are habitually conditioned into seeing as utterly trivial, but which can, in fact, disclose powerful utopian desires.

Such images are not only to be detected in the obviously 'fantastic' visions of a Fourier: the utopian investments of successive generations can also be discerned 'in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions.'²⁸ This has considerable significance for a mechanical conception of Marxism still anchored in the prejudices of the nineteenth century, especially the 'false consciousness' model of ideology. Just as the positivists had dismissed dream as mental detritus, its content to be rejected out of hand, so a certain positivist strain in Marxism would explain away our investments in the 'superstructure' simply as ideological error. What this fails to understand is the 'utopian' moment which can be glimpsed in capitalism consumption, the fragment of truth to be redeemed from the false totality: its secretion of wish images, traces of which are left even in neglected and unvalued artefacts as instances of unrealised desires. As Max Horkheimer once remarked:

We cannot blame people that they are more interested in the sphere of privacy and consumption rather than [in] production. This trait contains a Utopian element. In utopia production does not play a decisive part. It is the land of milk and honey. I think it is of deep significance that art and poetry have always shown an affinity to consumption.²⁹



That the dream-world of the arcades did not provide a true 'reflection' of the capitalist mode of production was, Benjamin argued, *not* because superstructural elements had been 'consciously falsified by the ideologues of the ruling class,' but out of a deeper structural need, one which Surrealism, emerging from the realm of the aesthetic, was in a privileged position to discover.

Again, it is the dream that provides the key for the conceptual remodelling of the historical materialist methodology, and the 'base-superstructure' paradigm in particular:

The superstructure is the *expression* [my emphasis] of the infrastructure. The economic conditions under which society exists are expressed in the superstructure precisely as, with the sleeper, an overfull stomach finds not its reflection but its expression in the content of dreams, which from a causal point of view, it may be said to 'condition.'³⁰

Marxism must, in Benjamin's view, reject the notion of ideology as a reflection (howsoever distorted) of an economic base for a more intricate notion of causality, just as psychoanalysis must confront the highly complicated questions of causality between the physical processes of the body and psychic operations. We understand nothing of the dream if we take it at face value, or attempt to understand its meaning as delivered as an organic whole, forming a discrete totality which 'reflects' waking reality. Read in such a way, the dream seems to be a mere absurdity. Rather, as Freud's pioneering work suggested, the dream was only *interpretable*, only capable of sundering its meaning, if its façade of unity was broken down into discrete fragments.

In this respect, Benjamin's appraisal of dream remarkably echoes his earlier work on the aesthetics of allegory, a mode for which 'the value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less their relationship to the underlying idea,'³¹ he claims, in a passage from his *Trauerspiel* study which might just as easily have been taken directly from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. Similarly in baroque allegory, according to Benjamin:

The false appearance of totality is extinguished. For the *eidos* disappears, the simile ceases to exist, and the cosmos it contained shrivels up. The dry rebuses which remain contain an insight which is still available to the confused investigator.³²

Suddenly, the very excess of meaning which Benjamin finds in the German mourning play sounds uncannily like Freud, the 'confused' interpreter before the rebus of his own dream. Hence, for Benjamin, the 'rebus' character assumed by the work of a Baudelaire, the strange dream-world of the arcades, and the modernist aesthetic of montage, is obligatory, since, if we are to remain true to our experience it can only be truly rendered in the form of the fragmentary and the disinterred. But just as the seeming chaos of the rebus form does not preclude Freud as interpreter of the dream from making a *meaningful* reconstruction, so the historical materialist can gleam an emancipatory kernel from the chaos of modernity. The model of psychoanalysis suggests this cannot be achieved, however, by a crude theory of reflection.

Moreover, if the 'base-superstructure' model of causality is re-worked along the lines of the dream, then we begin to see new possibilities for the study of cultural phenomena which had often previously appeared as subordinate or subsidiary concerns with respect to the 'main' task of examining the economic base. Freud had argued that the dream is a narcissistic phenomenon, as



the libidinal cathexes are withdrawn from the external world back into the body. Hence, in a dreaming state the dreamer is highly responsive to corporeal sensations, which will often be transposed into dream imagery (meaning that certain dreams, for example, might reveal - in coded form - the presence of a serious illness before it had been diagnosed in waking life). Benjamin makes a similar point with regard to the social collective:

Blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, muscle sensations become perceptible for him [the dreamer] and demand the explanation which delusion or dreams holds ready. This sharpened receptivity is a feature of the dreaming collective, which settles into the arcades as into the insides of its own body. We must follow in its wake in order to expound the nineteenth century as its dream vision.³³

Indeed, from this perspective the ideological 'dream' could be seen not as a layer of fog which obscures the economic base, but as a *heightened* form of the cognition normally shown in the 'conscious' waking state. Just as the neglected world of dreams provided a 'royal road' to the unconscious for Freud, perhaps the arcades as a dream-world of banal and outmoded forms of capitalist consumption could yield up fresh insight into the workings of the nineteenth century from which his own age was trying to awaken.

This latter point is crucial, however, for if Freud had perpetually slumbered along in the absurdity of dreams we would be none the wiser about the genesis of such visions. The same is true with the arcades where, as soon as we have entered, we are fully immersed in a world that is utterly self-enclosed. In 'Konvolut L', Benjamin notes: 'Arcades are houses or passages having no outside - like the dream.'³⁴ Here there might have loomed a kind of characteristically postmodern 'dead-end': if we are fully immersed in a *particular* context of experience, how can we also get so entirely outside that context in order to secure a vantage point from which to launch or validate an objective critique? Could Benjamin be admitting defeat when he notes that 'the "purity" of the gaze is not just difficult but impossible to maintain'³⁵? This is to mistake the point - Benjamin means simply to repeat the basic materialist axiom that all conscious thought must, of necessity, have been conditioned (though never absolutely determined) by the social and historical location in which it is obliged to begin. That our gaze is inevitably partial is a condition of possibility for subjective experience. Moreover, following Marx, Benjamin sees such conditions as developing dialectically: the social 'context' that structures our thoughts is never monolithic or static, but rather is internally fractured and continually transforming by virtue of its dynamic contradictions. He applies this schema to the study of dream which thereby already contains the seeds of its own awakening: what Benjamin terms the 'dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance.'³⁶

This insight, Benjamin considers, is of the utmost significance for our historical understanding: The compelling - the drastic - experience, which refutes everything 'gradual' about becoming and shows all seeming 'development' to be dialectical reversal, eminently and thoroughly composed, is awakening from dream...

This, he argues, will be the basis of the new



...dialectical method of doing history: with the intensity of a dream, to pass through what has been, in order to experience the present as the waking world to which the dream refers. (And every dream refers to the waking world. Everything previous is to be penetrated historically.)³⁷

What Benjamin presents here is a description of a dialectical movement between 'dream' as a historically specific modality of experience on the one hand, and on the other, 'dream' conceived of on the hermeneutic level as textual object, a critical resource waiting to be interpreted as a guide to future experience. Whether or not Benjamin knew it, he had come very close here to the formulations of André Breton in his *Communicating Vessels* of 1932. Strikingly, given Theodor Adorno's later criticisms of Benjamin's treatment of dream in the 1935 article 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', we find a passage in a letter to Benjamin, in which the former, upon reading a review of Breton's book in an English film journal, recommends it to his friend, remarking:

...unless I am mistaken, [it] appears to converge very closely with many of our own intentions. It too counters the psychological interpretation of dreaming and defends an approach in terms of objective images; and it also seems to ascribe a crucial historical character to such images. The entire piece is so closely related to your thematic concerns that it will probably necessitate a fairly radical revision...it may prove to be of great significance for you, comparable perhaps - what a parallel - to the significance of Saxl and Panofsky for your book on the baroque.³⁸

Such a substantial engagement with Breton's text does not appear to have happened, perhaps because Benjamin feared that such a sympathetic figure, far more than an obvious adversary like Klages, could surreptitiously smuggle back 'pernicious romantic prejudices' into his work. This is pure speculation, but I do think that Adorno was absolutely right here: Breton's text could have helped Benjamin clarify his conception to a greater degree.

I do not intend to deal with Breton's work at length here, so I will restrict myself to the observation that Benjamin would have found in Breton's treatment of the dream, a parallel emphasis on a dream-waking dialectic which reflects the significance of 'awakening' for the material development of human *praxis*. For Breton this is understood in the sense of a liberating rupture from the grip of the past, enabling us to work to achieve in 'reality' what previously we could only have cognisance of in wish-fulfilling thoughts:

On the very brief scale of the twenty-four-hour day it [the dream] helps us to make the *vital leap*...It is the unknown source of light destined to remind us that at the beginning of the day as in the beginning of human life in earth, there can be only one resource which is *action*.

For both writers, what is significant is not the waking state *per se*, which could quite easily carry on in the same drearily prosaic way, but the moment when consciousness is shocked into the recognition of possible forms of cognitive experience from which it is excluded in reality. Both writers also, therefore, develop a notion of a single material reality, in which 'dream' and 'waking' experience are *both* inextricably grounded, and which progresses not in a gradual, seamless, linear continuum, but instead proceeds unevenly in jolts, leaps and unexpected reversals. In this sense, we might



speculate along with Terry Eagleton that it is by no means coincidental that such works were produced in a historical moment which saw its expression in Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution.³⁹

A serious engagement here with Breton might have stimulated Benjamin's work on the dream to a more felicitous conclusion than that which it in fact enjoyed. In the re-written 1939 article on Paris it has slipped from view, although I think Margaret Cohen goes too far when she says that he 'drops the dream model'⁴⁰ in favour of his interest in phantasmagorical representation. It is displaced, certainly, under the hail of Adorno's criticisms, but Benjamin's interest in oneiric processes can be seen hovering behind his commentaries upon other forms of virtual seeing, of which the dream is perhaps only the most elementary. Hence, its trace can be discerned, in however displaced a form, not only in the fascination with the optical technologies of the nineteenth century, but also in his fascination with twentieth-century cinema and animation. Yet now, the dream theory itself, like the hunchbacked-dwarf theology of his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' is not allowed to venture back out into the light. Adorno's criticism had no doubt hit home, and yet the displacement of the dream theory would not help to bring Benjamin's project to completion. Let me now conclude with a few words on how the outstanding difficulties of this might at least have been confronted.

One of the criticisms made by Adorno was that Benjamin's account was predicated upon a notion of the collective unconscious which was indistinguishable, in all major respects, from that of Carl Gustav Jung. Benjamin had argued that if the future could be read in such wish images it could only disclose itself through a re-citation of archaic images:

In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history [*Urgeschichte*] that is, to elements of a classless society.⁴¹

Buck-Morss suggests that Marx might again have provided the inspiration here, citing the passage in the 18th *Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where Marx explains how revolutionary epochs in history, thrown back on their own resources, often begin by consciously imitating previous ages (hence, the bourgeois republic in France modelling itself on Rome, Cromwell and his age adopting the language of the Old Testament and so forth). Actually a more likely influence in this respect might be the late nineteenth-century historian and philosopher Johan Jakob Bachofen, whose suggestion that the earliest forms of society were classless and matriarchal seems closer to the strong sense of 'Golden Age' which Benjamin seems to invoke. For whereas in Marx's account the new is articulated through the manhandling of historical materials (perhaps similar to Freud's account in *The Interpretation of Dreams* of how the day's residues are 'worked-over'), in Benjamin's account the supposed Golden Age of the archaic is invoked in a direct, unmediated, trans-historical sense.

A more thorough reading of Freud could perhaps have offered Benjamin an alternative path. Unlike Jung, who posited the unconscious as a timeless repository of fixed 'archetypes' from which the imagination would be forced to choose in the construction of a dream, such a hypothesis was not essential for Freud. The dream, in Freud's view, was not a *direct* expression of the unconscious, but a *symptom* that such tempestuous desires were repressed, that is, were prohibited from being



expressed. Hence, the dream-image is not lifted 'off the shelf' from a pre-available stock, but instead represents, as I have suggested, a 'working-over', or creative manhandling of the materials which lie at its disposal, the day's residues. As Jacques Lacan has shown (himself no stranger to Surrealism), the dream cannot be confined to an event in the psyche of the individual subject; indeed, subjectivity is itself bound up with an alien, irrational element which functions to obscure for us the abyss between what we take for reality and the Real as such. Hence, as symptom, the dream is just as much a 'social' product: the symptomatic token of unassimilable desires whose expression the social order cannot allow. By the same token, the commodity itself is also just such a 'symptom'. As Slavoj Žižek has observed:

...the 'secret' to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form [of commodities, of dreams] but, on the contrary, *the 'secret' of this form itself...*⁴²

The key question, as Žižek puts it, is not to explain *what* the commodity is (the 'hidden kernel' of its social origins), but rather, *why* labour can 'affirm its social character only in the commodity-form of its product.' Benjamin was really asking a form of the same question, which we could formulate as: *why* can our desires for a fulfilled life be affirmed in the *form* of the dream-images of mass culture? And how can we harness this utopian energy to transform our present existence and fulfil our innermost potential? Clearly, as Benjamin was already clear, the dream (as symptom) cannot be simply collapsed into 'waking' reality, a prospect to which postmodernism subsequently has given ironic realisation. Rather, we are faced with the authentically political question of what kind of social mediation could liberate the possibilities which, at present, receive only distorted form in the shape of the 'dream'-images of consumerism. From today's vantage point (in the context of the challenges posed anew by the rise of the anti-capitalist movement), I would suggest that Benjamin's work critically extends the Surrealist fascination with the dream in ways still highly relevant for understanding contemporary social experience.

¹ Benjamin, Walter, 'The Metaphysics of Youth' [1914], in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard UP, 1996), pp. 6-17.

² Buck-Morss, Susan, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* [1991] (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 7.

³ See Weingrad, Michael, 'The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research,' *New German Critique*, 84, Fall 2001, p. 130.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130n.

⁵ Benjamin, letter to Rilke, cited in Wolin, Richard, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 126.

⁶ Benjamin, letter to Adorno (from Paris), May 31st, 1935, in *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p. 88.

⁷ Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 28.

⁸ Benjamin, letter to Adorno, in Lonitz, op. cit., p. 88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁰ Benjamin, 'Dream Kitsch,' in *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland, and G. Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard UP, 1999), p. 3.

¹¹ Aragon, Louis, *Paris Peasant*, trans. S. Watson Taylor (London: Pan Books, 1980), p. 28.

¹² Benjamin, 'The Metaphysics Of Youth' [1914], op. cit., p. 16.



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- ¹³ Benjamin, 'Paris Arcades,' in *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard UP, 1999), p. 838.
- ¹⁴ Benjamin, 'Paris Arcades,' in *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 845.
- ¹⁵ McCole, John, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993), p. 236.
- ¹⁶ Block, Richard, 'Selective Affinities: Walter Benjamin and Ludwig Klages', *Arcadia: Zeitschrift für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*, vol. 35, 2000, pp. 117-135.
- ¹⁷ Klages, Ludwig, *Menschen und Erde* [Men and Earth], cited in McCole, op. cit., p. 237.
- ¹⁸ Benjamin, 'To the Planetarium,' in 'One Way Street', *Selected Writings Vol. 1*, op. cit., p. 486.
- ¹⁹ Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' [1927], in *Selected Writings Vol. 2*, op. cit., p. 215.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 215.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218.
- ²² Benjamin, cited in McCole, op. cit., p. 206.
- ²³ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., pp. 388-9.
- ²⁴ Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century' [1935], in *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., pp. 4-5.
- ²⁵ Marx, Karl, *Kapital*, cited in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 155.
- ²⁶ Benjamin, 'Dream Kitsch', op. cit., p. 4.
- ²⁷ Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', op. cit., p. 210.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
- ²⁹ Horkheimer, Max, 'Letter to Leo Lowenthal', June 2nd 1942, cited in Jay, Martin, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1973), p. 213.
- ³⁰ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 392.
- ³¹ Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, op. cit., pp. 28-29.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- ³³ Benjamin, 'Paris Arcades', *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 842.
- ³⁴ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 406.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 470.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 389.
- ³⁷ Benjamin, 'Paris Arcades', *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 838.
- ³⁸ Adorno, letter to Benjamin (Oxford), 6 November 1934, in *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, op. cit., p. 54.
- ³⁹ See Eagleton, Terry, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: New Left Books, 1981).
- ⁴⁰ Cohen, Margaret, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 22n.
- ⁴¹ Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', in *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., pp. 4-5.
- ⁴² Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 11.

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A Question of Tomorrow: Blanchot, Surrealism and the Time of the Fragment

David Cunningham

Abstract

This article offers a close critical reading of Blanchot's essay on Surrealism, 'Tomorrow at Stake,' raising a series of questions concerning the *time* of 'Surrealist experience' and its relation to those temporal structures inscribed within the concepts of modernity, the avant-garde, and (art) history itself. It is argued, through a posited connection to Romantic conceptions of the fragment, that those 'reflexes of the future' which for Surrealism determine the value of the present, may be understood, philosophically, in relation to *diverse* conceptions of the 'openness' of the question, in turn suggesting a more complex understanding of Surrealism's 'avant-garde' character.

Finally, the future belongs in its entirety to romanticism because romanticism alone founds it
(Maurice Blanchot)¹

The late Maurice Blanchot, that most enigmatic of twentieth-century critics and theorists, friend of Bataille and Lévinas, inspiration to Derrida, Foucault and Barthes, among others, is perhaps best known for his 'philosophical' readings of modern writers such as Hölderlin, Mallarmé and Kafka, as well as for his 'literary' meditations on thinkers like Hegel, Heidegger and Lévinas. Rather less well-known is the fact that he wrote two, surprisingly admiring, essays on André Breton and Surrealism that could be said to indicate a somewhat elusive debt to what he himself terms 'the deciding role [Surrealism] played in French literature.'² The first of these pieces, 'Reflections on Surrealism,' is to be found in *The Work of Fire*, a collection of review essays from literary journals, first published in France in 1949. The second, written some twenty years later, (and upon which I shall be concentrating in what follows), is entitled 'Tomorrow at Stake,' and appears as the penultimate chapter of what is perhaps Blanchot's most important (and intimidatingly monolithic) work, *The Infinite Conversation*. Despite the two decades that separate them, both open with a common concern. In what sense has Surrealism, Blanchot asks in the 1940s, and again in the 1960s, 'become historical'?³

It is this question, far more complex than it might first appear, that I would like to take as my starting point for the essay that follows. For it is, I will argue, a question which, as Blanchot phrases it, brings into focus a series of accompanying questions concerning the *time* of Surrealism and Surrealist experience itself – as what he terms 'a pure practice of existence...in a determinate temporal modality' – and its relation to the temporal structures inscribed within our customary conceptions of modernity, of modernism, of the avant-garde and, indeed, of (art) history itself. '[T]he history of surrealism,' Blanchot writes in 'Tomorrow at Stake,' 'is only of scholarly interest, particularly if the conception of history is not modified by its subject' (407). What, then, might such a modification involve, and what might it reveal about the stakes of Surrealism in general?



At the risk of moving too quickly, and of assuming too much, I want to pose this question by exploring the relationship between the time of Surrealism and that of the avant-garde. Now, in saying this, I must make clear that I am emphatically *not* referring to 'the avant-garde' as a conventionally received art-historical category – designating, say, the attack on the material institutions of art - but rather as a general *concept* through which particular movements or works articulate themselves or come to be articulated. It is the tension between this abstract 'conceptual' sense and the positioning of the avant-garde within the time of art history that, I think, Blanchot's comment on the historical character of Surrealism serves to indicate, and which has much wider implications for attempts to 'historicise' the work of the avant-garde in general. As such, reconsidering the relation of Surrealism to modernism or the avant-garde should not involve simply another minor rewriting of typological categorisations derived (usually with considerable simplification) from the likes of Clement Greenberg or Peter Bürger, but should invite us to reconsider the nature of the very concepts of modernism and the avant-garde themselves.

This goes, too, for the obvious connections which hold between the concepts of avant-garde and *modernity*. For beyond the apparently simple historical locatability of something called the 'avant-garde' within the disputed limits of a socio-historical periodisation conventionally marked by the name 'modernity,' the more fundamental issue, that any consideration of such a conjuncture must take account of, is that, as Calinescu puts it, both the concepts of modernity and that of an avant-garde 'reflect' 'intellectual attitudes that are [themselves] directly related to the problem of time.'⁴ As Peter Osborne has recently argued, more than being simply chronologically-locatable historical periods or forms, or even empirical phenomena which merely engage in identifiable ways with questions of time or history (as Calinescu might still be taken to suggest), terms like 'avant-garde' and 'modernism' also have particular open structures of historical temporality implicit 'within' them *as concepts* relating to the possible character of cultural experience, and which are inseparable from more general questions concerning the nature of historical *time* (including, crucially, the time of art history).⁵

I should say, at this point, that Blanchot himself never uses the actual term 'avant-garde,' in this sense or any other, but I want to suggest that, understood in this expansive conceptual form, it can be seen to be implicitly *in question* in the very title of Blanchot's essay, 'Tomorrow at Stake,' and in the attempt to think the temporal modality of *experience* appropriate to what he terms the 'surrealist affirmation.' It is this temporal modality that is captured, in all its generality, in Breton's famous assertion that: 'The work of art is valuable only insofar as it is vibrated by the reflexes of the future.'⁶ For what is at stake here – where precisely tomorrow is at stake – must be understood to concern the conditions of a certain openness to possibility in the present's *relation* to the future (given the inaccessibility of the future *as future* itself), involving, in turn, a more general question of how to conceive of the three classical, phenomenological dimensions of time – past, present and future – and their interrelation and organisation as a means to positioning the present of modernity; a question which is also precisely a question of how to think the cultural present *historically*. The specificity of the concept of an avant-garde, as it emerges from the mid-nineteenth-century intensification of modernity as a form of historical consciousness (most famously registered by Baudelaire), could thus be seen to



derive from the particular primacy it gives to the future – to tomorrow – in its construction of the present.⁷ Nonetheless, if the avant-garde is to be thought – as a general concept with certain historical conditions of emergence – in these terms, it is still the case that, far from presenting us with any univocal ‘programme,’ it embraces in fact a whole range of equivocal, and often conflicting, understandings of how such an affirmation of the future is itself to be conceived and manifested in specific, concrete cultural forms and practices. It is, therefore, in terms of the resulting politics of *conflicting* temporalities that Surrealism’s particular place within the history of modernism and the avant-garde should be reconsidered, in such a way as to ‘modify’ – as Blanchot demands – our conception of this history itself.

Rethinking the Romantic Precedent

It is in the light of these theoretical presuppositions that I want to approach Blanchot’s specific reading of Surrealism. There is, however, one final precondition for doing so; one that takes us into a more familiar area of Blanchot’s writing: his work on romanticism. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that Blanchot’s interest in Surrealism cannot be appreciated *unless* one approaches it in relation to his engagement with the writings of German romantics and with what he terms their inauguration of ‘an entirely new mode of accomplishment’ for the modern literary or art work (353). It is this engagement, then, that I shall seek, briefly, to elaborate before returning to Surrealism in the next section.

Of course, the connections between romanticism and the more general discourse of the avant-garde are easily acknowledged. Renato Poggioli famously talks of the avant-garde ‘renewing the romantic precedent’,⁸ while Calinescu finds the concept already implicit in texts like Shelley’s ‘Defence of Poetry’ written in 1821.⁹ Moreover, one recent theorist has, for example, suggested that Jena romanticism itself might be considered the ‘first modern instantiation’ of an avant-garde movement; avant-garde *avant la lettre*, as it were.¹⁰ As for Surrealism, it is in the (German) romantics, as Blanchot himself notes, that Surrealism ‘recognises itself...and recognises what it rediscovers on its own: poetry, the force of absolute freedom’ (351). And, indeed, such a historical relation of self-recognition is clearly posited in the writings of the Surrealists themselves. In Breton’s ‘Originality and Freedom,’ from the 1940s, for example, he cites as Surrealism’s forebears those ‘explorers in whom an insatiable desire carries to the verge of discovery – those for whom nothing matters except the continual surpassing of the goal already attained’; a temporal dynamic of exploration and non-identity which finds its original momentum, Breton asserts, in the likes of Hölderlin and Novalis.¹¹ This is romanticism, Breton writes elsewhere, ‘as a specific state of mind and temperament,’ to which Surrealism responds as an attempt to uncover ‘the subversive elements concealed within it.’¹²

This much is well established and needs little recounting here. Nonetheless, the connection between romanticism, and both Surrealism and the concept of an avant-garde more generally, should not be restricted to the form of a chronologically-delineated ‘art historical’ continuity forged solely by evidence of direct ‘stylistic’ or ‘thematic’ influence. Rather, I want to argue, if we are to understand its more fundamental historical meaning, what should be in question here is the much broader, and self-



defining, relation that each have to the developing general *temporal* logic of modernity, as I have outlined it above, and the structures of cultural historical experience it opens up.¹³ For, as Habermas asserts, it is in the 'romantic spirit' that one can see emerging the 'radicalised consciousness of modernity' of which we are 'still the contemporaries.'¹⁴ In this sense, it is the differential repetition, from romanticism onwards, of a general *modern* problematic – what can be described as the problem of how to *affirm* the non-identity of modernity and tradition while resisting modernity's dominant social formations¹⁵ – which precisely allows Surrealism's historical 'recognition' of what it 'rediscovers on its own' in romanticism.

This can, perhaps, be best approached, at least initially, through a consideration of the historical importance Blanchot accords to the particular concept of the *fragment* in romanticism, particularly in the work of Friedrich Schlegel, as one thematic which is clearly carried through to his readings of the Surrealist image and, elsewhere, of the poetry of René Char, upon which I shall come to focus in what follows. A crucial point in this respect is that, while the fragment may present itself as a certain kind of 'spatial' form, its character is always fundamentally temporal. This is why, for Blanchot, as for Benjamin, the fragment is distinctly 'modern' as a *question*.¹⁶ The temporal experience of the fragment (as of the ruin) is an experience of the present's 'incompletion' which can be understood, historically, in terms of the non-identity or irreconcilability of modernity and tradition at the cultural present. The experience of historical time that the fragment invokes is, thus, necessarily a peculiarly modern experience of *irreversible* time (as opposed to a 'mythical time') where 'nothing ever returns to an origin,' with the concomitant 're-orientation to the future' that this necessarily involves.¹⁷ In this sense, the insistent question of the fragmentary, of how to understand and to 'deal with' the 'presence' of the fragmentary, at the cultural present, simply *is*, viewed in its most expansive sense as a question of time, the question of modernity itself, as the non-identity of modernity and tradition, and of its abstract temporal form.¹⁸ And if romanticism does not quite 'invent' the 'cultural form' of the fragment (citing its own precedents in Montaigne, Pascal and Chamfort), in relation to art at least it provides its inaugural *philosophical* articulation – or rather articulations – for that modernity to which I (like Habermas) would argue that 'we' still belong.

However, far from holding a consistent view of the fragment's historical significance, as a 'manifestation' of modernity, romanticism is, significantly, distinguished by its internal contestation – not simply between different thinkers but just as often in the writings of a single author – opening up a range of different conflicting forms of historical temporalisation as alternate forms of 'response' to present incompleteness, which might, very schematically, be divided into two nostalgic and affirmative modalities, as differentiated through their respective conceptions of this incompleteness: the present as a site of loss *or* of possibility. From the early Lukács through to Peter Szondi it is the former position which has tended to be stressed in readings of German romanticism; readings which, following the dominant metaphors of ruin (derived largely from the architectural ruin), present it as a tragic form of cultural melancholia. In this the fragment denotes, above all, modernity as lost wholeness, condemning the present to a Fichtean 'absolute sinfulness' which may or may not be transcended by



some moment of recovery or 're-birth.' It is this familiar conception of the fragment that is handed down, for example, to Wagner or to the early Eliot of *The Waste Land*.

Yet, as Simon Critchley, among others, has recently insisted, romanticism also possesses a strongly *affirmative* response to the non-identity of modernity and tradition, where the incompleteness of a fragmentary present marks what Critchley calls 'the very vertiginousness of freedom.'¹⁹ Take, for example, the following fragment from the *Athenaeum*, composed by Friedrich's brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel:

The mirage of a former golden age is one of the greatest obstacles to approximating the golden age that still lies in the future. If there once was a golden age, then it wasn't really golden. Gold can't rust or decompose; it emerges victoriously genuine from all attempts to alloy or decompose it. If the golden age won't last forever, then it might as well never begin, since it will only be good for composing elegies about its loss.²⁰

There is nothing terribly melancholic about this. Moreover, it is this *affirmation* of the non-identity of modernity and tradition – as the potential opening up of the present to a qualitatively different future – through which romanticism also opens up, for art and culture, an historically new conception of a necessary destruction and fragmentation of the already given that is quite different from, say, the earlier seventeenth-century 'Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes,' and which very clearly points forward to that form of historical temporalisation articulated by the concept of an avant-garde, as it subsequently emerges in the mid-nineteenth-century. Hence Friedrich's strikingly 'modern' assertion that: 'New or not new: that's the question [now] asked of a work.'²¹

Of course, this is itself not an unfamiliar link to make – Poggioli's remains the classic account – and is one that is perhaps most easily summarised as the legacy of a romantic *utopianism*. Furthermore, such utopianism can, as August Wilhelm's conception of a 'golden age that lies in the future' makes clear, be read (as Lyotard, for example, reads it),²² as essentially a mirror-image of the nostalgic modality of modernity which repositions desired wholeness in the futural dimension of a yet-to-come; a wholeness which, in Friedrich Schlegel's own words, 'doesn't lie behind, but before us.' It is this speculative desire for unification, and for a resistance to the 'disenchantment of the everyday with the violence of the imagination,' that is clearly passed on to dominant strains within the discourse of the avant-garde, from its origins in the nineteenth-century French utopian socialism of Saint-Simon and Fourier right through to the 1960s call for *l'imagination au pouvoir*. More generally, as Critchley suggests, the naivety of such utopianism as is manifested in romanticism could be understood to be that 'shared by all avant-garde movements...centred in the belief that a small group of men and women...could theorise and hegemonise new cultural forms and effect a new vision of social relations.'²³ Underlying this conviction is, in turn, an understanding of the artwork as 'a sensuous image of freedom' providing us with the model for a free society and a 'politically transfigured everyday life' – what the situationists, marking their own self-recognition in both romanticism and Surrealism, referred to as a project of simultaneously 'overcoming' and 'realising' poetry – and in which a speculative philosophical experience must be, for the romantics, a 'speculative Aesthetics,' where 'art is the speculative *organon par excellence*...formative power is aesthetic power.'²⁴ As



Andrew Bowie summarises: 'The aesthetic product [for romanticism] becomes a utopian symbol of the realisation of freedom: in it we can see or hear an image of what the world would be like if freedom were realised.'²⁵ Thus is the art work 'vibrated by the reflexes of the future.'

Mythology, Utopianism and the Futures of Romanticism

Such 'aesthetic absolutism', as Bernhard Lypp terms it,²⁶ constitutes, most clearly, the romanticism of the now famous 1796 'Oldest System Programme of German Idealism,' belatedly discovered among Hegel's notes but which may or may not have been written by Schelling:²⁷

The philosophy of spirit is an aesthetic philosophy...Poetry thereby gains a higher dignity, at the end it again becomes what it was at the beginning – *teacher of (History) mankind*...polytheism of the imagination [*Einbildungskraft*] and of art, this is what we need!...we must have a new mythology, but this mythology must be in the service of the Ideas, it must become a mythology of *reason*...we [must] make the Ideas *aesthetic* i.e. mythological...Then eternal unity will reign among us.²⁸ [second emphasis mine]

Now, if 'reason' is less obviously central to the rhetoric of the Surrealist invocation of the 'absolute' – although the use of the term in the 'System Programme' should not itself be taken in a restrictedly 'rationalist' sense ('the highest act of reason...is an aesthetic act')²⁹ – nonetheless it would be hard not to see a very clear continuity between this short, extraordinary piece and many of the central ideas of Bretonian Surrealism. Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, as is well known, begins, for example, by echoing the likes of Schelling in its articulation of the search for a 'mythology of the modern' which would provide the foundation, not only for poetry as a literary form, but for a '*poetic life*.'³⁰ (And think, in this respect, of Benjamin's reservations about Surrealism's residual 'romantic turn of mind,' in his 1929 essay, though this is, I would contend, a more complex judgement than it is often supposed to be.)³¹ Similarly, more than a decade and a half later, Breton in the 'Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism' famously remarks Surrealism's desire for a 'new myth,'³² and in 1947 is still asserting that the 'hour has come to promote a new myth, one which will carry man forward a stage further toward his final destination.'³³ More generally, even when the 'formative power' of the mythological as such is not evoked – an evoking which is in fact, in Aragon at least, more radical than it is frequently taken to be (not least by Benjamin)³⁴ – Surrealism clearly does invite its reading as a distinctly romantic 'longing,' as Balakian approvingly encapsulates it, 'for innate unity among the contradictions...[a] synthesis of the human dream and material reality...a permanent integral connection cementing abstract and concrete reality into a single framework.'³⁵ Thus, Breton writes in 'What is Surrealism?': '[W]e have attempted to present interior reality and exterior reality as two elements in a process of unification, of finally becoming *one*. This final unification is the supreme aim of surrealism.'³⁶

Of course, once again, if we are to think properly about Surrealism's particular modernity, the status of this 'final unification' must be seen as related to a certain futurally-orientated temporality which, we can say, marks, in turn, a particular response to the problematic of present fragmentation



already outlined, in abstract form, in romanticism. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy assert of the 'System Programme' (but they could have been speaking of many Surrealist texts), the fact that it 'comes to us in a fragmentary form is perhaps a symbol...of the incompleteness...to which the will to completion, moreover, was deliberately dedicated.' In this sense, what marks the *temporality* of the fragment, at this point, is 'its announcement in the future...the announcement of the "programmable" fact according to which the System is envisaged in the name and in the form of an exigency, a desire, or a will; the System is not there (does not exist). It is "to do".'³⁷ Such a temporal logic is repeated in the Surrealist reflection on the idea of myth – on the idea of a specifically *modern* myth – to the extent that it cannot be separated, as Chénieux-Gendron notes, from *futural* 'reflection on the notion of a *projective model*,' a characteristically utopianist belief in 'the necessity of inventing myths as models for the society to come.'³⁸ Thus, Breton writes in the first manifesto: 'I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*.'³⁹ At his most extreme, Breton even suggests that it may be a question of deciding 'in what measure can we choose or adopt, and *impose*, a myth fostering the society that we judge to be desirable?'; the formation of 'a collective myth' as a means to assisting 'the much more general movement involving the liberation of man.'⁴⁰ This would thus be one way (but, as shall be seen, not the only way) of reading Breton's exemplary avant-gardiste demand for the work of art to be 'vibrated by the reflexes of the future,' a vibration which would, in this case, be read as the artwork's 'sensuous' prefiguring of a 'final unification' which would overcome present alienation. (Most obviously, perhaps, in certain forms of the Surrealist image, to which I will return in a moment.)⁴¹

It is such utopianism which, all too obviously, opens Surrealism up to Hegelian or properly Marxist critique as the subjective and idealist invocation of a merely *abstract* or *formal* freedom which, as *The Communist Party Manifesto* puts it, yields 'historically created conditions of emancipation to fantastic ones.'⁴² Yet, while this is fairly indisputable as regards the affirmative modalities of modernity articulated in both romanticism and Surrealism, and for that matter the hegemonic manifestations of the avant-garde in general, it does not mean – and this is precisely the point that I want to argue – that this is the *only* way of thinking the relation between present and future opened up by Surrealist work and experience, even if it is undoubtedly the dominant one. Indeed, it seems to me, 'tomorrow is at stake' for Blanchot in Surrealism precisely in terms of the potential it may afford for recognising *another* model of the affirmative relating of present to future: a distinctively *non-utopianist*, yet still speculative, experience of the present as a site of possibility.

Surrealism and 'the other romanticism'

In order to understand this, though, we need to go back, once again, to Blanchot's reading of romanticism, especially as it is pursued in the essay, also included in *The Infinite Conversation*, which is simply entitled *The Athenaeum*. Key here is the search for what Blanchot terms – in a phrase to which I will return – a 'non-romantic essence of romanticism,' to be found in the work of Friedrich Schlegel in particular (357). And, in fact, as Blanchot, rather densely, elaborates this idea, it refers to



nothing less than an affirmative conception of the fragment which would, *contra* the projective temporality of utopianism, actually *affirm the fragmentary* as a condition of futurity itself; that is, a conception regulated by a certain organisation and acceptance of the fragmentary (and thus of the finite) as that which should 'guide' present action outside of any horizon of (utopian) completion.

One of the most famous of Schlegel's *Athenaeum Fragments* provides a particularly fertile resource for Blanchot, as well as for Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, in this respect:

A project is the subjective embryo of a developing object. A perfect project should be at once completely subjective and completely objective...The feeling for projects – which one might call fragments of the future – is distinguishable from the feeling for fragments of the past only by its direction: progressive in the former, regressive in the latter.⁴³

It must first be observed that – as in his brother's fragment cited earlier – what is conceptualised by Schlegel here are, *contra* melancholia, fragments of the *future* not of the past. The *affirmation* of fragmentation thus serves to re-orient the relation of cultural present to future away from the narrative of loss or decline and toward possibility as a 'product' of the fragmentary, opening up what Schlegel, in a remarkable prefiguring of surrealist rhetoric, calls 'the as-yet-uncharted territories of life, art or science.'⁴⁴

The question which then arises is how, within this temporal set-up, the relation of (fragmentary) present to future – to the 'as-yet-uncharted territories' of tomorrow – is to be understood. There is little doubt that the most obvious reading of this passage – with its suggestion that the 'feeling' for fragments of the future is 'distinguishable from the feeling for fragments of the past only by its direction' – would view it, once again, as simple utopianism. The 'meaning' of the fragment would then remain very much under the governance of a reconciliation – a speculative future when the missing contents would be finally filled in – of a synthesis of subject and object, sensible and intelligible, the ideal and the real; romanticism as the 'progressive, universal' projection directed by the regulating Idea of a reunification of poetry' and 'life.'⁴⁵ This would be the *telos* of the 'project' as that which marks, as the 'embryo of a developing object,' a promised future unity, even if one which cannot, historically, be realised 'here and now' in the fragmentary present. If non-identity is, in this, irresistible at the present – is indeed 'dialectically' necessary as the force which would project the development of the embryonic wholeness forward – and thus to be affirmed, it is still to be affirmed *in the name of* an identity which cannot *yet* be instantiated.

Yet, for Blanchot, this is not the only way of understanding the nature of the 'fragments of the future' which are to be affirmed at the present. For one can also locate in the margins of Schlegel's conception a kind of 'equivocity' which points to a thinking of the fragment beyond the hold of 'solutions and resolutions, systems and chaoes' and which suggests that the 'future' itself might be conceived of as fragmentary. It is, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy argue, this 'gesture which distinguishes it infinitesimally but all the more decisively from metaphysical idealism,' insofar as 'discreetly and without really wanting to...it abandons or excises the work itself – and thus is transformed in an almost imperceptible manner into the "work of the absence of the work



[*désœuvremen*].⁴⁶ Such is the 'non-romantic essence of romanticism,' 'unworking' the temporalities of utopianism. As Blanchot puts it in the later *Writing of the Disaster*:

The demand, the extreme demand of the fragmentary...traverses, overturns, ruins the work because the work (totality, perfection, achievement) is the unity which is satisfied with itself – this is what Schlegel sensed, but it is also what finally escaped him, though in such a way that one cannot reproach him with this misunderstanding which he helped and still helps us to discern in the very movement whereby we share it with him.⁴⁷

If, then, as Blanchot concedes, Schlegel most often thinks the fragment through a model of 'history, which, become revolutionary, places at the forefront of its action work that is undertaken in view of the whole' – and he will say the same of Breton – there is also, in tension with this, a sense of 'fragmentary writing' as an *infinitely* disruptive movement of *unworking* which exposes and traces the *impossibility* of any final resolution and makes possible 'new relations that except themselves from unity, just as they exceed the whole' (359). At the very least, one can say, Blanchot asserts, that 'literature will from now on bear in itself [the] question of discontinuity or difference as a question of form – a question and a task German romanticism not only sensed but already clearly proposed – before consigning them to Nietzsche and, beyond Nietzsche, to the future' (359).

Surrealist Image and Fragment

It should by now be obvious that Blanchot is very clearly *not* concerned, in his writings on Schlegel and the *Athaeneum* group, with the fragmentary simply as a particular 'literary, rhetorical, or stylistic form,' which is exhausted by its romantic expression, but rather as a much more general (and necessarily abstract) problematic or *question* which romanticism hands on to those coming after; the question, in some sense, as I have already suggested, of *modernity* itself. Needless to say, among those to whom such a 'question' is 'consigned' are the Surrealists. It is in these terms that one might thus approach the Surrealist image, in particular, as a practice which bears the 'question of discontinuity or difference as a question of form.' (Recall Aragon's distinction between 'image' and 'metaphor', where the former should 'produce a cataclysm'.)⁴⁸ As Breton famously describes it in the first manifesto: 'The value of the image depends on the beauty of the spark obtained; it is, consequently, a function of the difference of potential between the two conductors.'⁴⁹ For Blanchot, as such, the Surrealist image may be philosophically delineated, in resolutely non-Hegelian fashion, as 'the surprising manifestation (a manifestation by surprise) of the un-unifiable, the simultaneity of what cannot be together' (415) – the sewing machine and the umbrella, in Lautréamont's famous phrase. As he notes, a range of terms are used to denote the experience thus 'produced' – shock, the spark, the explosive, the convulsive; experiences of the extraordinary, the marvellous, the unexpected, the *surreal* – concepts that, as Blanchot puts it, 'would like to escape all conceptualisation' (406). The question that then emerges, where 'tomorrow' is at stake, is: What kind of futurity does such a 'spark' evoke or 'respond' to? And the answer to this is far from self-evident.



Adorno's famous critique, for example, would see little, if any, futurity at work in the Surrealist discontinuous juxtaposition of images,⁵⁰ presenting – in 'wide-eyed' fashion – only 'unmediated absorption of the fragments of immediacy', as Wolin puts it.⁵¹ 'The marvellous,' Aragon writes, 'is the eruption of contradiction within the real.'⁵² But, Adorno asks, does such an 'eruption' do anything more than merely replicate the existing 'reality' of capitalism? How is such 'eruption' to be connected to any speculative experience? A reasonable question. Yet, equally, in its potentially *utopianist* functioning, the Surrealist image could, just as easily, of course, be accused of *too much* futurity, in the sense of a direct 'imagistic' projection of the desired future unification of which Breton also speaks in the first manifesto, betraying, in another form, the Adornian insistence upon the necessity of a *negative* dialectics. As always, such a stark opposition would suggest that something is being missed, and, as I am not the first to note, it is clear that part of the problem with Adorno's critique of Surrealism – and of Benjamin in similar terms – lies in his own restrictively Hegelian conception of 'mediation.' For it tends to presume that speculative experience can *only* ultimately be conceived of in utopianist or Hegelian terms (even if negatively defined). However, it is, in fact, precisely this assumption that, for example, Benjamin's, early accounts of montage (as a form of self-conscious incompleteness, or, we might say, fragmentation) – which look forward to the 1929 Surrealism essay – are intended to counter, insisting as they do upon the montage or image's capacity to open a (necessarily speculative) perspective on how the present 'may be changed,' without violently predetermining the form that such a change might assume in terms of new modes of experience.⁵³ As Caygill rightly observes, the *whole point* of Benjamin's philosophy is the principled attempt to elaborate a 'non-Hegelian account of speculative experience.'⁵⁴

It is in the terms of such an attempt that Blanchot's readings of romanticism and Surrealism might also be placed. In this sense, just as, as I have been arguing, Blanchot seeks to read Schlegel against that which in him leads into Hegel – the 'rhythm of the romantic fragment' which works, 'anachronistically', against its 'dialectical *Aufhebung*'⁵⁵ – so, too, he seeks to read Breton against the grain of his own Hegelian or utopianist formulations. It is in the light of this, for example, that Blanchot cites the possibility, in Surrealist practice and experience, of an 'opening' which the Hegelian determination of chance is 'insufficient to account for' (414), insofar as the latter must always work to recuperate such an 'opening' through its own dialectical movement.⁵⁶ Of course, echoing Adorno in this respect, it should be said that Blanchot expresses his own doubts about the Surrealists' conceptions of the 'chance operation,' doubts which centre on what it would mean to 'will' or 'desire' the chance formation or encounter. Surrealism's 'temptation' is its 'wish to believe', Blanchot writes, that 'the very unknown...in the world, but disturbing the world, would allow itself to be observed so as to make the surrealist affirmation, in the full light of day, tangible and real' (416). Yet, above all, Blanchot argues, what is important in the 'play' with 'chance' (beyond any futile debates concerning its 'origins' or 'authenticity'), is the 'provocation' by which the future 'itself' comes into play. Such a future – the future upon which chance 'speculates' – is quite different from that of Hegelian logic or utopianist imagining. For this future is precisely, Blanchot writes, the future as unknown – 'ever exterior to the horizon against which it seems to stand out' (412) – which comes 'into relation', in the



Surrealist image, as 'interruption, interval, arrest, or opening' (413), rather than as any actual positive projection. What Blanchot explicitly terms René Char's 'fragmentary writing' is exemplary in this respect:

Whoever says fragment ought not to say simply the fragmenting of an already existent reality or the moment of a whole still to come. This is hard to envisage due to the necessity of comprehension according to which the only knowledge is knowledge of the whole...For such comprehension, the fragment supposes an implied designation of something that has previously been or will subsequently be a whole – the severed finger refers back to the hand...Our thought is thus caught between two limits: the imagining of the integrity of substance and the imagining of a dialectical becoming. But in the fragment's violence, and, in particular, the violence to which René Char grants access, quite a different relation is given to us – at least as promise and as a task (307).

Hence, in Char, the 'fragmented poem...is not a poem that remains unaccomplished, but it opens *another form of accomplishment* – the one at stake...in questioning, or in an affirmation irreducible to unity...[a] new kind of arrangement not entailing harmony, concordance or reconciliation, but that accepts disjunction or divergence' (308) [my italics]. What would such an 'accomplishment,' and 'acceptance,' entail?

Another Form of Accomplishment

I will come back to the motif of 'questioning,' in Blanchot's reading of Char, in a moment, but before doing so it is worth fleshing out a little more – beyond the dense compactness of Blanchot's own text – what is being suggested here of the Surrealist image. For, as suggesting the possibility of 'another form of accomplishment', a 'new kind of arrangement,' the Surrealist image, clearly, for Blanchot, manifests, in some sense, the promised conception – promised by early romanticism – of a fragmentary writing no longer regulated by the dialectical *Aufhebung* or utopianist horizon of final unification. This does not so much negate 'completion' – whatever that might mean – as it proposes 'a new form of completion that mobilises – renders mobile – the whole through its *interruption* and through interruption's various modes' (358) [my italics].

As the emphasis on mobility, on *movement*, here implies, I would argue, this is not the destruction of affirmative speculative experience *per se*. Rather the *future* appears here – comes 'into relation' with the present of the art work – *only through interruption*, in doing so continuing to insist upon its 'unknown' character. This then is, as it were, the other romantic precedent for avant-garde experience, and for its defining relating of present to future. Hence, the remarkable convergences between Blanchot's essay on romanticism and that on Surrealism. And is it, indeed, not possible to read a central part of what Blanchot calls the Surrealist 'exigency' in this way – that Surrealism for which, as Breton writes, 'freedom, not only ideally but as a constant regenerator of energy...must exclude any idea of comfortable balance; it must be conceived of as a permanent *erethism*?'⁵⁷ At the very least, it seems clear that Blanchot is right to insist upon something like a crucial *différend* in



temporalities at stake, in the alternate ways in which Surrealism sets 'tomorrow' 'in play and as a player' through the 'eruption' of the image – a fact that commentators have often failed to acknowledge. It is in the light of this, perhaps, that Blanchot, meditating on the question with which I began – that is, the 'historical' character of Surrealism – writes that 'one cannot claim that surrealism has been realised (thus losing more than half of what names it: everything in it that goes out ahead of it), neither can one say that it is half-real or on the way to realisation' (407). What, then, finally, is the *time* of this Surrealism?

The Future of the Question

Of course, as I have already noted, Blanchot is not unaware of the problematic aspects of much of Surrealism's (essentially utopianist) self-understanding: 'Authentic thought? Non-distorted, non-enclosed, non-alienated?', he writes: 'The *real* is the temptation to which surrealism risks succumbing when it lends itself to a search for the immediate.' Yet, for Blanchot, Surrealism is, in relation to such a temptation – and I recall that he says something similar of Schlegel – 'less responsible than it is its victim' (410). And it is against this notion that he cites, in Surrealism, a non-utopianist 'search for an affirmation that stands in a distant relation with the unknown: that which is not measured by unity, and be it even interior to it, always extends beyond, separates from and disarranges the whole' (411). This is, as I have tried to show, the key to Blanchot's alternate understanding of the 'surrealist affirmation,' its particular temporal modality, as a 'perpetual affirmation, perpetual dissuasion and dissidence.' Surrealism, he significantly argues, is not, in its fullest radicality, a project or programme – much as, at times, Breton (and others) might have *wanted* it to be – but rather the inscription, and perpetual re-inscription, of a 'summons', an 'exigency' – a *demand* – which comes precisely from the 'unexpected', the 'unknown' itself as the source of the future's reflexes which 'vibrate' it:

From the unknown – what is neither the pure unknowable nor the not yet known – comes a relation that is indirect, a network of relations that never allows itself to be expressed unitarily. Whether it be called the marvellous, the surreal, or something else...the unknown provokes – if in fact (in what way?) it is provoked – a non-simultaneous set of forces, a space of difference and, to speak like the first surrealist work, a *magnetic field* always free of the itinerary it calls forth, embodies, and nonetheless holds in reserve...*the future of surrealism is bound to this exigency of a plurality escaping unification and extending beyond the whole* (while at the same time presupposing it, demanding its realisation), untiringly maintaining, in the face of the Unique, contradiction and rupture (409). [my italics]

It is at this point, in thinking about this 'exigency' to which 'the future of surrealism is bound,' that we might then return to the notion, elaborated in the reading of Char, that the 'fragmented poem...is not a poem that remains unaccomplished, but it opens another form of accomplishment – the one at stake...in *questioning*.' For, there is, as Blanchot attests elsewhere in *The Infinite Conversation*, a clear *temporality* to the question generally which is not unimportant here:



A question is movement...In the simple grammatical structure of interrogation, we already feel this opening of questioning speech – there is a demand for something else; incomplete, the speech that questions affirms that it is only a part. In which case...the question would be essentially partial, it would be the place where speech is always given as incomplete (12).

There is, however, a difference in the ways in which this incompleteness might be conceived. Thus, Blanchot continues:

...in the Yes of the answer we lose the direct, immediate given, and we lose the opening, the richness of possibility. The answer is the question's misfortune, its adversity...And yet the question demands a response? Certainly there is a lack in the question that seeks to be made up for. But this lack is of a strange kind...the question is not pursued in the answer. On the contrary, it is terminated, closed again by the answer. The question inaugurates a type of relation characterised by openness and free movement; and what it must be satisfied with closes and arrests it (13-14).⁵⁸

In his essay on Char, Blanchot cites the following phrase from his work: 'How can we live without the unknown before us?' (300). It is, of course, precisely in the *question*, in its form, that such an *experience* must be confronted. To question – as a form of fragmentary, incomplete speech, as Blanchot defines it – is necessarily to 'speak' with 'the unknown before us.' This is always the case, but there is (and this is the crucial point for my concerns here), an articulable distinction between the presentation of this experience in relation to the completion of an *answer* – the relating of incomplete to complete at work in both utopianism and Hegelianism – and, as Blanchot divines in a certain Surrealist affirmation, its presentation in relation to what he calls the 'unknown as unknown' in which no such end is projected. This 'unknown as unknown' is, from the 'perspective' of the cultural present, neither 'the not yet known, the object of a knowledge still to come,' nor is it simply 'the absolutely unknowable, a subject of pure transcendence, refusing itself to all manner of knowledge and expression,' which would render impossible any relation to the unknown at all. It is neither the projected object of absolute knowledge, nor that which 'would arise out of intuition or a mystical fusion' (300). Rather, we might say, it is that which marks the open relation of present to future at stake in something like *experimentation*;⁵⁹ what Blanchot, in the essay on Char, and implicitly echoing certain formulations in Heidegger, terms 'research':

In this relation...the unknown would be disclosed in that which it leaves under cover...Research - poetry, thought – relates to the unknown as unknown. This relation discloses the unknown, but by an uncovering that leaves it under cover; through this relation there is a 'presence' of the unknown; in this 'presence' the unknown is rendered present, but always as unknown...This relation will not consist in an unveiling. The unknown will not be revealed, but indicated (300).

In such 'indication,' Surrealism functions as a 'concerted, non-concerted seeking that remains without assurance and without guarantee' (419). The future remains 'surprising,' because it *is* the future, that which is not reducible to the terms of the present, yet which may, precisely as (and only as) 'unknown,' *interrupt* it as demand or promise (for something other). If there are the reflexes of many



futures that vibrate the Surrealist work, it is this 'unworkable' future which, for Blanchot, constitutes its most 'radical exigency,' as that which is without end and 'exceeds every whole' (even as it endlessly evokes it).

In this light, let me return, then, finally, to Blanchot's question concerning the historical character of Surrealism. In his extraordinary 1995 book, *The Politics of Time*, Peter Osborne notes that the most fundamental 'lack' within 'the time-consciousness of historical studies' is that 'of an adequate sense of the future': 'In the constitution of historiography as a discipline, the future appears only negatively...it embraces the future only tangentially in past and present forms...It does not confront it as an independent temporal dimension.'⁶⁰ It is this 'lack' that, *unmodified*, does indeed render a history of Surrealism, in Blanchot's words, 'only of scholarly interest.' What it cannot, at any rate, account for is the radical temporalising of history set to work in Surrealism itself, in its affirmation of an irreducible futurity as a source of artistic value. It is in relation – and only in relation – to the full force of this tension that the time of Surrealism truly places the present in question as the 'demand for something else.' At the very least, this should serve to unsettle and to question the simplistic narrations of Surrealism, or of the avant-garde 'in general,' still all-too-prevalent within art and literary history, and their reduction to mere 'period styles' or univocal 'projects.' For a genuine account of Surrealism would have to take account of the challenge that Surrealism makes to the temporalities and categories of historicism – sociological or formal – that would seek to subsume it. Much as Blanchot may write against the grain of our customary readings of Breton's 'provocations' – and I have perhaps not acknowledged this enough – what he does serve to point to is the internal complexity of Surrealism itself, and of its self-understanding, as well as its relation to movements, artists or thinkers which came before, or which responded to its 'exigency' after it. More than most, Surrealism's 'text' is not an homogenous one. Indeed, this very 'reading against the grain' may well be the condition of any new contemporary encounter with Surrealism; the condition of 'our' own 'self-recognition' in the movement of its questioning. It is perhaps only on this condition that 'we' might think the tomorrow of Surrealism today.

¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Howard, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 356. Subsequent page numbers for this work will be given in brackets in the main body of the text. The piece that follows is the revised text of a paper delivered to the AHRB Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies Seminar Series, in Manchester, in November 2002. I would like to thank David Lomas and Gavin Parkinson for their kind invitation to speak, as well as those present at the seminar for their comments on the paper.

² Maurice Blanchot, 'Reflections on Surrealism' in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandel, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1995, p. 85. It is, in part, for this reason that I would suggest – although this will not be the primary focus of what follows - that a critical attention to these pieces may serve to argue a need to rethink our customary conceptions of surrealism's relation to recent French theory and its recasting in the terms of Anglo-American 'post-structuralism.'

³ Blanchot, 'Reflections on Surrealism,' op. cit., p. 85.



⁴ Matei Calinescu, *The Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, 2nd edn., Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1987, p. 9.

⁵ See Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, Verso, London & New York, 1995.

⁶ André Breton, cited in Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, Fontana, London, 1992, p. 242.

⁷ For a slightly fuller elaboration of this argument about the concept of an avant-garde, see David Cunningham, 'Architecture, Utopia and the Futures of the Avant-Garde' in *The Journal of Architecture* 6, 2 (Summer 2001), pp. 169-182.

⁸ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald, Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 1968, p. 10.

⁹ 'For Shelley, the poet is not a relic of the past but a harbinger of the future...poets are specifically termed "heralds", and their minds are called "mirrors of futurity",' Calinescu, op. cit., p. 105.

¹⁰ Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 98.

¹¹ André Breton, 'Originality and Freedom' in *What is Surrealism?: Selected Writings*, ed. Franklin Rosemont, Monad, New York, 1978, p. 207.

¹² André Breton, 'Cavalier Perspective' in *What is Surrealism?*, p. 314. It is the articulation of just such a task that, I believe, allows, in turn, Blanchot's own self-recognition in Surrealism, as will become clear in what follows.

¹³ It is not unimportant in this respect that, as Calinescu shows, 'romanticism' is often used in the early nineteenth century, particularly in France, as 'a synonym for "modern" in the broadest acceptation' and 'only later...narrowed down to designate [particular] literary and artistic schools that reacted against [a] neo-classical system of values,' Calinescu, op. cit., pp. 37-8. As Calinescu states, 'for Stendhal, the concept of romanticism embodies the notions of change, relativity, and, above all, presentness, which makes its meaning coincide to a large extent with what Baudelaire would call four decades later "*la modernité*"' (p. 40). Baudelaire, as he points out, also uses a very similar conception of romanticism in 'The Salon of 1846': 'For me, romanticism is the most recent, the most contemporary form of beauty' (pp. 46-7).

¹⁴ Jurgen Habermas, 'Modernity – an Incomplete Project', trans. Selya Ban-Habib, in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto, London, 1985, p. 4.

¹⁵ See David Cunningham, 'A Time for Dissonance and Noise: On Adorno, Music and the Concept of Modernism' in *Angelaki* 8, 1 (April 2003).

¹⁶ This, I take it, is what is partly meant by Schlegel's assertion that '[m]any of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written.' Friedrich Schlegel, 'Athenaeum Fragments' [fragment 24] in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p. 21.

¹⁷ Art Berman, *Preface to Modernism*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana & Chicago, 1994, p. 135.

¹⁸ See Cunningham, 'A Time for Dissonance and Noise', op. cit.

¹⁹ Critchley, op. cit., p. 112.

²⁰ August Wilhelm Schlegel, 'Athenaeum Fragments' [fragment 243] in *Philosophical Fragments*, op. cit., pp. 51-2.

²¹ Friedrich Schlegel, 'Critical Fragments' [fragment 4] in *Philosophical Fragments*, op. cit., p. 23.

²² See Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Representation, Presentation, Unpresentable' in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby, Polity, Oxford, 1991, pp. 126-7.

²³ Critchley, op. cit., p. 98.

²⁴ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard & Cheryl Lester, SUNY Press, Albany, NY, 1988, p. 35.

²⁵ Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, 2nd edition, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003, p. 57.

²⁶ See Bernhard Lypp, *Aesthetischer Absolutismus und politische Vernunft*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1972.

²⁷ See Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, op. cit., pp. 27-8.

²⁸ 'Oldest System Programme of German Idealism,' trans. Andrew Bowie, in Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, op. cit., p. 334-5. As Bowie comments: 'In the SP an understanding of Kant's postulated "kingdom of ends"...becomes available to intuition in the work of art,' op. cit., p. 57. More than this, the possible intuition of the absolute in the work of art tends to be matched by a conception of the world itself as a work of art. In Friedrich Schlegel's words: 'All holy games of art are only distant intimations of the endless play of the world, of the work of art which constantly forms itself,' *Conversation on Literature*, cited in Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, Routledge, London & New York, 1997, p. 78.

²⁹ 'Oldest System Programme,' op. cit., p. 334.

³⁰ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson-Taylor, Picador, London, 1980, p. 215.

³¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligensia,' trans. Edmund Jephcott, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, Verso, London & New York, 1985, pp. 225-239. These reservations would perhaps most obviously refer to what Peter Bürger re-terms, in his book on the movement, the 'magical irrationalist' side of Surrealism. Peter Bürger, *Der französische Surrealismus*, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, Frankfurt, 1971, p. 18. However, this should not be understood as an attempt to efface the communication between Surrealism and romanticism altogether, but rather to reveal the former's 'self-recognition' in a *different*



romanticism, one more akin to the Schlegelian conception of the fragmentary, about which Benjamin wrote in his 1920 essay 'The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism.' It is precisely in relation to this that a juxtaposition of Benjamin's reading with that of Blanchot would be productive, though I do not have the space to pursue this here. For some brief comments on Benjamin's reading of Surrealism, see Cunningham, 'Architecture, Utopia and the Futures of the Avant-Garde,' op. cit.

³² André Breton, 'Prolegomena for a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else' in *What is Surrealism?*, op. cit., pp. 217, 215.

³³ André Breton, 'An Inaugural Break' in *What is Surrealism?*, op. cit., p. 343.

³⁴ The key point here is that Aragon's 'mythology of the modern' is not simply envisaged as something like a new myth for the 'modern age' – in a socio-periodising sense – but as emphatically modern in its *temporality*; a 'mythology in motion' as Aragon terms it. Aragon, op. cit., p. 130. As far as I am aware, Susan Buck-Morss is alone among Benjamin scholars in having recognised this fact, and in not taking Benjamin's critique of Aragon rather too much at his own word. See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1989, p. 256.

³⁵ Anna Balakian, *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986, pp. 138-9.

³⁶ Breton, 'What is Surrealism?', op. cit., p. 116.

³⁷ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, op. cit., pp. 28, 33. Interestingly, it is to such a schema that Blanchot traces Surrealism's attraction to Marxism in the 1949 article: 'In truth, it is glaringly obvious that historical dialectic offers to all those [like the surrealists] haunted by the ideas of a perfected man, of a limit to the human condition, a chance of the first order: complete man is not to be sought, now, in the rifts and disorders of capitalist society, it is not to be known, it is to be done,' 'Reflections on Surrealism,' op. cit., p. 94. This is, of course, in a sense, just to reconfirm what is already all-too-evident: that Surrealism's Marxism was that of a 'romantic' (early) Marx.

³⁸ Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*, trans. Vivian Folkenflik, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990, pp. 106, 111.

³⁹ André Breton, 'First Manifesto of Surrealism' in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver & Helen Lane, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1972, p. 14.

⁴⁰ André Breton, *Prolégomènes* and 'The Political Position of Surrealism,' both cited in Chénieux-Gendron, op. cit., p. 106.

⁴¹ See, for an example of this reading, Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1993, p. 16.

⁴² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Progress, Moscow, 1977, p. 70. The fact that such an argument has its origins in Hegel's engagement with the likes of Fichte, and the inability of romanticism to resolve the Kantian antinomy of 'ought' and 'is,' is not, I think, unimportant to a reading of surrealism, insofar as, while the desire for 'unification,' of subjective and objective, abstract and concrete, is often explicitly presented in Hegelian terms – in, for example, Breton's second manifesto or Aragon's 1924 text *Une Vague de rêves* – it is, in fact, more clearly 'romantic' in form. This is something I address at more length in 'Hegelianism, Romanticism and the Futures of Surrealism,' forthcoming.

⁴³ Schlegel, 'Athenaeum Fragments' [fragment 22], op. cit., pp. 20-1.

⁴⁴ Schlegel, 'Critical Fragments' [fragment 95], op. cit., p. 11.

⁴⁵ See Schlegel, 'Athenaeum Fragments' [fragment 116], op. cit., p. 31, where Schlegel outlines the desired end of making 'poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical.'

⁴⁶ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, op. cit., pp. 124, 57. The term *désœuvrement* – variously translated as 'unworking,' the 'absence of the work,' 'idleness,' 'inertia' – is of course taken from Blanchot himself.

⁴⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986, p. 160.

⁴⁸ Louis Aragon, cited in Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, California University Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1993, p. 194. As Cohen notes: 'When Aragon asserts the disruptive power of the image, he stresses its destructive force.'

⁴⁹ Breton, 'First Manifesto,' op. cit., p. 37. Thus, as is well known, Breton argues that the Surrealist image is a juxtaposition which derives its 'convulsive beauty' from its denial of any straightforward unification of its disparate elements. It is this that would distinguish it from the drive to (ultimate) unification apparent in, the otherwise superficially similar, constructions of, say, Anglo-American imagist poetry.

⁵⁰ Theodor Adorno, 'Looking Back on Surrealism' in *Notes to Literature. Volume One*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, pp. 87-8.

⁵¹ Richard Wolin, 'Benjamin, Adorno, Surrealism' in Tom Huhn & Lambert Zuidervaart (eds), *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997, p. 107. See also Theodor Adorno, 'Letter to Benjamin, November 10th 1938', trans. Harry Zohn, in Ernst Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, New Left Books, London, 1977, pp. 128-130. Interestingly, such a critique has some echo within Surrealism itself. For example, André Masson, writing in 1950, states of automatism that its 'danger' lies in the fact that 'it often associates only unessential relations, whose content, as Hegel puts it, "does not go beyond what is contained in the images".' André Masson, 'Painting is a Wager' in *Yale French Studies* 31 (1964), p. 123. The fact that Masson cites Hegel at this point is interesting given Adorno's argument.

⁵² Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, op. cit., p. 217.



⁵³ This is why Adorno is also so profoundly wrong in attributing to Benjamin a kind of naive Fichtean faith in imaginative power as having a 'direct – I would almost say: developmental – relatedness to the future as Utopia.' See Theodor Adorno, 'Letter to Benjamin, August 2nd 1935' in Bloch et al., op. cit., p. 111. The problem for Benjamin was precisely one of how to think speculative experience outside of *both* Hegelian dialectics *and* Fichtean utopianist idealism.

⁵⁴ Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, Routledge, London & New York, 1998, p. 8.

⁵⁵ Critchley, op. cit., p. 115.

⁵⁶ There is an obvious proximity here to Bataille's concerns and to his reading of Hegel.

⁵⁷ Breton, 'What is Surrealism?', op. cit., p. 118.

⁵⁸ I have offered a slightly different commentary on this passage – which comes from a chapter entitled 'The Most Profound Question' – in David Cunningham, 'Ex Minimis: Greenberg, Modernism and Beckett's *Three Dialogues*' in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 13 (December 2003).

⁵⁹ See *The Infinite Conversation*, op. cit., p. 417, where Blanchot writes of an 'experience' that is 'an experimentation.' An interesting comparison could be pursued here with Lyotard's later, but rather similar, attempt to theorise the temporality involved in 'the condition of the literatures and arts that have no assigned addressee and no regulating ideal, yet in which value is regularly measured on the stock of experimentation,' Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Vlad Godzich, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985, p. 16.

⁶⁰ Osborne, *Politics of Time*, op. cit., p. 33.

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The Guarantor of Chance: Surrealism's Ludic Practices¹

Susan Laxton

Abstract

The historical link between Surrealism and poststructuralism, apparent in the psychoanalytically informed ludic practices of both the Bretonian and Batailleian strains of the movement, has been central to the rewriting of Surrealism as the 'other' to modernist discourse – and to an understanding of the movement's importance to the wildly expanded field of art practices of the 1970s and 1980s. Through their ludic practices, from automatist driven *errance* to firmly regulated games activated to guarantee chance outcomes, Surrealism turned play against itself, initiating processes and gestures that resisted the means/ends rationality driving institutions of art toward homogeneity, standardization and commodification.

Surrealism's Postmodern Dialectic

Last year I attended a conference in honour of the philosopher and critic Arthur Danto where a contemporary painting was disparaged with the comment that it was 'no better than a bad Magritte.'² For a moment, there was silence. The audience shifted in their seats; the speaker faltered. The spectre of Surrealist painting had been called forth – nobody asked what made a Magritte good or bad – everyone understood the terms of the dismissal. In spite of the fact that Magritte's paintings are among the best known and most widely exhibited works associated with the Surrealist movement, the critical position that maintains Surrealist painting as the standard for 'bad art' persists in contemporary academia. And by this phrase 'bad art,' I mean to evoke judgments of both taste and morality.

This is not a position that should be mistaken for a Greenbergian hangover – the opposition that valorised abstraction as 'pure opticality' and denigrated Surrealism as kitsch has long been exhausted.³ Rather, the issue lies with easel painting itself as a privileged medium within art institutions, and the refusal of those institutions by radical artists working in the first decades of the twentieth century. More specifically, it has to do with painting's own uncomfortable history within the Surrealist movement: a history scarred by polemic reversals, embarrassing compromises, and internal dissention. For, when André Breton performed his recuperation of painting in *La Révolution surréaliste* over the heads of Max Morise and Pierre Naville, compromising early commitments in order to draw Picasso into the movement, he virtually guaranteed that the greater part of Surrealist painting would be excluded from the subsequent art historical re-evaluation of the movement in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ That reassessment would be based on the recovery of Surrealism as an *avant-garde* movement, and the criterion for inclusion – that the work meet certain standards of 'resistance' – demanded that art practices be understood as the only available sphere from which to recode a cultural field driven by commerce.⁵ Easel painting, affirmative of the status quo, could never approach the transgressive power of collage and photography. Measured against this standard of institutional critique, Surrealist painting was of course condemned for conforming to the pictorial demands of the museum and the art market, but the apparition that sent a shudder through the auditorium at Danto's



conference was Surrealist painting as the sign for the inevitable co-optation of all avant-garde movements.

Of course, the standards set by critics such as Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster who wrote Surrealism back into the history of modern art in the 1970s and 1980s are inseparable from their own historical context as postmodern subjects and from their simultaneous reception of the wildly expanding and commercially driven field of contemporary art practices – conditions that made institutional critique seem particularly urgent. Advanced art in the postmodern field interrogated modernist autonomy by revealing strategies of construction and displacing the doxa of authenticity and originality. Instead, it addressed the production of meaning and the conditions from which meaning emerged, following on the rigorous questioning of representation initiated by post-structuralist theories.

Accordingly, the simultaneous reassessment of Surrealism recovered an alternative strain of art production latent in the dominant art historical discourse – a strain that sought to fold art into life through the embrace of the experiential, the degraded and the everyday. In retrospect, this alternative range of practices seemed to affirm the ultimate *contingency* of meaning against the *certainty* or *totality* of meaning proffered by modernist aesthetics; that is, they appeared self-reflexive, not self-referential. From the far-flung reaches of the Dada movement, Marcel Duchamp's readymade interrogated the determinants of the work of art. And from the margins of Surrealism, the dismantling of cognitive autonomy was recognized as well, through the movement's psychoanalytically-driven surrender of visual and experiential mastery to the mechanisms of the unconscious. It was through these alternative practices – strategies and processes, not canvases and sculptures – that Surrealism gained status as an avant-garde movement, initiating a critique of artistic and cognitive autonomy that resonated with postwar advanced art.

The link between Surrealism and postmodernism was succinctly made by Hal Foster in his 1983 introduction to a collection of essays gathered under the name *The Anti-Aesthetic*.⁶ Arguing through the theories of Jürgen Habermas, Foster claims that the autonomy of culture itself in the first decades of the twentieth century 'provoked, at least in art, a counter-project in the form of an anarchic avant-garde.' He continues: 'Although repressed in late modernism, this "surrealist revolt" is returned in postmodernist art (or rather, its critique of representation is affirmed), for the mandate of postmodernism is also: "change the object itself".' Both the historical avant-garde and its postwar neo-avant-garde counterpart engaged the task of bodying forth the 'death of the subject,' the loss of 'master narratives,' and the difficulty of opposition in 'consumer society'.⁷

One of the leitmotifs of what would come to be described as a postmodern reintegration of art with life was the appearance of acategorical art practices that freely mixed formerly discrete mediums – or ignored them entirely. With the rise of hybrid and unclassifiable forms such as the combine of performance and video or the dematerialising gestures of conceptual art and installation, the framing functions of easel painting and sculpture were declared effectively bankrupt – unable to adequately incorporate the structural freedoms now necessary to address the voracious institutional field. Likewise, when the contours of an alternative strain of modernism began to show themselves to



historians looking back on Surrealism, they took the shape not of the discourse of mastery and control implied by the high finish of Surrealist painting, but of art production that had been marginalized in the discourse: most emphatically, photography and collage, but also frottage and the erotically charged found object.⁸ Surrealist painting was discredited as a reactionary return to academic and institutional norms, a rejection with historical support in the form of the writings of the so-called renegade surrealists led by Georges Bataille, who had excoriated Breton's group on the grounds of its sublimation and romantic idealism.

Bataille's *informe* reads as a *desublimating* operation that opens form onto space, eroding the boundary between figure and ground, inside and outside, art and life – exposing those boundaries as conventions. From their place outside the traditional categories of works of art, avatars of the *informe* effectively critique the institutional codes and lines of power underlying those categories. Thus within Bataillean Surrealism, painting could be accounted for only if it displayed a structural heterogeneity – rather than a depictive one, which would be designated as a transformation of base material into the merely visual – and a proclivity to waste that challenged the prevailing ethos of instrumental reason and exchange value.⁹ The 1996 show *L'informe: mode d'emploi*, an exhibition that had been in germination since the early 1980s, posed the operations of the *informe* point for point against the founding myths of modernism: opticality, verticality, unification and the visual gestalt – yet that resistance was liberally demonstrated with *postmodern* art. Thus Raoul Ubac's 1939 *Brûlage* and Robert Morris's 1967 *Felt Tangle* were linked not through their medium, style or historical contingency but through their shared resistance to assimilation by the dominant culture.¹⁰

It could be said, then, that a well-limned set of concepts guided the art historical project that wrote the Surrealist past as the history of the postmodern present. Through the miasma of shifting historical contexts an impulse to 'change the object' could be traced through formal and institutional challenges, unconventional mediums and an insistence on the contingency of meaning. But perhaps most importantly for Surrealism, these new interpretive frames would be joined by art history's embrace of psychoanalytic theory as a challenge to the humanist notion of cognitive autonomy.¹¹

Following on the post-Lacanian acknowledgment of the centrality of repetition compulsion and the uncanny to psychoanalysis, Surrealism was reinterpreted on the basis of the movement's engagement with the *full* range of Freudian theories – as opposed to the focus on the abundant literal dream depictions that had become a cliché of Surrealist art history. Photography, arguably the single most important critical medium actively refracting the *postmodern* scene, made its critique of authorship by foregrounding its reproductive dimension – the repetition of an absent original that is inherent to the medium. Once again, the implications for Surrealism were recognized and activated, and the movement was reinterpreted on the basis of its formulations around chance and repetition. With chance understood not as fully random coincidence but as the unconscious contriving to place the subject in situations favourable to a traumatic return of the repressed, understood, that is, as an avatar of the Lacanian 'automaton,' then the extent to which Breton had recoiled from this dark side of desire seemed clear and condemnatory. In withdrawing from the impulse to death and destruction that is implied in the full formulation of the pleasure principle, Breton would additionally forego the



direct historical links to the postwar Lacanian revival of psychoanalysis. Again, the writings of the Bataille group, which fully acknowledged the implications of the death drive, were received as a refusal to sublimate the base and the carnal into libidinal desire, a refusal that extended to resistance against the constant pressures on art toward homogeneity and subordination.¹²

The Surrealist Ludic

The displaced role of human volition – and its cousins, artistic intent and originality – that was central to the psychoanalytic formulation of chance and the uncanny was of course also key to the post-structural critique of humanism and had become a touchstone of postmodernist critics, particularly in terms of the relevance of painting to advanced art. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that those artists aligned with Georges Bataille were the only – or even the first – Surrealists to have recognized the potential for critique inherent in the deployment of chance. When modernist easel painting took its first blows from the historical avant-garde, Breton's Surrealism was at hand, and the response of the then-nascent movement was identical to its postmodern 'repetition': a turn to alternative practices. By this I mean not only Breton's early engagement with photography and collage but the activation of automatist-based strategies that were in place even prior to the formulation of the first Surrealist manifesto: ephemeral gestures that, in resistance to object-production, remain only as a trace of their process; procedures that reject the omniscient author through the immediacy of their production. These are the strategies that I am designating as the Surrealist ludic – an early deployment of chance meant to militate against means/ends rationality. Play in Surrealism traces Breton's avant-garde engagement from its first instances in automatist wandering to its systematic application in the form of firmly regulated games. And Surrealist play as it is presented here, in appropriated photographs or in the drawings produced by the game called *cadavre exquis*, reveals direct links to postmodern art practices that have critiqued, rather than affirmed, art institutions.

But the analysis of ludic Surrealism must be prefaced by a clarification of what exactly is meant in an art historical context by play, a task that has never been undertaken within the visual arts, yet is necessary in order to retrieve the ludic from a vernacular that equates it with whimsy, leisure, or entertainment.¹³ Play in fact has a long association with art through aesthetics – a relation that began with the coupling of the two terms in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, a conflation which was maintained through Schiller's institutionalisation of disinterest to ultimately become concretised as a set of practices in the art for art's sake movement at the turn of the last century.¹⁴ The humanist/autonomous definition of play that aligns it with the civilizing impulse in culture survives intact well into the postwar period, and is best summarized by Johan Huizinga:

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary' life.¹⁵



Play comes by its connotations of frivolity and un-productivity to this dominant characteristic: it exists at a remove from a reality driven by practical necessities and its activities have no consequences in that reality. It is conceived as bounded or, to use a term familiar within the discourse of modernism, autonomous. In philosophy, play is any pursuit undertaken for its own sake: it is neither conceptual nor sensuous; it has no stake in intellectual or material worlds; it doesn't *matter*.¹⁶ Clearly, this ludic is inadequate to the goals of an avant-garde bent on shattering boundaries, indulging desire, and probing the grounds of 'pure thought.' But if we press on play's apparently sturdy ramparts, they wobble. For following on play's opposition to reality, a number of other oppositions commonly held against the ludic have emerged, extrapolated from the master notion that aligns the satisfaction of practical needs with biological naturalism and with the stability and authenticity of empirical truths. Seen from this perspective, opposed to fundamental knowledge supported by the reliability of material evidence, play is perceived as unstable, as in the play of meaning; fragmented, as in the play of light; insubstantial, as in the play of music; or as artificial or inauthentic, as in illusion or 'make-believe.'

These attributes characterize play as eccentric specifically in its *lack* of limits – in direct contrast to the aesthetic grasp of play as a bounded activity. This designation sets play against the normative, the rational, and the ideal as well as, in its apparent unconcern with external conditions, against political entities. This characterization, too, persists up to and throughout modernist discourse. In fact, at the threshold of the twentieth century, just before Surrealism emerges on the scene, play as a signifier is internally riven. The contradictions inherent to the term are reflected in the very range of philosophical approaches that make use of ludic theories: play is claimed as the underlying justification for such radically opposed concepts as Schiller's autonomous aesthetics and Nietzsche's Dionysian excesses.¹⁷ The ludic drives are historically something to be contained, harnessed or released; their significance is determined solely by context. Even within the relatively limited discipline of art, play's variability rubs through, as when for example musical diachrony, dynamic and ephemeral, is inertly framed as an abstract totality autonomous from material content.

In fact the breadth and flexibility of play as a signifier threatens to dissolve even these meanings in the multiplicity of its references. To play is to engage – to put into play; yet to play is to *disengage* from consequence. Play is artificial, as in mimetic illusions, yet it is characterized as a primal impulse. It is useless and it produces nothing, yet is understood psychologically as a form of practice, trial action for life. It is constructive, as when the smooth play of machine parts keeps up production, and it is destructive, as when too much play in a part can bring the whole to a catastrophic halt. Play claims to be free – it cannot be coerced – yet it is valued for the restrictions that keep it circumscribed from life. In spite of Huizinga's insistence (and Schiller's and Kant's before him) that play is bounded and regular, circumscribing an ideal field, its overarching characteristic is *indeterminacy*. Accordingly, play is repeatedly defined in aesthetic and cultural discourse by what it is *not*, rather than by an essence: there is nothing at its centre; it signifies the absence of essence. Play's conundrum, then, is also its power. Its position as the signifier of excess beyond binary opposition has made it a central reference for post-structural thought, notably that of Jacques Derrida,



with the play of the signifier providing the unstable basis for the arbitrariness and ultimate contextuality of meaning at large.¹⁸

This alternative dimension of the ludic, the strain that was tapped by the avant-garde as a fundamentally subversive phenomenon, was not without its precedents in the discursive field from which Surrealism was to emerge: Nietzsche's aesthetic theory acknowledged play's full range of signification, sorting out the fundamentally ludic cosmos into Apollonian illusion and Dionysian excess.¹⁹ Nietzschean play, in its sounding of the depths of violence and tragedy, would become a touchstone of the Bataille Surrealists. But it was the play theories of psychoanalysis, also engaged with opening up the conundrum of the pleasures of 'unpleasure,' that would resonate with the Surrealists gathered around André Breton, and these are the theories that would ultimately inform the better part of the Surrealist games.²⁰

In their ludic practices the Surrealists would find an unrestricted medium for their critique of reality. Yet this medium, play, was nevertheless thoroughly modernist itself. Play, according to the terms by which it is joined to art through aesthetics, shares the structure of modernist self-referentiality: a bounded field of signs cut off from reference to – and consequence in – material reality. To theorize the ludic as critique in the modern context is to explore the paradox of the deployment of play against play, with the regulated and autonomous ludic as the basis for art institutions undermined by a disorderly counter-model that underpins Surrealism's occupation of play as an avant-garde strategy.

The first of these strategies, in place by 1924, is Surrealist *errance*, an aimless wandering in the city's streets meant to encourage the eruption of unconscious images into the perceptual field.²¹ *Errance* was an extension of automatist strategies into physical space, a revaluation of perception and apprehension that, in its privileging of the immediacy of experience, stood firmly against representation itself. As such, the practice was so ephemeral as to have left few traces. Yet like all Surrealist strategies engaging the unconscious, *errance* was tied to the imagistic.

In describing automatism, the psychiatrist Pierre Janet maintained that it is only through the *conventions* of perception that we experience time as linear and the visible world as a continuous field – without preconceptions, reality would appear radically fragmented, in a condition of disaggregation, as subconscious processes became indistinguishable from the consciously perceived world.²² Through the disengagement of will that marked *errance*, the Surrealists sought this breakdown between imaginary objects and real objects, a breakdown that would fully satisfy the avant-garde criteria for the rejoining of art with everyday experience. Any record of *errance* therefore would necessarily appear as a disaggregate assembly of emphatically ordinary images, scraps lifted directly from the urban field in an attempt to evade conventions of perception and organization. Two texts of the mid-to-late 1920s, André Breton's *Nadja* and Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, approached this montage-like immediacy through their diaristic structure – but importantly, *Nadja* also leaned on photographic illustrations. But a third, entirely photographic record of *errance* also exists, contemporary with these – a text that records an experience of the city structured by the psychic apparatus in its own likeness – an obscure album of Eugène Atget's photographs bound together by Man Ray in 1926.²³





Fig. 1 Eugène Atget, *Avenue des Gobelins*, 1925, silver printing-out paper print, 22.8 x 17.8 cm, George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, Man Ray Collection.

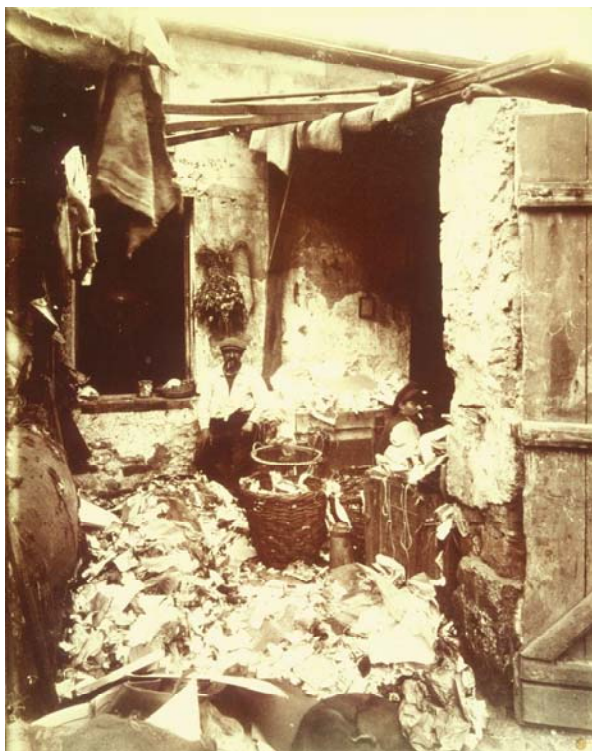


Fig. 2 Eugène Atget, *Porte d'Asnières – Cité Trebert*, 1913, albumen print, 21.7 x 18 cm, George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, Man Ray Collection.



The assemblage of more than forty photographs is mounted in exactly a manner to evoke the reception of the city by a Surrealist 'in a state of grace with chance.'²⁴ Its choice of subjects feels arbitrary: unnamed women in doorways, window displays (**fig. 1**), anonymous architecture; and it is repetitive within those categories. The places that it documents range from a travelling circus encamped at Rue de Vaugirard in Montparnasse, to the ragpickers' settlement in the far reaches of the 17th arrondissement northeast of the city (**fig. 2**), to a hairdresser's shop on the Boulevard de Strasbourg just east of Les Halles. And the disaggregation of the collection also extends to its temporal logic: the images range in the dates of their production from 1899 to 1926, in further resistance to closure and unity. The only shared term for the sites seems to be one already present in Atget's own archive: that of a conspicuous displacement – from the well-toured boulevards and monuments that had grounded Paris as homogeneous and refined, to its marginal, gritty and diverse back alleys – effectively delivering a Paris mildly repellent in its banality.

Man Ray's appropriated text – an album of images identified as Atget's but assembled under the sign of Surrealism – represents an exportation of the archive into the field of artistic practices and a radical displacement of authorship. The motivation behind the selection of the images is recondite to the point that the album resists composition and composition's articulation of meaning. Rather, the book-form of the album, which would normally assure the rational unfolding of meaning, here reconstructs a site of Surrealist play – the aleatory 'emergence' of the photographs and their conversion into a Surrealist text. For the images that comprise the album, in their random, redundant and apparently unmotivated disorder, indicate not purposeful selection, but a kind of aimless drift through the city of Paris that was for sale in Atget's studio.²⁵ The fragmented and arbitrary structure of the album indicates a submerged 'illogic' that links the images associatively across their subject matter, much in the oblique manner of unconscious processes.

Disaggregation of the visual field in surrealist *errance* was understood as perception opening transgressively onto the occluded city, in a material instantiation of psychic processes. Writing in the 1970s, some fifty years after his break with the Surrealists, the philosopher Henri Lefebvre still considered this overdetermination of the urban field as a crucial element in his critique of everyday life.²⁶ Through Lefebvre, Surrealist *errance* ripened into the politically charged Situationist *dérive* of the 1950s and 1960s, a spatial *détournement* equally resistant to representation, one that marked out the 'psychogeographic' potential of the urban grid. But it was the activist philosopher Michel de Certeau who made the connection to play explicit. For de Certeau, the sense of never settling implied by the body in *errance*, its state of being always in 'movement-between,' was critical to the political valence of passage through the city. His claim was that urban wandering, recast as a 'pedestrian enunciation' operates in excess of utilization, 'displacing meaning in the direction of equivocalness.' When walking is unmotivated, de Certeau wrote, 'it "authorizes" the production of an area of free play on a checkerboard that analyses and classifies identities,' imposing 'a local authority' as against 'functionalist totalitarianism.'²⁷



Grafting psychic processes onto the 'horizontal' or 'geographic experience of human life' has its postmodern heritors most obviously in the Situationist *dérive*, or in its contemporary, *New Babylon*, a ludic utopia planned by Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys whose inhabitants could change the configurations of the city on whim. But *errance* is also active in post-studio practices such as Vito Acconci's 1969 *Following Piece*, in which Acconci allowed the movements of an arbitrarily chosen passer-by to determine his own passage through the city, or Robert Smithson's 1967 photo-essay *Monuments of Passaic*, an anti-tour through a degraded industrial landscape in New Jersey. The critical potential of revealing what is normally unacknowledged in the urban field would eventually emerge in the public interventions of for example, Gordon Matta Clark, who described his building cuts as a process of 'undoing,' and Adrian Piper, whose 1970 *Catalysis* series sought to derail the isolated complacency of the city dweller. In fact, the dynamic object resistance initiated with *errance* would resonate with the ephemerality of a whole range of post-war performance art, and the appropriative move by which the Surrealists claimed the city as a field of signification was the necessary precedent to the revelation of social systems in the photographically documented work of Hans Haacke and Martha Rosler.

As rich a vein as the urban coordinates of the purposeless proved to be, by the end of the 1920s Surrealist *errance* had been eclipsed by the theory of 'objective chance,' just as its psychoanalytic basis, Janet's automatism, had been replaced by Freudian theory. It would seem that within a mere half-decade the founding notion of Surrealism as essentially dynamic and therefore representable only through an index of process had disappeared. Yet there are indications that it was not abandoned but only submerged, slipped in as the automatic structure underlying another pastime: the systematic playing of games. The most widely and continuously practiced of these was the game of *cadavre exquis*, 'an infallible means,' as Breton recalled, 'for sending judgment on holiday and for completely liberating the metaphorical activity of the mind.' The drawings, he asserted, were endowed 'to the highest degree with the power of *dérive*,' the subjection of the self and its representations to the vagaries of pure circumstance, as against even the predetermination of unconscious motives.²⁸



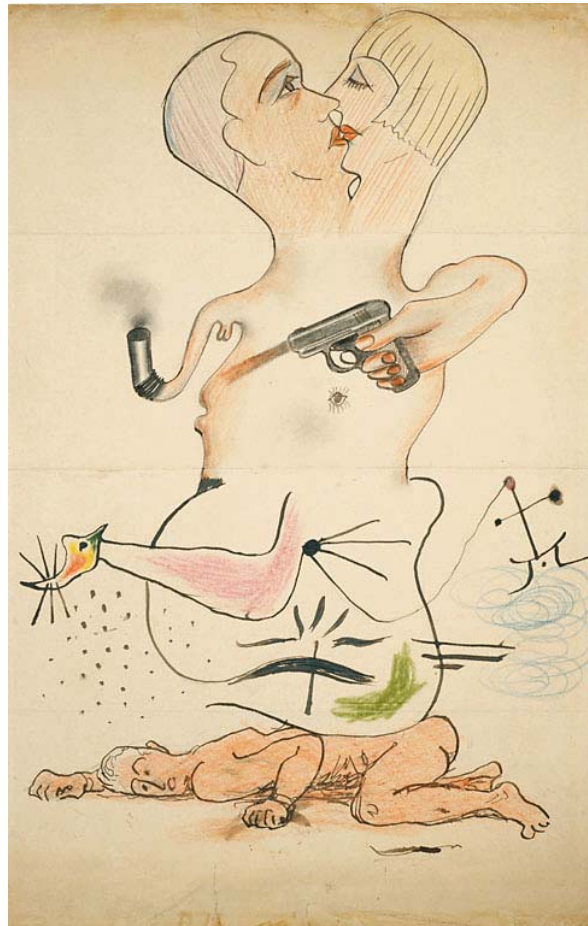


Fig. 3 May Ray, Yves Tanguy, Joan Miró, Max Morise, cadaver exquis, c. 1928. Pen and ink, graphite, coloured pencils and coloured crayons on paper, 36.2 x 23.1 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago (reproduction, The Art Institute of Chicago)

Appropriated in 1925 from the parlor game *petits papiers*, and unique among Surrealist language games for having a visual counterpart, the regular play of *cadavre exquis* displaced even the automatic drawings from which it indirectly derived. Like automatic drawings, the *cadavre exquis* deployed machine-like depersonalization and an insistence on the unpremeditated mark to disable the twinned authority of unique signature and compositional order that had defined the fine arts since the sixteenth century (figs. 3,4). Assembled from the discrete contributions of a number of players according to predetermined rules, each *cadavre exquis* attests to the act of putting pencil to paper in a manner intended to produce sheer inconsistency of signature, style and skill, of mimesis and abstraction, the painstakingly modeled and the utterly flat – provoking a casual violation of tone as the drawing shifts from all the lyricism of which a line is capable to willful and unrepentant scrawl.

But the play itself is severely regulated. The players pass prefolded sheets, and each draws a portion of the figure, hides the contribution behind a fold, then passes the sheet to the next player. Now, each player has a page marked and hidden by somebody else, and must draw on the next blank section, using the remaindered ends of the previous drawing as a starting point. Thus a certain



degree of autonomy is preserved for the 'head' of the figure, but this does not hold for the 'body' of the work, which becomes increasingly overdetermined as play continues. When everyone has put down their pencils, the sheets are unfolded and, as Breton put it, 'one judges the viability of the monster thus produced.'²⁹

Where exactly is chance in this game? The rules that govern the *cadavre exquis* structure and dominate the associative range of iconography registered in the course of play. The game effects a reassuring rhythm, predictable and consistent; an assertion of stability that would seem to be incompatible with the aleatory dynamism associated with free-play, and which reveals an alliance with convention and mechanical automation that should run counter to the discourse of liberation informing Surrealist practices. Yet there is a latent subversiveness to the game that accounts for its continued play long after the Surrealists had given up on tapping the unconscious.

Unlike the deregulatory experiments in automatism, games hold no pretensions to unbridled and primitivist origins – they are self-acknowledged artificial constructions. Their power lies in their ability to generate and establish *new* conventions, a license to freedom purchased by their spatial and temporal boundaries – by their open existence outside the discourse of naturalism that encloses material reality. Any condition lived inside a game is provisional; for the duration of the game behaviours not socially permissible elsewhere can have free rein – so long as this is written into the rules.³⁰ In a sense, then, the extreme regulation of games is moot, for arbitrariness underlies the initial constitution of the rules. As such they have the power to open up unprecedented courses of action and modes of representation from within the bounds of the system they articulate; phenomena that can later be exported from the game in the form of newly rehearsed systems of meaning. If 'surreality' sought a utopian representational mode that approached immediacy through the production of unpremeditated texts, the game and its regulations could be designed to put it into effect: the regulations acted as a *guarantor of chance and chance's repetition*. Thus every *cadavre exquis* testifies indexically to the process of its making – through the folds that slam and lurch across the figure – yet each identically regulated round of the game yields a different result. The paradox is structural, and its mechanical reliability explains the game's appeal long after Surrealism itself had ceased to be compelling as an avant-garde movement: Picasso was still playing in 1947 with Dora Maar; Robert Motherwell, William Baziotes, Roberto Matta, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner played, as did Gerhard Richter and Joseph Beuys, as late as 1979.³¹

Like montage, if the *cadavre exquis* is valued as an avant-garde practice it is because it specifically demands a mode of reception radically different from that of a unified object. In the organic work of art, anticipating the comprehension of the whole guides the comprehension of the parts, as, say, the *cadavre exquis*, in its verticality and its anthropomorphic iconography, raises the expectation that the image will represent a figure. Yet repeatedly the *cadavre exquis* frustrates that expectation, as it substitutes 'monsters' for that which was previously assumed as given: the unity of the human form. The figures are received as ludicrous because their specific parts are set in perceptual and cognitive tension with the whole of the object and its meaning. The reception by the



viewer forces a critique of conventional expectations – there is no essence, no centre to the image, there are only parts set in a chain of part-production. The buckled page introduces ambiguity into representation – between figure and ground, material and ideal, originality and reproduction – releasing the monolith of denotation into the proliferation of play outside meaning.

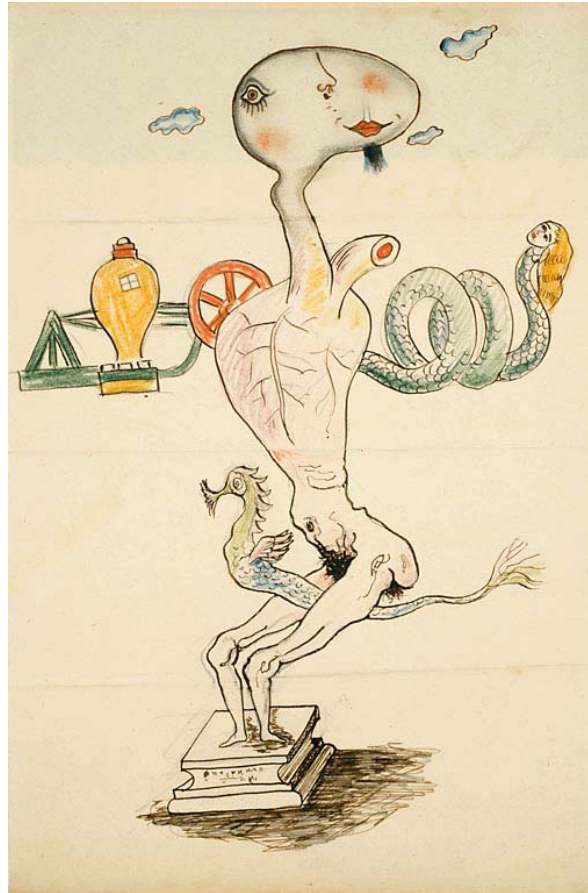


Fig. 4 Yves Tanguy, Man Ray, Max Morise, André Breton, cadaver exquis, 1928. Pen and ink, graphite and coloured crayons on paper, 31.1 x 20 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago (reproduction, the Art Institute of Chicago).

The course of the game amounted to a repeated staging of textual production: an acknowledgement of the work of art as a construction, as a physical manifestation of intertextuality. These ideas, circulating at the nascent moment of post-structuralist theory, would burst into the postwar field in the form of a renewed interest in play as evidenced by the wide translation in the late 1940s of Johan Huizinga's sociological study *Homo Ludens*, a cult text of the Situationists, the appearance of Roger Caillois's ethnologically inflected *Man, Play and Games*, in 1958, and Jacques Derrida's extended treatment of the play of meaning, first made explicit in 1968 with his essay, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'.³² Games would simultaneously resurface in art production, literally in Fluxus projects like Georges Brecht's 1963 *Water Yam*, in which



cards with brief instructions directed the play, or in Oyvind Fählstrom's *Planetarium* of the same year, which generated an infinite variety of combinations from only two perspectives – words determining images or images determining words. Both were preceded by the curtly scripted 'Happenings,' which depended on the active engagement of the audience to produce an unpredictable amalgam of action and reception. Sol Lewitt's directives for wall drawings, meant, like the *cadavre exquis*, to be executed by people with little or no skill, also share in regulation's self-effacement and mechanical reproduction: 'the idea,' as Lewitt said, 'becomes a machine that makes the art.'³³ And the range of process art that showed itself in the 1970s exists, like the *cadavre exquis*, mainly as a degraded trace of its own making – for example in William Anastasi's *Un sighted Drawing* of 1968, where a precisely folded page is repeatedly marked by a pencil jiggling in the draftsman's pocket, producing a prescribed but indeterminate outcome.

To the extent that 'use-value' – defined as that which is consumed 'on the spot,' never entering the cycle of economic exchange – is a touchstone for avant-garde production, it may seem perverse to consider play, which is useless and repetitive, as resistant to the circulation and homogeneity essential to the mature money system.³⁴ But Walter Benjamin, addressing the commodification of art objects in his essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' irrevocably released use-value from its connotation as utility, finding the unique status of the artwork not in instrumentality but 'in ritual, the location of its original use-value.'³⁵ The regulated action of Surrealist games reactivates the parameters of ritual, throwing new light on Benjamin's characterization of the group's activities as 'profane illumination.'³⁶ And the Surrealist games lay outside the system of production and consumption in two important ways. So long as their outcomes remained ephemeral, they resisted evaluation and could not be smoothed into commodities. Even the *cadavre exquis* drawings, thanks to the 'debasement' devices of the fold, were regarded as byproducts which long resisted recuperation as curated art objects. Their value was as a mnemonic trace of process and intersubjective relations. Second, those elusive play outcomes could not be predicted. Chance is the definitive element in the ludic; and in spite of attempts to tame chance into the calculable probabilities of economic game theory,³⁷ play continued to perform destructively – not only at the level of provocations aimed at the propriety of the bourgeoisie, but at a level directed against the broader political category of repressive conventions and the institutions of power that keep them in place. As Denis Hollier has argued through Marx, use-value functions in objects as a property so inseparable from its material support that it 'is only realized in the consumption, that is, the destruction, of the thing' – that is, in a degree of violence done to the object, a violence inflected by pleasure.³⁸ Surrealist games, as pure experience exempt from exchange value, played out their self-destruction as well, gleefully taking down with them the monolithic structure that had held art to play through autonomy and disinterest.

If the problem of autonomy in the visual arts can itself be traced to the ludic, then the relevance of Surrealist play as an avant-garde strategy lies in the use of play to explode accepted notions of the ludic/aesthetic from within. Easel painting was never exempt from the system of exchange that depended on disinterest to sustain commodity culture – a culture that has become so



pervasive in the postwar years that it threatens to compromise the very possibility of critique. Any movement toward once again foregrounding Surrealist painting must acknowledge the historical link between Surrealism and poststructuralism – between not only Dalí and Lacan, but Lacan and Masson, or between Miró, Bataille and Leiris; or via Foucault's reception of Magritte. Through those links, Surrealist painting stands a chance of being understood as having been positioned in resistance to the accelerating standardization of culture that still dominates and manipulates contemporary experience. To risk ignoring the specific conditions of Surrealism's importance to the postwar revolution in meaning would be to risk relegating Surrealist painting to nothing less than a conservative retrenchment on a par with the interwar 'return to reason'³⁹ or, more seriously, to risk complicity with the ongoing commercial and institutional co-optation of the movement.

¹ Sections of this essay were delivered at the Association of Art Historians 29th Annual Conference in London, April 12, 2003, in the session that asked the question, 'Just what is it that makes today's surrealism so different, so appealing?' I'd like to thank the session chairs, Simon Baker and Neil Cox, as well as the speakers and audience for the lively discussion that ensued.

² Arthur C. Danto: *Art, Action, History*, conference, Columbia University, New York, 3-5 October, 2002.

³ Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' and 'Surrealist Painting' in *Collected Essays and Criticism Vol I, Perceptions and Judgments 1939-1944*, John O'Brian (ed.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1986, pp. 5-22; 225-31.

⁴ Morise rejects painting as incommensurate with automatism in 'Les Yeux enchantés,' *La Révolution surréaliste* no. 1, Dec. 1924, and Naville famously declares, 'everyone knows there is no surrealist painting...' in 'Beaux Arts,' *La Révolution surréaliste* no. 3, April 1925, p. 27. Breton displaced Naville as editor of the journal and his 'Surrealism and Painting' appeared in the next issue. Maurice Nadeau traces the 'Naville Crisis' in *The History of Surrealism*, Richard Howard (trans.), Belknap, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989, pp. 127-132. The reassessment of Surrealism in the visual arts was initiated by Dawn Ades in 1978 with the exhibition *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, Arts Council of Great Britain and Hayward Gallery, London, 1978, followed by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'Amour fou: photography and surrealism*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1985, in which photography was shown to be central to Surrealism's resistance to the modernist paradigm.

⁵ This characterization of an historical (as opposed to modernist) avant-garde is drawn from Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Michael Shaw trans., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, but it should be noted that even Clement Greenberg, as early as 1944, acknowledged Surrealism's 'anti-institutional, anti-formal, anti-aesthetic nihilism.' Greenberg, 'Surrealist Painting' in *Collected Essays and Criticism Vol I, Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, John O'Brian (ed.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1986, p. 225.

⁶ Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, Seattle, Washington, 1983.

⁷ Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, pp. x, xi. Regarding the emergence of an avant-garde impulse in postmodern art, Foster departs from Bürger, who flatly denied the possibility of a critical art practice in a contemporary milieu dominated by spectacle and the culture industry. See Benjamin Buchloh's critique of Bürger's position, based on the postwar reappearance of 'key paradigms' of the avant-garde (among them the readymade, collage, assemblage and photomontage) in his introduction to *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2000.

⁸ See for example Rosalind Krauss, 'The Master's Bedroom,' *Representations*, No. 28, Autumn 1989, pp. 55-76; Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, MIT Press, Cambridge and London, 1993, and Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1993.

⁹ The single Surrealist painter who has approached this devolution of painting into base material would be André Masson, whose automatist sand paintings attempted to extended the exploration of 'pure thought' onto the *horizontal* surface. For Masson's extended exploration of automatism and his alliance with Bataille, see David



Lomas. *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2000.

¹⁰ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, Zone Books, New York, 1997.

¹¹ See Rosalind Krauss, 'The Master's Bedroom,' *Representations*, No. 28, Autumn, 1989, pp. 55-76.

¹² Again, the earliest references are Krauss and Foster, particularly Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, as well as her 'Corpus Delicti' in Krauss and Livingston, *L'Amour fou*, also Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, followed by Bois and Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*.

¹³ Considering the prominent place play has had in post-structural critique and the dominance of those theories in the art history in the past two decades, a full examination of play as a signifier in the visual arts is long overdue. A comprehensive study would be vast, which may explain why most approaches (including my own forthcoming study on play as an avant-garde strategy) have been contextually specific, or have limited their discursive analysis with an overarching, often restrictive, thesis. An example of the latter, addressing aesthetics, is Mihai Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1989. Addressing play more generally, at a cultural level, the two best-known texts are Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Beacon, Boston, 1955; and Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, Meyer Barash trans., The Free Press, New York and Illinois, 1961; to which I would add Jacques Henriot, *Sous couleur de jouer: la métaphore ludique*, Librairie José Corti, Paris, 1989. In the former category, referring to Surrealism, see Emmanuel Garrigues, *Les jeux surréalistes: Mars 1921 – Septembre 1962*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris, 1995; Jacqueline Chenieux-Gendron and Marie-Claire Dumas (eds), *Jeu surréaliste et humour noir*, Lachenal and Ritter, Paris, 1993; Alastair Brotchie, *Surrealist Games*, Redstone Editions, Boston, 1993. Only the last two address the visual arts.

¹⁴ 'When we judge free beauty (according to mere form) then our judgment of taste is pure. Here we presuppose no concept of any purpose for which the manifold is to serve the given object, and hence no concept [as to] what the object is [meant] to represent; our imagination is playing, as it were, while it contemplates the shape, and such a concept would only restrict its freedom.' Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Werner S. Pluhar trans., Hackett, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1987, §16, 77. Schiller's program for a 'State of Aesthetic Semblance' depends on the breakdown of human endeavor into a carnal 'sense-drive' and its opposing 'form-drive' brought into reconciliation by a 'play-drive'. See Friedrich Schiller, *On The Aesthetic Education of Man In a Series of Letters*, Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby trans., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967. Gene Bell-Villada traces this lineage from Kant through Schiller to the French academy through Victor Cousin and Théophile Gautier as well as Baudelaire in G. H. Bell-Villada, *Art for Art's Sake & Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology & Culture of Aestheticism, 1790-1990*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1996.

¹⁵ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, op. cit., §9, 62.

¹⁷ See in particular Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Walter Kaufmann trans., Random House, New York, 1967.

¹⁸ The initiating text would be Jacques Derrida, 'Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,' in *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass trans., University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, pp. 278-293, and is elaborated throughout Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak trans., Johns Hopkins, Baltimore and London, 1974. The question is put directly to Kant (how can art be at once bounded and 'without end?') in Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod trans., University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1987.

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, is the text that lays out his aesthetic theory, but Nietzsche's references to play are consistent throughout his work, reappearing with particular force in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Walter Kaufmann trans., Modern Library, New York, 1995; *Ecce Homo*, Kaufmann trans., Vintage Books, New York, 1967, and *The Will to Power*, Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale trans., Random House, New York, 1967.

²⁰ Freud's 'play' texts, in which he follows Schiller and then Nietzsche in aligning play and art, are Sigmund Freud, 'Creative Writers and Day Dreaming,' (1907) in *Art and Literature*, Penguin Freud Library Vol. 14, James Strachey trans., Penguin Books, New York and London, 1991; Sigmund Freud, 'Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious' (1905), Strachey trans., *The Penguin Freud Library Volume 6*, Penguin Books, New York and London, 1991; and Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, *The Penguin Freud Library Volume 11*, Strachey trans., Penguin Books, New York and London, 1991.

²¹ The term *errance* is Michael Sheringham's from *Parisian Fields*, Reaktion, London, 1996, p. 92. In most accounts of the Surrealist movement *errance* is either collapsed into or eclipsed by objective chance (Sheringham does the latter). I make a distinction between them, following Michel Beaujour, in order to stress the



early Surrealist emphasis on experience, performance and manifestations as opposed to later preoccupations with objects and representations. See Michel Beaujour, 'From Text to Performance' in *A New History of French Literature*, Denis Hollier (ed.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1994, pp. 866-871.

²² See Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1999, pp. 39-40; 126; 323.

²³ The album, now absorbed into the collection at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, is something of a mystery. The original order of the photographs is unknown, as are the precise dates they were acquired. See Susan Laxton, *Paris as Gameboard: Man Ray's Atgets*, Wallach Gallery, New York, 2001.

²⁴ André Breton, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, Mark Polizzotti trans., Paragon House, New York, 1993, p. 106.

²⁵ Man Ray himself recalls the experience of Surrealist *errance* as a 'slumming operation' refracted through photography: 'At the instigation of Jacques Prévert ... we roamed about the more shady sections of Paris with my camera, shooting scenes haphazard and fraught with some hazard' [sic.]. Man Ray, *Self Portrait*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1963.

²⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Vol. I*, John Moore, trans., Verso, London and New York, 1991. Lefebvre's alliance with the Surrealists is contemporary with the assembling of Man Ray's *Atget* album, dated to the co-drafting of the 1925 manifesto *La Révolution d'abord et toujours*.

²⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984, p. 106.

²⁸ André Breton, *Le Cadavre exquis, son exaltation*, Galleria Schwarz, Milan, 1975, p. 12. In the text I refer to the game by its French name in order to emphasize its punning engagement with drawing through the word 'esquisse', a dimension lost in translation. Unlike *errance*, the game of exquisite corpse has been the subject of some scrutiny, most recently in Jean-Jacques Lebel (ed.), *Juegos Surrealistas: 100 Cadáveres Exquisitos*, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, 1996.

²⁹ Philippe Audoin makes the comment about viability and judgment in 'Surréalistes,' his entry on surrealist games in *Le Dictionnaire des jeux*, René Alleau (ed.), Tchou, Paris, 1966, p. 484. The rules of the game are set out in a number of documents and recollections, the most often cited being the definition from the *Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism*: 'Game of pleated paper that consists of a number of players composing a phrase or drawing, without any of them able to render the whole collaboration or to know the nature of the preceding collaborative contributions. The classic example, which gives the game its name, is "The – exquisite – corpse – will – drink – the – red – wine",' *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme*, Galerie des Beaux Arts, Paris, 1938, p. 6. Tristan Tzara's more specific 'recipes' for the game, separate versions for the written and the drawn forms, can be found in Breton, *Le Cadavre exquis, son exaltation*, pp. 18, 24.

³⁰ John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969, p. 33. Searle uses the rules of games as an analogy for conventions in language systems, a comparison that would have interested the Surrealists a great deal. He does not, however, account for the element of chance in games, and his otherwise useful analysis therefore fails to account for unintended meaning. Following Derrida, who in his critique of Austin (and by extension Searle) dramatically loosens meaning from intention toward reception, opening it in a number of ways to radical distortion and miscommunication, chance is reintroduced and affirmed, and the analogy between game and language holds. Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context,' *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bass trans., University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, pp. 307-330.

³¹ Reproductions of *cadavres exquis* to which Picasso and Maar contributed can be found in Jean Jacques Lebel et. al, *Juegos Surrealistas: 100 Cadáveres Exquisitos*, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, 1996, pp. 170, 171, 205. The description of Motherwell's weekly exquisite corpse sessions with Baziotes, Krasner and Pollock is in Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1995, 317, 325. The illustrated reference to Beuys and Richter is in Ingrid Schaffner, "In Advance of the Return of the Cadavre Exquis," *The Return of the Cadavre Exquis*, The Drawing Center, New York, 1993, p. 21.

³² Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*; Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*; Jacques Derrida, 'Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.'

³³ Sol Lewitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,' first published in *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 10, Summer 1967, pp. 79-83, rptd. in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Blackwell, Oxford, UK and Cambridge Mass., 1992, p 834.

³⁴ Denis Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates: Shadows Don't Cast Shadows,' *October* 69, Summer 1994, pp. 113-114.



³⁵ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn trans., Hannah Arendt (ed.), Schocken, New York, 1969, pp. 217-251, cited in Hollier, 'The Use Value of the Impossible,' *October* 60, Spring 1992, p. 11.

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' in *Reflections*, Edmund Jephcott trans., Peter Demetz (ed.), Schocken, New York, 1986, p. 179.

³⁷ See Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1990.

³⁸ Hollier, 'The Use Value of the Impossible,' p. 8.

³⁹ Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989.

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Resurrecting the Stylite Simon: Buñuel's Surrealist History Film

Kirsten Strom

Abstract

This paper discusses a relatively little known film by Luis Buñuel, specifically in terms of its ability to examine the relationship of both Surrealist ideology and the cinematic medium to the process of writing history. Arguing that *Simón del desierto/Simon of the Desert* (1965) represents a radical critique of the authority of both history and the indexicality of photographic signifiers, the paper looks to shed light upon the subtleties of Buñuel's method as a historiographer working within a post-positivist ideology based on the notion of doubt.

The film narrates the life of Saint Simeon Stylites, a fifth-century Syrian famed for standing atop a column in the desert for forty years. Though based on a 'true' story, *Simon of the Desert* is a film replete with anachronisms and Surrealist ruptures, which work to undo the film's own claims to historicity. The film, in other words, eloquently constructs and deconstructs itself simultaneously. While the film's ruptures might be dismissed on the grounds that they simply represent Buñuelian black humor, or the aesthetics of Surrealist juxtaposition, this paper will argue that the film's incongruities also function at a deeper level, critiquing the ideological foundations of modern historiography, in a manner rooted not only in the aesthetics, but also in the radical politics of the Surrealist movement.

At the Intersection of History, Film, and Surrealism

Working in Mexico in 1965 for producer Gustavo Alatriste, Luis Buñuel ran out of money while filming *Simon of the Desert*. The hastily completed film would run only forty-five minutes in its entirety, though it had initially been intended to be feature length. Situated chronologically between the chic French heroine films *The Diary of a Chambermaid* (1963) and *Belle de Jour* (1967), Buñuel's meditation on the 'real' life of Byzantine St. Simeon Stylitus has often been overlooked in critical discussions of the *auteur's* late 'masterpieces'. Perhaps this is due to a latent francophilia within the critical discourse, as well as to several more pragmatic factors, such as the film's unconventional duration, its low budget, and its somewhat anomalous subject matter. The notion that *Simon's* content is *somewhat anomalous* is significant here, as the film is indeed quite 'Buñuelian' in a number of aspects, even sharing several actors already familiar to Buñuel's followers,¹ while also plainly privileging many of his so-called *obsessions*, notably sexuality and Catholicism. But the manifest subject, the biography of a fifth-century Syrian ascetic makes this, in effect, Buñuel's only history film.² As such, it provides a rare opportunity to examine the product of a unique form of historiography with implications for both the medium of film and the aesthetics and ideology of Surrealism.

With regard to the cinema, several scholars in recent times have investigated the question of film's ability to function as historiography in its own right. In the process, they have had to reckon with conventional arguments *against* the legitimacy of the film as a historical medium, which may be summarized as follows: 1) popular films in particular prioritise entertainment over accuracy; 2) too many details are necessarily improvised, as films are both visually and verbally specific about elements which cannot be confirmed; 3) films can only *present* episodes; they cannot theorize them;



4) films cannot be 'footnoted' and thus do not reflect the diversity of the discourse on any given subject.

It may be worth noting, however, that the motives informing these first two arguments seem somewhat at odds with those of the second pair, given that the concerns regarding theory and footnotes seem to advocate the complication and critique of historiographic discourse, while those regarding accuracy and specificity seem rooted in the positivist notion that history's goal is to arrive at the truth of the past, in such a way that improvisations and narrative manipulations are inappropriate and have no place.

Implicitly negotiating the conflicting methodological assumptions outlined above, Robert Rosenstone, in particular, has argued that filmmaking *can* viably function as a form of history, not necessarily subordinate or inferior to written texts.³ Following Hayden White, he has suggested, for example, that film's adherence to cinematic convention only mimics the fact that written texts, whether popular or academic, similarly obey their own conventions. Neither one nor the other, therefore, can claim to be unmediated by the horizon of expectation of their medium. Furthermore, he has suggested that films to be numbered among the 'New History Film' genre, most of which were produced in the 1980s and appear to be conscious on some level of theories of postmodernism, have made important contributions to discourses both of history and historiography.⁴ While Buñuel's *Simon of the Desert* has not been officially ranked among these films, I would like to propose that it too provides a significant meditation upon and critique of the process of history writing, one which furthermore meaningfully reflects the charged ideological agendas of Surrealism. Indeed, as I will discuss shortly, the film ranks among those which provide abundant evidence of the importance of Surrealism for Buñuel, even in his late work. More specifically, however, this film provides occasion to discuss the potential of the process of narrating and imaging history to function as a form of Surrealist critique.

While *Simon* postdates Buñuel's formal affiliation with the Surrealist group in Paris by three decades, his interest in the subject stems back to his student days in Madrid, when, according to Buñuel, Federico García Lorca introduced him to the thirteenth-century hagiographic text, *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints*. This text's pages actually do *not* include an account of St. Simeon Stylitus, who lived out his life in Syria standing, like all good stylites, atop a column;⁵ but regardless of the source, he would claim to have been attracted to the story of Simon precisely because it fused the quotidian and the marvellous, in a manner which would come to typify later Surrealist practice. Specifically, Buñuel has claimed that Lorca called his attention to a passage both lyrical and immanently earthly stating that Simon's excrement flowed down the column like wax from a candle. (Though Buñuel would repeatedly cite this episode when discussing the genesis of the film, the image itself was not realized within it, a contradiction whose significance will be discussed at the close of this essay).



Narrative Overview

The title sequence opens onto a procession of chanting monks and peasants, which culminates in the presentation of a new column to the title character, masterfully portrayed by Claudio Brook. Viewers of the film soon learn both that the new column has been dedicated by a wealthy merchant, and that Simon is consequently abandoning the original column, upon which he has stood for six years, six months, and six days. During the brief moment in which Simon's feet are upon the ground, he rejects two gestures that are made toward him, one from his mother, who wishes to embrace him, and the other from the officiating priest who wishes to ordain him. Telling the former that 'earthly love cannot come between the Lord and his servants' and the latter that he is a sinner unworthy of the priesthood, Simon ascends his new column, with the intent, presumably, of being closer to God. No sooner does he reach the top, however, than he is implored from below by a peasant whose hands have been cut off as a punishment for stealing. Showing no signs of being taken aback by the man's pleading, Simon leads the crowd in prayer, after which the man's hands miraculously reappear. (Buñuel creates this effect through simple edits and cropping, 'cutting off' the man's elevated hands with the frame of a close-up shot.) Without hesitation, or expression of gratitude, the peasant hurries his family along stating that they have work to do. When his young daughter asks 'Are they really the same hands, father?' he orders her to 'shut up,' and uses his new hands to slap her on the back of the head.

The next incident marks the first appearance of Silvia Pinal's character, as she provocatively saunters past the monks attending prayer at the base of Simon's column. Her role as an instigator of conflict is fulfilled when Simon tricks one of the monks into admitting that he has leered at her. Once the monks have left, however, she returns for Simon alone, dressed anachronistically in a little girl's sailor suit from the *belle époque*. As she sings to him of her kingdom, it becomes clear, both to Simon and to the viewer, that she is the devil, who has come to tempt him. Through another simple trick edit, she appears suddenly on top of the column, where she tugs at Simon's beard, shows him her long tongue, and pierces his back with a lengthy needle. Simon manages to resist both the pleasure and the pain that she offers, but as the scorned devil consequently runs off across the desert in the nude body of an elderly hag, she shakes her fist at him, promising that she will be back.

In short intervals throughout the film, the patterns of Simon's life atop the column unfold. He sings praises to God almost incessantly, but occasionally shows signs of human frailty, in one instance stumbling and forgetting the next line of his recitation, and in another daydreaming that he is on the ground with his mother, free to feel the earth under his feet and to bond with the woman he had previously refused. Indeed, her role, though limited and virtually without speech, becomes one of the most poignant aspects of the film, as she lives humbly in a small tent on the ground within sight of her son's column. She watches him and occasionally waves to him as if thinking that he has noticed her, but her efforts are never rewarded. In Simon's reverie, however, he imagines that she asks him, while he rests his head in her lap: 'Do you ever think of me?' Simon's reply is: 'Hardly ever. I don't



have time.' To a modern audience, the isolated, ascetic stylite may appear to have nothing but time, but this simple remark succinctly indicates that his struggle for purity overwhelms him ceaselessly.⁶

On an occasion when the monks have joined Simon for a sermon on the benefits of asceticism, a brother by the name of Trifon surreptitiously places bread, wine, and cheese into Simon's bag, which hangs down from the top of the column so that he may be provided with the water and lettuce leaves that sustain him physically. Trifon feigns surprise as he pretends to discover the luxury goods, and then accuses Simon of hypocrisy and deceit. When called upon to defend himself, Simon remarks only that slander is more soothing to a humble soul than praise. Trifon, however, suggests to his brothers that the indirectness of Simon's response is tantamount to proof of guilt. The head brother calls upon the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth, a gesture which soon after sends Trifon to the ground, cursing and frothing at the mouth, in spasms of demonic possession. The resulting chaos reveals the potential for confusion and human fallibility among the community of monks.

One day, in mid-prayer, Simon takes note of an approaching flock of sheep, led by a bearded figure in classical garb. Simon recognizes the teary-eyed figure as a suffering Christ, but upon being instructed by the figure to give up his penance and to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh, Simon realizes that he has been duped by the devil, who is here, too, portrayed by Pinal, wearing what is obviously a false beard and a garment that does little to disguise her feminine body. Time passes ambiguously in the film, but we learn in her address to Simon that he has now stood upon his column for eight years, eight months, and eight days. Having realized the error of his perception, however, Simon again scornfully refuses the devil. Frustrated a second time, she can only promise him that he has still not seen the last of her, before shooting him in the forehead with a stone propelled by a slingshot. As she vanishes into a cloud of smoke, a trick edit transforms one of her lambs into a frog, while Simon himself concludes that he still has 'far to go,' after having mistaken the wolf for the lamb. Consequently, he determines to intensify his penance by standing on one foot until the Lord commands him otherwise.

Another peasant man, who was first met cursing Simon for not accepting his gift of goat milk, is the next to visit the stylite, in order to ask him the favour of blessing his pregnant goat. When Simon replies, 'And bless you, too,' however, the impatient goatherd becomes angry that Simon has blessed him and his goat in a single gesture. Proclaiming that he still likes Simon anyway, the peasant asks the saint if his belly doesn't ache from hunger, to which the ascetic responds that he requires little sustenance, and that he excretes dryly, 'much like your goats.'⁷ Played by Jesús Fernández, who was himself no more the three feet tall, the goatherd is far from Simon elevated on his column. He walks off, shrugging and saying, 'All I understood was dryly,' a small bit of wry humour, which succinctly illustrates the insurmountability of the distance between them. One literally cannot understand the other.

The saint's next visitor is the monk whom Simon previously cast away for looking at the devil as she walked past earlier in the film. After apologizing for his behaviour, the monk laments that the heathen are advancing upon Rome, and that man will do terrible things for that which he thinks is his. Here, however, it is Simon who is simply unable to comprehend the situation, asking the unthinkable



innocent question: What do *yours* and *mine* mean? 'Your unselfishness is admirable,' the brother tells him, 'but of little use in the world of men.'

In making her final appearance, the devil arrives at Simon's column in what would seem to be a self-propelling coffin (though Buñuel himself would later lament that the ropes used to pull it were all too visible). This time, after a brief theological debate, she tells Simon that he is coming with her to a black mass; then she gestures into the heavens where an airplane passes overhead. The film cuts to a long-shot of Simon's column which reveals it standing empty, before editing in disorienting and vertiginous images of urban skyscrapers, then finally cutting to the interior of a nightclub. A long, slow pan of the fervently dancing crowd is followed by a brief conversation between Simon and the devil, both of whom are entirely contemporary in their appearance, with the bearded, pipe-smoking Simon outfitted as a beatnik. 'What's this dance called,' he asks her calmly. 'Radioactive flesh,' is her reply; 'It's the latest and the last.' When Simon tells her to have fun, but that he is going back, she informs him that he cannot, because his column has a new tenant. 'You just have to take it,' she says, getting up to join the dance. Uttering the film's final line, she reiterates, 'You just have to take it until the end.'

Surrealist Historiography

What then is to be made of these words and pictures, so riddled with anachronism, rupture, and contradictory impulses of faith and disbelief? As I have previously suggested, I would like to propose that Buñuel's treatment of the subject represents more than characteristic Buñuelian atheism and black humour, but rather that these features function to set the stage for a larger analysis of historiographic practice. Indeed the film assumes broader critical implications, pertaining both to the politics and mechanisms of Surrealist cultural criticism and to the historiographic possibilities of the medium of cinema. Specifically, *Simon of the Desert* functions as critique by deconstructing the notion of history itself, through a process of performatively revealing not only that history is necessarily authored and that it invariably inflects contemporary agendas, but also that the past, in its virtual incomprehensibility to the present, may serve provocatively to relativize our own contemporary ideological assumptions, exposing them as such in the process. It is my contention that such relativization was at the very heart of the Surrealist project, which provocatively - and very explicitly - relativized the concept of reality itself in order to expose the 'paucity' of bourgeois thinking.⁸ While many of the aforementioned points of historiographic criticism may seem readily familiar from recent methodological discourses challenging the positivist assumptions of past historians, in *Simon of the Desert*, they are - and indeed *were* in 1965 - compellingly articulated not by a professional historian authoring an academic treatise, but rather by an at-large Surrealist utilizing the tools of the cinema.

For example, in the very first scene alone, numerous elements highlight the notion that the worldview of the early Christian era is patently absurd from the vantage point of the twentieth century. To begin, of course, is the very premise of the stylite. As if it were inevitable, countless ancient cultures have embraced the notion that elevated forms, such as pyramids, sacred mountains, or acropoli, bring one literally closer to the gods. Indeed, Early Christian imagery frequently made use of



conventions visualizing the model of the universe which maintains that the earth is flat, and that heaven is a massive blue dome containing it. Though not widely visualized until later medieval times, hell is similarly conceptualised as a space physically underneath the disk of the terrestrial realm. Simon, then, atop his column goes to great lengths to achieve a literal, physical elevation as an early medieval subject for whom the sky is synonymous with heaven. This belief, of course, has not been sustainable in the west for centuries, due to the simple knowledge that the earth is round, and that *up*, consequently, is a relative rather than an absolute direction. The materiality of the 'fact' of the world's roundness has outweighed the symbolism of faith in our post-positivist culture to such a degree that Simon's gesture can at best be read as poignantly misguided.⁹ Even among contemporaries who would claim to share Simon's faith in Christ, the literalness of his action is quite unlikely to be duplicated. As contemporary viewers, in other words, we can feel for Simon, but not without a degree of condescension. While the absurdity of the faithful stylite's blatant naivety might well be taken as an indicator of Buñuel's own lack of belief, implying by extension that any act of faith after Galileo is absurd, the atheist director contradictorily gives us the miracle of the peasant's new hands. He therefore seems to perform the unlikely task of asking his audience to believe in miracles. Yet this, too, comes to signify the degree to which the faith of early Christian cultures vastly exceeds our own, precisely because as 'modern' viewers, we are surprised and taken aback by this miracle which seems to strike the faithful crowd as entirely commonplace. As Buñuel himself has commented: 'Today a priest would open an ecclesiastical investigation into a miracle like that,' but 'the man [in the film] must have thought, "He is a miraculous saint; it's natural that he performed this miracle for me."' ¹⁰

While efforts to study historical subjects within a contextualized framework may assist in making historical ideologies appear plausible on their own terms, they are necessarily limited and mediated both by contemporary expectations and by authorial agendas. In this case, Buñuel patently fictionalised the incident of Simon's miracle to illustrate a point that he wished to make. Thus in presenting the 'truth' of the idea that the past is beyond our comprehension, Buñuel also repeatedly reminds us more directly that this is *his* view of the past, and implicitly, that it is *his* agenda to make us realize its incomprehensibility from our own vantage point. But this function may be performed most succinctly in the presentation of the devil as she appears to tempt Simon on top of the column for the first time. She is a double anachronism, as a woman dressed in a child's costume - underscoring the perverse irony of her comment that she is 'an innocent little girl' with 'innocent little legs' - while at the same time, of course, her clothing is in a fashion disruptively out of sync with those of all of the other characters. (Buñuel has claimed, in particular, that her costume represents the moment of his own erotic awakening in Spain in the early twentieth century.) A rupture within the historical illusion is created, therefore, which directs attention to the fact that this story is being brought to us by one historically situated to possess knowledge of - and great feeling for - *belle époque* couture. At the same time, however, the recognition of this moment of patent artifice encourages the viewer to realize, furthermore, that everyone else in the film is wearing a costume, too. Even those who seem appropriately clad for the period are dressed in a vision of the past far removed from the historical



moment. (Rearticulating this sense of rupture is our contemporary distance from the film itself. When Pinal emerges from the coffin to tempt Simon for the third and final time, her hair and makeup may well strike a twenty-first century viewer as very 'period,' in a way in which they likely would not have at the time of the film's release in 1965.)

Simon of the Desert, therefore, performatively - rather than didactically - functions to illustrate that the past is necessarily viewed through filters and mediated by the present. As previously suggested, this in itself is hardly a revolutionary point for those submerged in contemporary historiographic discourse. Yet I would suggest that it is significant nonetheless, in part because the notion of history as the truth of the past is still widely assumed outside of academic discourse. Indeed, as several contributors to Rosenstone's anthology *Revisioning History* have noted, historical films are still widely evaluated according to a faithful standard of pseudo-positivist 'accuracy.'¹¹ Yet the point is all the more significant because film has been critiqued as a medium incapable of conveying methodological subtleties. As I have argued, I believe that *Simon of the Desert* successfully refutes this point.

I would add, however, that in loyal Surrealist form, Buñuel's critique goes on to suggest that while we cannot escape our own cultural and ideological baggage with regard to history, relativizing it is still an immensely useful exercise. In the final sequence of the film, we of the 'modern' world look at Simon looking at us. Though the sense of his anachronistic position is minimized by his assimilated appearance, the rupture caused by his unexpected presence in a western twentieth-century nightclub functions to encourage viewers to distance themselves and to see the scene before us through Simon's eyes. Doing so, we divorce ourselves from our own recognition of the setting as a nightclub filled with music and dancing to perceive the sights and sounds for what they are when removed from the framework of modern cultural knowledge that gives them meaning: they are loud noises and writhing bodies jammed into a crowded, dark and smoky space. While Simon's question 'What's this dance called?' suggests that on some level he can recognize their gestures as a dance, at the same time, seen in the context of earlier episodes, the convulsions of the dancers seem strikingly reminiscent of the spasms of Brother Trifon while he is possessed. Thus the scene of our modern world, from an early medieval point of view, looks much like hell itself, as it has been rhetoricized and visualized in Christian thought and imagery.¹² We may therefore find ourselves reminded that the mores and costumes of our own time appear just as absurd to Simon as those of his time do to us. Through such realizations, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the flattering notion that history is a linear narrative leading to and culminating in our own present.¹³ This notion, derived from positivist thought, is thus performatively critiqued in succinct and uniquely cinematic terms.

I have already suggested that although Buñuel would withdraw from formal Surrealist association as early as the 1930s, he and his films would maintain an allegiance to the basic ideology of the Surrealist project, particularly with regard to its complicated practices of deconstructive cultural criticism. Indeed, the historical relativism of *Simon of the Desert* which I have discussed might be understood as a process of creative critique which illuminates, and is illuminated, by basic tenets of



Surrealism. With regard to the Surrealists' relationship to the problem of history, it is further worth noting that the Surrealists' celebration of chance as a revolutionary principle, can be - and has been - linked to the potential of chance to disrupt and undermine the bourgeois notion of history as progress. In his essay 'As in a Wood', for example, André Breton would hail Charles Fourier specifically on the grounds that: 'Only [he] had enough revolutionary vision to argue and demonstrate that the whole of cultural development of humanity did not follow the direction it did out of any internal necessity but as a result of various pressures that might have been different and might have been borne differently.'¹⁴ Thus the notion of a history motivated by chance occurrences has the potential to subvert the belief that contemporary industry, capitalism, and democracy represent the inevitable push of progress. In other words, our entire set of contemporary cultural values is in fact relative to and contingent upon the chance events which have determined them. Though Buñuel's film appears not to aim explicitly toward the omnipotence of chance in history, as I have suggested, the dark conclusion of *Simon of the Desert* does emphatically undermine the notion of progress in history, opening to doubt the validity of modern cultural assumptions of the validity of modern culture itself.

Additional Remarks on Cinematic Specificity

Like the ideology of *Simon of the Desert*, the film's 'aesthetic', both verbal and visual, would similarly conform to Surrealist standards, particularly in its use of jarringly incongruous juxtapositions. But for the most part, as with virtually all of his later films, Buñuel's 'magical realist' technique seems relatively restrained and even strangely 'classical' in comparison to contemporaries such as Jean-Luc Godard, at least in the degree to which it generally avoided unusual framings, camera movement and other devices which call attention to the director's 'hand'. Thus it might be noted that Buñuel's critique of history takes places almost entirely on the level of narrative. But the visuality of the film does play an important role in a number of respects, further supporting arguments of the potency of the cinema as a historiographic vehicle.

While *Simon of the Desert* indeed lacks even an approximation of footnotes, as I have argued, Buñuel was able to visually complicate the discourse of history by upsetting visual conventions of continuity in film, as in the case of the devil's anachronistic *belle époque* costume. Yet the film also addresses the theme of the potential falsity of appearances and our ability to be deceived by our own expectations, in the process, deconstructively raising the viewer's awareness of the fact that we harbour such expectations in the first place. For example, Sylvia Pinal is completely unconvincing as the Good Shepherd. Her false beard, wig, and costume are not able to disguise the fact that she is an artifice-laden woman in drag. Simon, however, believes her to be not only the Good Shepherd, but also Christ himself. This scene, then, implicitly functions as a critique of iconographic signification, in that she is able to fool him simply by donning the trappings of an iconographic convention.¹⁵ In other words, Simon all too readily takes her for the realization of a metaphor made potent through discursive currency. Other scenes in the film do suggest that the devil is powerful enough to alter her physical form, yet she does so in this scene only through the



superficialities of costume, suggesting, perhaps, that that is enough to deceive one with expectations based on the language of visual signs. In the case of Simon, he is looking to understand the world in the terms of that which he has already learned, and this makes him vulnerable to her trickery, a point succinctly conveyed through the film's visuality. Indeed it is precisely the visuality of the cinema that enables this subtle and performative critique, for the filmic medium is able to succinctly relate the duplicity of her appearance, as Good Shepherd and not Good Shepherd simultaneously, in a way that linear text could not.

Indeed, the indexicality of the photographic medium of the film plays a significant role, in that what is visualized is necessarily, on some level, real. When we see anachronisms, such as the devil's costume and the airplane, we know that they are historically inaccurate, and yet we cannot deny the fact that we are really seeing them nonetheless. The sense of rupture created, as previously suggested, functions to complicate the authority of both the photographic medium and that of the historical narrative as well. This points, then, to the notion that the media of history and photography are analogous in the degree to which they are manipulated yet widely assumed to function as bearers of 'truth'.

Of course casting is also a specifically cinematic process, which also functions both to signify meaning and, in the case of *Simon of the Desert*, to critique the discourse of historiography and its expectations.¹⁶ Sylvia Pinal, in particular, may well be known to Buñuelian audiences as the title character of Buñuel's better known *Viridiana* (1961), in which she plays the role of a young novice who, like Simon, meets her spiritual demise in the course of the film. Our potential recognition of her makes her casting as the devil seem all the more arbitrary and conspicuous, as a conscious choice, perhaps deliberately ironic, made by the author of this historical narrative.¹⁷ More broadly speaking, of course, the casting in this role of a female performer has the ability immediately to complicate the expectations of an audience familiar with Christian imagery portraying the devil as male. It may well have been the conventions of commercial movie-making that influenced this decision, as a glamorous female lead seems almost obligatory across national borders. What may be a potential concession to custom, however, adds a rich dimension in the realm of the dynamics of gender, as Pinal's character might be interpreted alternately as the ultimate *femme fatale*, or as an outcast other, one denied the privileges of (patriarchal) Christianity.

By way of conclusion, I would like to revisit and reframe two points already made. The first involves Buñuel's attraction to the description of the Saint's excrement flowing down the column like wax from a candle. By Buñuel's own accounts, this was the image which made an indelible impression, the one to which his cinematic interpretation of Simon's history may owe its origin. However, Buñuel would alter this very detail. As previously described, in the film Simon informs the peasant goatherd that he excretes dryly, 'much like your goats.' The reason for the deviation, according to Buñuel is quite simply that, 'a man who eats lettuce and only drinks water is like a little bird; he can't possibly excrete very much.' In conjunction with this rationale, he furthermore adds: 'I'm a realistic purist.'¹⁸



The second moment which warrants revisitation is that of Simon's miracle, when the hands of the peasant man are restored. Though he freely admitted to having been raised within a Catholic tradition, Buñuel made no secret of his loss of faith, devoting, for example, an entire chapter in his autobiography to the theme of his own atheism.¹⁹ And yet this faithless director, who purports to be a 'realistic purist,' has accommodated this unlikely miracle.

What we have here in both instances, then, are moments of contradiction which bear additional implications for Buñuel's historiographic methodology. For the most part, Buñuel's cinematic statement is extremely cynical in virtually every respect. The films seems to attack not only positivist presumptions about truth and progress in history, but also the idealistic spiritual premise upon which Simon has based his life. The two scenes cited above, however, raise tantalizing questions: how could a historian indulge in flagrant anachronisms while claiming to be a 'realistic purist'? How could such a 'realist' endorse supernatural gestures? How could one apparently so critical of 'truth' in history claim to be a stickler for purity?

One potential answer to these questions is that through these very moments, the filmmaker reveals himself doubting his own doubt. Buñuel would repeatedly deny in his writings that he made 'thesis films' which would argue or illustrate a predetermined viewpoint. While on the one hand, this assertion may have been based on a simple desire not to be intolerably didactic or 'preachy', on another level, it may be based on the notion that advancing a 'thesis' implicitly requires certainty of the truth-value of one's own ideas, a notion clearly at odds with the radical critique of positivism that I have argued *Simon of the Desert* represents. This then introduces the paradox of doubt, that doubt itself must be doubted, in the process simultaneously destroying and reinforcing itself. That Buñuel's historiography would embrace such radical doubt is the final point with which I would conclude. Indeed, Buñuel would eloquently articulate this notion when asked whether the film's 'only message could be: "That no one knows."' 'It could be,' he answered, 'but I would cast doubt even on that message.'²⁰

¹ Claudio Brook (Simon) would also appear in *The Young One* and *The Exterminating Angel*, while Silvia Pinal (the devil) starred in *Viridiana* and *The Exterminating Angel*; Jesús Fernández (the goatherd) performed for Buñuel previously in *Nazarín*.

² *The Diary of a Chambermaid* (1963) might arguably provide an exception to this rule, as it is set in the 1920s, and in several respects is quite telling of Buñuel's own experiences in France during this time. Its subject matter, however, is derived from the novel by Octave Mirbeau, and is based therefore on fictional, rather than actual historical characters. The same observation might be made about *Nazarín*, which Buñuel set in Mexico in the 1910s, and which was based on a nineteenth-century novel by Spanish writer Benito Pérez-Galdós.

³ See Robert Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁴ These films, discussed in his *Revisioning History*, include: *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1985-7), *Eijanaika* (1981), *From the Pole to the Equator* (1986), *Hitler: A Film From Germany* (1977), *The Home and the World* (1984), *The Moderns* (1988), *The Night of the Shooting Stars* (1983), *Radio Bikini* (1987), *Repentance* (1986), and *Walker* (1987). Films predating widespread discourses of postmodernism include *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) and *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968).

⁵ Buñuel would recount the discovery of Simon in *The Golden Legend* in his memoirs (*My Last Sigh* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 240) and in the interviews collected under the title of *Objects of Desire* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992), p.177.



⁶ A closely related exchange would occur in John Huston's filmic adaptation of Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* (1979). When the obsessively self-punishing Hazel Motes is encouraged to take up preaching again, he responds, 'I can't preach. I ain't got time.'

⁷ Buñuel would acknowledge that this was a departure from the original account which stated that Simon's excrement flowed down the column like wax from a candle. See my concluding remarks for more on this point.

⁸ See, for example, Breton's 'Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality,' in *What is Surrealism?*, Franklin Rosemont, ed. (New York: Monad Press, 1978), book II, pp. 16-27.

⁹ This is not, however, to overlook the notion that the column also functions to physically separate Simon from the distractions and intrigues of the human realm, a point which becomes significant in other contexts.

¹⁰ *Objects of Desire*, p. 182.

¹¹ See for example Sumiko Higashi's essay on *Walker and Mississippi Burning* (*Revisioning History*, pp. 188-201).

¹² Visual images of Hell, the Last Judgment, and the Apocalypse would not become standard fare until later Medieval times, notably the Romanesque period of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. I would argue, however, that in the interests of illustrating a point- and knowing full well that the film was not made for a Medieval audience- Buñuel would be willing to allow his viewer to freely conflate early and later Medieval periods.

¹³ This is implied by Francis Fukuyama's famed 1989 declaration that the fall of eastern European communism signaled the 'end of history.' See Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1991). With an almost Romantic nostalgia, however, Buñuel himself would remark: "What diabolical times we live in: crowds, smog, promiscuity, radios, etc. I would happily return to the Middle Ages, as long as it was before the Great Plague of the fourteenth century' (*Objects*, p. 178.)

¹⁴ André Breton, 'As in a Wood', in *Free Rein* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 239.

¹⁵ The Good Shepherd was indeed one of the first visual symbols of Christianity, when it was still largely an underground cult in Roman times. The image was painted in catacombs and also appeared in statuette form and on numerous sarcophagi. It is believed to have functioned initially as a surreptitious symbol and not as a portrait of Christ himself.

¹⁶ As Rosenstone has pointed out, casting is necessarily one of the fictions of the history film, in that Liam Nisson, for example, is not in actuality Oskar Schindler.

¹⁷ More specifically *Viridiana* suffers a similar demise in the presence of rock and roll, implying here too that contemporary culture does not necessarily represent the culmination of an ever-improving historical trajectory. With regard to casting, Buñuel's other devil would be played by Pierre Clementi, dressed all in white and holding a flower in a brief appearance in the 1968 film *The Milky Way*.

¹⁸ *Objects of Desire*, p. 177.

¹⁹ *My Last Sigh*, chapter 15, pp. 171-76.

²⁰ *Objects of Desire*, p. 184. Elsewhere, Buñuel would state: 'I sympathize with those who make an effort to search for the truth; I disagree with those who speak as if they had discovered it' (*Objects of Desire*, p. 129). See the introduction to Thomas McEvilley's *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999) for an expanded discussion on the history of doubt as a worldview.

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Surrealist Black Humour: Masculine/Feminine

Susan Rubin Suleiman

Abstract

This article treats a subject that has not received much critical attention from feminists: that of Surrealist black humour. What was it? How, if at all, did women participate in it? And what can that tell us about the larger questions of the role of women's work in Surrealism and the role of Surrealism in women's work? Three specific strategies by women Surrealists are considered: assimilation to "mainstream" Surrealism; hostile parody of it; and mimicry, an in-between position expressing ambivalence. These are examined in works by Leonora Carrington, Gisèle Prassinos, and Nelly Kaplan.

As we have known for over two decades now, one way to renew our view of the historical avant-gardes is to reinscribe the work of women into their history. In the case of Surrealism, which will concern me here, feminist critics and historians since the 1980s have not only done an impressive amount of excavation of forgotten or overlooked women writers and artists and their work; they have also sought to theorize how taking proper account of women's work can help us rethink the achievements as well as the shortcomings or blindspots of Surrealism as an avant-garde movement.¹ It is not a matter of distributing praise or blame, and even less a matter of 'bashing' male Surrealists for their misogyny (as feminists are often accused of doing). Rather, it is a matter of understanding the historical situation and the set of cultural presuppositions that contributed to Surrealist mythologizing about women and the feminine; and understanding, as well, how women artists and writers may have shared those presuppositions or else responded to them critically in various ways.

I propose to consider here a subject that has not received much critical attention from feminists: that of Surrealist black humour. What was it? How, if at all, did women participate in it? And what can that tell us about the larger questions of the role of women's work in Surrealism and the role of Surrealism in women's work?

Is Black Humour Male?

The term 'black humour' has become such a part of the language (in both English and French) that it is difficult to think of it as having a specific origin. The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as 'the humour of the morbid and the absurd, especially in its development as a literary genre,' without citing any source or etymology. The Petit Robert dictionary of the French language does likewise ('a form of humour which exploits dramatic subjects and draws its comic effects from coldness and cynicism,' my translation). In fact, André Breton appears to have been the originator of the term. In the brief 1966 foreword to his *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, Breton lays claim to his paternity. When the book first appeared, he writes, "the words "black humour" had no meaning... It is only since then that the term has entered the dictionary: we know how popular the notion of black humour has become."² The *Anthologie* came off the press in June 1940, just before the Germans



entered Paris - a coincidence that is itself not devoid of a certain terrible black humour. Because of the German invasion, the book was not actually distributed until 1945; it had subsequent editions, with some modifications, in 1950 and 1966.

Breton does not give a precise definition of black humour in his anthology, but this does not prevent him from making a very strong claim for its importance and for its necessary link to modernity: for a modern sensibility, he writes in his introduction (titled 'Paratonnerre,' 'Lightning Rod'), contemporary works that lack '*this kind* of humour' are unlikely to endure, whether in the realm of science, art, poetry, or philosophy (OC II, 868, Breton's emphasis). He then evokes Hegel's concept of 'objective humour' as an antecedent, but it is Freud that he quotes as his major authority in this domain.

Freud wrote about humour both in his book *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) and in his brief essay, 'Humour' (1927). In the latter, he cites as a typical example the 'criminal being led to the gallows on a Monday' who remarks: 'Well, this is a good beginning to the week.' As this example shows, Freud conceives of humour as a way of overcoming pain or humiliation by asserting one's superiority to the situation. He writes: 'Humour is not resigned, it is rebellious....The humorous attitude...refuses to undergo suffering, asseverates the invincibility of one's ego against the real world and victoriously upholds the pleasure principle.'³ These words could not but appeal to the leader of an avant-garde movement known for its rebelliousness, who was also the author of a youthful 'discourse on the paucity of reality' ('Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité,' 1925, in OC II). Indeed, Breton quotes the above passage from Freud's essay at length in his introduction to the *Anthologie*, including the example of the criminal; and later, in his headnotes for the text by Salvador Dalí, he paraphrases it in his own words: 'humour, a denial of reality, the grandiose affirmation of the pleasure principle' (OC II, 871-72, 1149).

It is in his choice of authors and texts as much as in any explicit statement that Breton clarifies what he means by black humour. The *Anthologie* begins with texts by Swift and Sade, moves through Poe, Baudelaire, Lewis Carroll and Lautréamont to Jarry, Kafka, Duchamp and many others. Mireille Rosello, in her book devoted to the *Anthologie*, notes that Breton's choice of texts is at once absolute (having invented the category, he decides what texts best illustrate it) and arbitrary (no explicit criteria dictate the choices). Appropriating a metaphor that Breton himself uses in his introduction ('To take part in the black tournament of humour, one has to have overcome many trials'), Rosello calls him 'the sovereign arbiter of the black tournament.'⁴ She then makes a point of noting that among the forty-five authors who figure in the final version of the anthology, only two are women (the original edition had only woman, Gisèle Prassinos; the second one, Leonora Carrington, was added in the 1950 edition). Whence Rosello's question, which has been asked variously by feminist critics about Surrealism in general: 'Is black humour a man's business?' (106).

Although Rosello asks this question rhetorically, the answer to it is by no means unambiguous. The writer Annie Le Brun, who was among the young women who joined the Surrealist group in the 1960s, is an ardent advocate of Breton's conception of black humour (as well as an acerbic critic of feminist work). As Le Brun sees it, black humour- like Surrealism itself - is as much a



woman's business as a man's. Black humour, she stated in a speech at a conference on Surrealism in 1966, is 'the mark of the greatest insubordination, capable of affirming itself among the most varied minds,' endowed with 'subversive and liberating values...that place it quite naturally at the extreme point of the human adventure.'⁵ Black humour, she concluded, is 'a total revolt of the ego which refuses to let itself be affected by its own sensibility,' opposing 'all repressive notions... with a mood of affective and intellectual subversion that threatens the wellbeing of everything that considers itself stable' (104).

The fact that Le Brun's celebration of the revolutionary force of black humour took place less than two years before the social and political explosion of May 1968 in France adds a special flavour, retrospectively, to her words. Many years later, the American scholar John D. Erickson argued in a similar way that Surrealist black humour was an 'oppositional discourse,' an 'attempt to discover and articulate a new discourse offering an alternative to that representation of the world imposed by the dominant discourse of Western middle-class society.'⁶

Breton, as we saw, was drawn to the revolutionary aspect of black humour, but he also emphasized the ego's superior self-affirmation against 'the traumatism of reality.' Did he consider women capable of this kind of superior self-affirmation? Significantly, the French translation of Freud that Breton quotes uses the phrase 'sublime et élevé' ('sublime and elevated') to qualify humour, where Freud had written 'splendid and elevating' (*grossartiges und erhebendes*). Can women attain the sublime? What does Breton think?

Judging by the texts included in his *Anthologie*, I would answer that Breton thinks some women are indeed capable of attaining the sublime heights of black humour, but he does not think that that capability is a 'feminine' trait - indeed, he is quite sure that it is not. The metaphor of 'the black tournament' ('le tournoi noir') suggests that this kind of humour is virile: chivalric and warlike. This view is confirmed by another, much more extended metaphor which concludes Breton's introduction to the anthology. Although it has escaped commentary so far, this concluding metaphor is worth pondering:

[L'humour noir] est par excellence l'ennemi mortel de la sentimentalité à l'air perpétuellement aux abois - la sentimentalité toujours sur fond bleu - et d'une certaine fantaisie à court terme, qui se donne trop souvent pour la poésie, persiste bien vainement à vouloir soumettre l'esprit à ses artifices caducs, et n'en a sans doute plus pour longtemps à dresser sur le soleil, parmi les autres graines de pavot, sa tête de grue couronnée. (OC II, 873)

[Black humour is par excellence the mortal enemy of sentimentality, which always has an anxious air - sentimentality, always on a blue background - and of a certain short-term fantasy that too often passes itself off as poetry, persists vainly in wanting to submit the spirit to its outdated ploys, and doubtless will not much longer raise to the sun, among the other seeds of poppy, its head of a crowned crane.]



Black humour is opposed here to sentimentality 'on a blue background' - and doubtless also to women's romances, which in French are called 'romans à l'eau de rose,' novels with essence of rose. Max Ernst, in an essay written around the same time as Breton's introduction to the *Anthologie*, had also opposed 'black humour' to 'rosy humour' - but his reasoning was that since the times were not rosy (especially true in 1937), neither could humour be. 'Chance is the master of humour,' writes Ernst, 'and consequently, in a period that is not rosy, the period we are living in, when a heroic act consists in having your two arms cut off in combat, [chance is] the master of humour-that-is-not-rosy, of *black humour*' (quoted in Breton, *OC II*, 1768). Breton's metaphor, by contrast, points not to history but to poetry, not to war but to nature - and to the eternal battle of the sexes. Black humour, in Breton's tortuous sentence, is called the enemy of sentimentality and of 'short-term fantasy,' which plies its 'outdated ploys' against the spirit like an old whore plying her seductions. Breton's image here becomes truly baroque, for the word 'grue' means both 'whore' and the long-legged bird, crane. A 'grue couronnée' is a species of crane, the crowned crane, but the way Breton has set up the image one inevitably reads the phrase doubly: we see a crane raising its head to the sun with 'other seeds of poppy' (which doesn't make much sense in this context), and we also see a coquettish old tart whose days are numbered. Although Breton does not actually use the adjective 'vieille,' 'old,' to qualify the noun, the reference to 'outdated ploys' and the idea of numbered days imply old age. However one glosses this odd image, one thing seems clear: black humour is not 'feminine' but is the enemy of the feminine, whether the latter is figured as sentimental ('blue') or as an aging 'grue couronnée.' Nevertheless, Breton includes two women in his *Anthologie*, without forgetting to emphasize that they are young. Leonora Carrington, whom he compares to a young and beautiful sorceress (*OC II*, 1162), and Gisèle Prassinos, 'who was not yet fourteen when we had the privilege of hearing her for the first time' (1166), are women capable of black humour.

Indeed, the texts Breton chose by Carrington and Prassinos are easily assimilated to the other texts of the *Anthologie*. Carrington's 'La débutante,' a cruel comic tale, recounts the stratagems of a young girl who is so averse to debutante balls and dinner parties that she sends a talking hyena in her place (*OC II*, 1163-66). The only problem is, the hyena must wear a human face: she therefore proposes that the young girl kill her maid and use her face as a mask. When the girl voices doubts ('someone will surely find the corpse and we'll go to jail'), the hyena reassures her: being quite hungry, she will eat the corpse, including the bones. The plan is put into execution - the young girl won't have to go to the ball, what a relief!

This is black humour, no doubt about it, pitiless even toward the underprivileged class (reminiscent, in that regard, of Baudelaire's prose poem 'Le mauvais vitrier,' which occupies pride of place in the *Anthologie*). But although it is the maid who gets eaten, the tale's major aggression is directed against 'high society,' represented here by one of the favourite targets of Surrealist attacks: the bourgeois mother. It is the young girl's mother who hosts the dinner and ball the girl refuses to attend, and it is the mother who, 'pale with fury,' erupts into the girl's room after discovering the substitution trick. To insult (and enrage) the bourgeois mother was a favourite pleasure of Surrealist humour (see, for example, the sequence in Buñuel and Dalí's film *L'Age d'or*, where the hero slaps



his beloved's mother in her own *salon*). Carrington's story conforms perfectly to this programme, as Breton clearly saw.

As for Prassinós, the adolescent poet discovered by Paul Eluard and Breton, who published her first volume of poetry in 1935 when she was fifteen years old, Breton chose two texts by her: a short piece of nonsensical dialogue in the manner of Lewis Carroll (who is also included in the *Anthologie*), between a man and his horse ('Une conversation'), and another cruel tale whose aggression is directed against the family and bourgeois domesticity, titled 'Suite de membres'. The father in the story, helped by the mother, gives a 'huge kick to the little crate' that contains their child, whereupon the crate 'descended the staircase, lively' (*OC II*, 1170). In *L'Age d'or*, the hero kicks a blind man in one sequence, while in another a father shoots and kills his child when the latter playfully knocks a cigarette out of his hand. The 'civilized' codes of Western society, like the protectiveness of the bourgeois family, turn out to be only a veneer. Prassinós's text, like Carrington's, confirms and conforms to the Surrealist view, as well as to the particular Surrealist practice of black humour.

In my books *Subversive Intent* and *Risking Who One Is*, I have discussed the relation of women artists and writers to Surrealism by asking how, given the overwhelmingly male perspective of the movement, women associated with it managed to produce works of originality and power. The question of the relation of individual invention to collective doctrines applies, of course, to every artist associated with a movement that thinks of itself as a group (publishing collective manifestoes, using the collective 'we' in speaking of their work). But in the case of women artists and Surrealism, the question is complicated by the fact that male Surrealist artists and poets based so much of their work on erotic fantasies of the female body. How could a woman situate her work as an artist in a universe where images of the female form (as dreamed almost exclusively by men) predominated, and where flesh-and-blood women were 'naturally' (that is, based on unquestioned cultural assumptions) relegated to secondary or minor status?

This question, I have suggested, can only be answered by looking at a large number of individual cases and works. But in a general way, one can define certain strategies used by women artists to situate their work in relation to the work of the dominant males. Among these strategies, I have suggested, is mimicry: an exaggerated, implicitly parodic self-representation, corresponding to male stereotypes about femininity. Explicitly hostile parody or critique of Surrealist males and their views, what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'internal polemic,' is another kind of critical response by women. Both of these imply what I call a 'double allegiance' on the part of the woman artist: on the one hand, allegiance to the formal experimentation and playful innovations of Surrealism and other male-dominated avant-gardes; on the other hand, allegiance to the feminist critique of sexual ideologies, including those of the very same avant-gardes.⁷ Another way to define double allegiance is as ambivalence, simultaneous positive and negative feelings directed toward the same object.

A third strategy, which I did not discuss in detail in my earlier work, is precisely the one evident in the two texts by Carrington and Prassinós that Breton chose for his *Anthologie*: I call it assimilation, in which the woman's work is not really distinguishable, either formally or in terms of values, from the work of male colleagues. This does not mean that the woman's work lacks originality



or a personal stamp; rather, it means that the question of gender relations is not foregrounded and there is no internal polemic in the work, as in the case of mimicry or explicit parody. Carrington's and Prassinós's tales are wonderful examples of Surrealist black humour, like any number of texts by Robert Desnos, Benjamin Péret, Louis Aragon, or René Crevel. In their playfulness and verbal inventions, as in the targets they attack (bourgeois conventions, the family, the mother), Carrington's and Prassinós's texts are easily assimilable into the Surrealist canon - which is doubtless why Breton included them in his anthology.⁸ (He included Péret too, of course, and would doubtless have included Desnos and Aragon if they had not broken with Surrealism - and personally with Breton - years earlier).

Another way to put this is to say that these particular texts by Carrington and Prassinós manifest no ambivalence toward Surrealism: their aggressivity and parodic energy are directed 'with' Surrealism against common targets, not against Surrealism itself. But these two women writers (among others) produced quite different works of black humour as well, which might have made Breton and other male Surrealists squirm. It is to a few of those works that I now turn.

Women on Top: Surrealist Black Humour in the Feminist Mode

Freud, in his book on jokes, divides jokes into two main types, the 'innocent' and the 'tendentious,' and notes that 'innocent' jokes rarely provoke the explosion of laughter - or the degree of pleasure - that characterizes tendentious ones. The latter fall into two main subtypes, the obscene and the hostile: such jokes, Freud explains, 'liberat[e] pleasure by lifting inhibitions.'⁹ Obscene jokes lift the inhibition against talking about sex ('smut'), while hostile jokes lift the inhibition against the open expression of aggressive feelings. Presumably, the stronger the inhibition that is lifted by the joke, the greater the pleasure and the more explosive the laughter that greets the joke.

Black humour is obviously related to tendentious jokes, and more often to the hostile type than to the smutty type. Indeed, one could argue that the taboo against open expression of hostility is even stronger, in Western culture (and no doubt in some others as well), than the taboo against 'smut.'

In what I am calling black humour in the feminist mode, aggressive feelings are expressed against the Surrealist group itself, dominated by males; the ambivalence that accompanies such expressions is, I think, all the stronger when the writer is closely involved, in friendship or love, with members of the group.

Consider, for example, two stories by Leonora Carrington written between 1937 and 1940, the years during which she was most strongly involved with the Surrealist group and was living with one of its most dominant members, the artist and writer Max Ernst. Ernst was more than twenty-five years older than Carrington - she was twenty and unknown as an artist when they met, he already famous and forty-six.¹⁰ Like several other of Carrington's stories, these two - 'Pigeon, Fly' and 'Monsieur Cyril de Guindre' - remained unpublished for a long time.¹¹ 'Pigeon, Fly' is a macabre but also quite humorous tale of doubling and repetition, themes often found in Surrealist prose. It is



narrated by a woman, a painter by profession, who is called to the home of an aristocratic gentleman named Célestin des Airlines-Drues. This nobleman has the peculiarity of looking like a sheep, and is accompanied by a group of men who 'bleat like sheep.' More to the point, he has just lost his beloved wife, and has summoned our heroine to paint the portrait of the dead lady in her coffin.

When the portrait is finished, the narrator notes with a shock that the face on the canvas is her own. After that, informed that the dead woman was also a painter, she asks to be shown her studio - there, she finds her diary, in which Madame des Airlines-Drues confides her growing fear and disappointment. It emerges from these pages that Célestin is at once old and childlike, flighty and narcissistic, comic and sinister. He refuses his wife's company (when he does visit her, all he can do is talk about himself: 'Am I beautiful? They say I am.' 'Look at me. I am terribly young, aren't I?') and spends most of his time with his band of men dressed as sheep, playing the game 'pigeon, fly.' Meanwhile, in his wife's studio the furniture begins to sprout leaves (an allusion, perhaps, to Surrealist objects like Wolfgang Paalen's *Leafy Furniture Cover*, a chair covered in leaves) while she herself fades away into nonexistence. At the end of the story, the narrator-heroine discovers that the wife's place has been reserved for her: she is part of a series of young women at once cherished and neglected, who all look alike. As a final touch, the wife's portrait fades from the canvas and the narrator herself is afraid to look into the mirror: she has become faceless.

Two tell-tale signs indicate that Célestin des Airlines-Drue is a caricature of Max Ernst: he wears striped socks, and he takes himself for a bird. Ernst, in the famous portrait of him painted by Carrington around this time, wears striped socks; and he often portrayed himself as a bird. He even had a winged alter ego: Loplop, the Superior of the Birds. 'Pigeon, Fly' can thus be read as a tendentiously hostile but also cruelly humorous putdown of Ernst and his Surrealist friends, by a woman who loved Ernst, who shared his life and his passions, but who no doubt felt at times like the women in the tale: stifled, deprived of her face and her personhood.

The second story, 'Monsieur Cyril de Guindre,' is equally savage in its treatment of the main character. Although he is a father (of a girl he has never consented to see), Monsieur de Guindre detests everything related to women's bodies and to procreation; he cares only for his friend Thibaut Lastre, who dreams of having a suit made of 'rosy beige fur' with a shirt of feathers: 'It will hardly be a suit for going out in,' Thibaut says, 'but rather for the privacy of the boudoir.' As for Cyril, his taste in clothing runs to striped socks and angora robes - Ernst, in Carrington's portrait of him, wears, with his striped socks, a fluffy red robe that could be angora. Here, as in 'Pigeon, Fly' but even more explicitly, we find the suggestion that the Surrealist 'men's club' (or, in Luce Irigaray's word, the 'phratric') left little or no place for women, and that it prized female attributes only when they were possessed by men. We're rather far from *l'amour fou*, the passionate heterosexual love celebrated in so much Surrealist writing. Breton, as is well known, was quite homophobic - this makes Carrington's depiction of Cyril and his friend Thibaut (who could be a parody of Breton), with its homoerotic resonance, all the more hostile.

It should be noted, however, that at the same time that she was writing these hostile humorous tales, Carrington was also writing other stories in which the accent is on the complicity



between lovers, the man and woman as twin souls united against the world ('The Seventh Horse,' 'The Bird Superior, Max Ernst'). This kind of splitting can also be found in the work of other women associated with Surrealism, sometimes co-existing in a single work (as we shall see).

Turning now to Prassinos: 'La naissance' ('Birth'), a prose poem first published in 1935, begins with a sentence of pure black humour: 'He wanted a great dead doll to hold in his arms and smother' ('Il voulait une grande poupée morte pour la tenir dans ses bras et l'étouffer'). To anyone familiar with the dolls of Hans Bellmer (his first photos of the doll appeared in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1934), the allusion seems obvious: 'With blond hair, he said, and big open eyes...I will hug her very hard, to kill her blue eyes, to give them a life that's mine.' In the end, he gets what he desires: 'a nervous package landed heavily on his chest. Then, he took hold of it with his eager hands and began to destroy it.'¹²

Unlike Carrington, Prassinos did not have a personal relationship with the artist who is evoked in this poem (she did know Bellmer's work, however, as shown by a 1937 poem titled 'Hans Bellmer'). But just as in Carrington's two tales, one can read this poem as a hostile piece of black humour directed against an artist, or better still an artistic practice, that desires the female body - preferably dead or inanimate - only in order to destroy it. If Breton is right and black humour is both 'superior' and critical of reality, then in these works we seem to have a case of black humour raised to the power of two: Prassinos and Carrington are putting down the Surrealist black humorists themselves.

Assimilation on the one hand, hostile parody on the other: is there an intermediate position between these two extremes? I think that mimicry occupies that place. Like all intermediate positions, mimicry often produces ambiguous effects so that interpretation wavers. In that sense, it is the clearest expression of ambivalence.

Take, for example, Prassinos's 1961 story titled 'La mante' ('The mantis' - a play on words with 'l'amante,' the female lover). The punning title is humoristic, but also alludes to Surrealism, for the praying mantis ('la mante religieuse') was an object of considerable fascination to the Surrealists; the particularity of this insect is that the female of the species devours the male after copulation. The mantis/lover of Prassinos's story is a woman who has killed several husbands, a fact she does not hide but does not explicitly state either: 'I am of a loving nature. I love children and animals...but I have a flaw: I cannot abide physical weakness, it makes me dizzy. I cannot rest until I have helped the creature afflicted with it to get rid of it. One way or the other.' This 'loving' woman and man-killer may be a caricatural embodiment not only of the praying mantis, but also of the *femme fatale* dear to the Surrealist imagination. Is Prassinos mocking this powerful myth and those who promote it, or is she promoting it herself? One cannot say for sure.

Another example is the story by Carrington titled 'The Sisters,' written around the same time as 'Pigeon, Fly' and 'Monsieur Cyril de Guindre' (and also included in *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales*). The title characters of this exaggeratedly gothic tale are Juniper, who is half-bird and half-human, a vampire in love with the moon, and Drusille, a woman in love with an old king named Jumart. But by the end, Drusille strangely resembles her monstrous sister: 'Drusille, naked to her



breast, had her arms around Jumart's neck. The heat of the wine warmed her skin like a flame, she gleamed with sweat. Her hair moved like black vipers, the juice of a pomegranate dropped from her half-open mouth' (*Seventh Horse*, p. 49). Drusille, a combination of vampire, Medusa, and sorceress who transforms men into beasts ('The carcass of a peacock decorated Jumart's head. His beard was full of sauces, fish heads, crushed fruit. His gown was torn and stained with all sorts of food'), can be seen as an excessive figuration of the *femme fatale*. But it is not clear whether this is a parody of Surrealist mythology (Juniper and Drusille as caricatures of the 'wild woman') or on the contrary its assimilation - Drusille as the child-woman close to nature, *l'amour fou* as mutual feast and seduction.

Of all the women artists associated with Surrealism, perhaps the one who has made the most extended use of the ambivalence of mimicry is the filmmaker and writer Nelly Kaplan. Kaplan is a mistress of raunchy black humour, and most of her works have a feminist slant. She is probably best known for her 1969 film *La Fiancée du pirate (A Very Curious Girl)*, and has made several other films as well; but she is also the author of a collection of stories, *Le Réservoir des sens (The Reservoir of the Senses)* and a novel, *Mémoires d'une liseuse de draps (Memoirs of a Sheet Reader)*. (Both of these were first published under the pen-name Belen). Among Kaplan's many 'mimicking' versions of the *femme fatale* is the heroine of a story titled, punningly, 'Un fait d'hiver' ('A Winter Event,' playing on 'fait divers,' a small news item, often concerning crimes of passion). This woman recounts how she has just killed the love of her life, her partner in *amour fou*: 'Oh! my love, how could I strangle you with my stockings, those stockings of black silk which fit my legs so tightly? Do you remember my legs? They always excited you terribly. Do they still excite you? (No, I don't think so.)'¹³ And why did she kill him with those sexy black stockings loved by the Surrealists? (Recall Breton's celebration of black stockings in *Nadja*, where he describes a play about two *femmes fatales* who excited him terribly, *Les Détraquées*). 'I had told you a thousand times: you irritated me with your habit of never taking off your socks while making love to me.' (*Réservoir*, p. 127). Here is one woman, at any rate, who (like the 'superior' humorist according to Breton and Freud) will not allow reality to get the better of her!

In Kaplan's stories, the ambiguity is often indistinguishable from hostile parody, as for example in the story titled 'La circonstance exténuante' ('The extenuating circumstance,' playing on the other meaning of 'exténuante' as 'exhausting'). Here it is the woman who kills the vampire by her excessive sexual appetite: the male vampire dies exhausted! 'You too..., like all the others who were mere humans?' the heroine asks, disappointed. She is sure people will again accuse her of being a nymphomaniac (*Réservoir*, p. 113). One can read this as a parody of the male vision (and fear?) of women's sexual appetite, but it also has some of the ambiguity of mimicry: yet another *femme fatale* revelling in her mythic role.

To conclude this discussion, I offer an episode from *Mémoires d'une liseuse de draps*, in which the heroine, a beautiful young girl who is a pirate's daughter and lives on an all-male ship, must choose the man on board who will initiate her into love. She chooses, with no hesitation, her father:

Car ma décision avait été longuement méditée, puis raffermie par mes lectures scientifiques. L'amour que je vouais à mon père étant ce qu'il était, je devais agir de la sorte pour éviter les risques d'une fixation affective telle qu'elle aurait perturbée par la suite toute ma vie physique



et sentimentale. Papa, il me le dit plus tard, approuva entièrement ma sagesse. Je pense en outre que *lui aussi* en avait très envie.¹⁴

[For I had arrived at my decision after careful thought, and found confirmation for it in my scientific research. The love I bore my father being what it was, I had to act that way in order to avoid the risks of an affective fixation that would subsequently have perturbed my whole physical and emotional life. Daddy, as he told me later, completely approved my wise choice. Besides, I think that *he too* wanted it very badly.]

Killing two birds (at least) with one stone, Kaplan takes pleasure here in lampooning both the discourse of psychoanalysis (justifying incest in order to 'avoid the risks of affective fixation') and the Surrealist myth of the *femme-enfant*, the 'child-woman.' Her heroine becomes, literally, the 'woman' as well as the child of the handsome pirate, who initiates her into the secrets of love in a cosy little apartment in the shape of a vagina, with the circular bed/clitoris in the middle. The narrating heroine even draws us a picture of this apartment, in the manner of Salvador Dalí drawing a living room in the shape of Mae West's face.

Alas, this great love cannot last, for shortly after their first night together the father is killed by rival pirates. That is the beginning of the daughter's career as a reader of sheets (she foretells men's future by the traces on the sheets on which they have made love to her), among many other adventures. In the course of her travels she spends time in Paris, where she encounters 'the race of VAMPIRES,' including 'Norteb, the hunter of fire' and 'Ultapuso, a madman of genius.' That is, Breton, Soupault, and the others: 'They came toward me one by one, from diverse, often hostile sects. Charmed, I paid no attention. Until one fine morning I awoke to find myself caught in their claws, nailed by their teeth, the more or less consenting victim of their magic. For it is seductive, the race of vampires...' (*Mémoires*, p. 196).¹⁵

I think we can see in this statement a *mise en abyme*, a self-reflexive commentary on the ambivalences and ambiguities of being a woman artist among the Surrealists.

To return to the question with which I began: How does taking account of *women's* black humour inflect our understanding of Surrealist black humour or of Surrealism generally? Insofar as the women's work comments, aggressively or ambivalently, on Surrealism, and insofar as it does this with Surrealism's own black humour, it allows us to adopt a stance that is at once critical and appreciative. These works by women, in other words, place the reader in their own position of double allegiance toward Surrealism, or in what I have called elsewhere the 'Yes, but.'¹⁶ We can also call it the position 'between' -between appreciation and critique, between repetition and renewal. It is not a bad place to be, if one wants to think (or rethink) through the early twentieth-century avant-gardes in the year 2003.



¹See, among others, Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, Little, Brown & Co., Boston, 1985, and Chadwick, ed., *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1998; Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997; Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, and *Risking Who One Is*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1994.

²Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, II, ed. Marguerite Bonnet et al., Gallimard, édition de la Pléiade, Paris, 1992, p. 865. See the informative 'Notice' by Etienne-Alain Hubert, in this same volume, for details about Breton's and Max Ernst's first uses of the term (pp. 1767-68). Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the text; all translations from the French are my own.

³Sigmund Freud, 'Humour' (1927), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et al, vol. 21, Hogarth Press, London, 1971, p. 161.

⁴Mireille Rosello, *L'Humour noir selon André Breton*, José Corti, Paris, 1987, p. 57. Further references to this book will be given in parentheses.

⁵Annie Le Brun, 'L'humour noir,' in *Le Surréalisme*, ed. Ferdinand Alquié, Mouton, The Hague, 1968, p. 100. Further references will be given in parentheses.

⁶John D. Erickson, 'Surrealist Black Humour as Oppositional Discourse,' *Symposium*, Fall 1988, p. 198.

⁷Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, pp. 27, 162-63; and 'Dialogue and Double Allegiance: Some Contemporary Women Artists and the Historical Avant-Garde,' in *Mirror Images*, ed. W. Chadwick, pp. 128-55. For the concept of mimicry, see Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1985, p. 76.

⁸My reading of these texts differs from Mireille Rosello's, for I am struck above all by the resemblance (assimilation) between Carrington's and Prassinos's texts and the others in the anthology, while Rosello emphasizes their difference. Thus, in Carrington's 'La débutante,' she sees a feminine sensibility that dwells on communication and dialogue (*L'Humour noir selon André Breton*, p. 129). This reading does not take account of the violent, and violently anti-'bourgeois family' aspects of Carrington's text- which were precisely, I surmise, what appealed to Breton.

⁹Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey, W.W. Norton, New York, 1963, p. 134.

¹⁰I discuss their relation in detail in *Risking Who One Is*, pp. 89-121; the discussion of the two stories that follows is drawn from that chapter.

¹¹Although written in English, they were first published in French translation in 1986, and in English in 1988: Leonora Carrington, *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales*, E.P. Dutton, New York.

¹²Gisèle Prassinos, *Les Mots endormis*, Flammarion, Paris, 1967, pp. 17-18.

¹³Nelly Kaplan, *Le Réservoir des sens*, nouvelle édition augmentée, J.-J. Pauvert, Paris, 1988, p. 126. Further references to this book of stories will be given in parentheses.

¹⁴Belen, *Mémoires d'une liseuse de draps*, J.-J. Pauvert, Paris, 1974, p. 95; italics in the text.

¹⁵For a detailed reading of *Mémoires d'une liseuse de draps* which I discovered belatedly and which confirms my own reading, see Stella Béhar, 'Belen: Gourme et gourmandises,' *Symposium*, Spring 1996, pp. 3-14.

¹⁶Suleiman, 'Dialogue and Double Allegiance,' in *Mirror Images*, ed. Chadwick.

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Fantasy, the Uncanny and Surrealist Theories of Architecture

Anthony Vidler

Abstract

This paper examines the complex relationship between Surrealism and architectural theory and practice. While architecture did not apparently play an extensive role in Surrealist concerns, this paper argues that it could offer, nevertheless, a crucial arena for a Surrealist articulation of space as psychically charged. In the writings of Carrington, Matta, Tzara and Dalí, the irrational possibilities of architectural spaces are explored, particularly in relation to discussions of homes and dwellings. If Surrealism pitted itself explicitly against the modernism of Le Corbusier, this paper considers the points of overlap between them, using Benjamin's concept of fetishism to explore confusions of identity between the mental and the physical, the organic and the inorganic.

This paper is based on a keynote speech given at the conference Fantasy Space: Surrealism and Architecture, Manchester, Whitworth Art Gallery, September 12, 2003.



Frederick Kiesler, *Endless House*, 1959
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I want to begin by rendering homage to my old friend and interlocutor Dalibor Vesely for the extraordinary perspicacity that enabled him to assemble the 1978 issue of *Architectural Design* on Surrealism and Architecture, writing what is still the most important survey of Surrealism and architecture in his introduction, as well as orchestrating the entirely prescient joining of Tschumi and Koolhaas in two of the most important preliminary manifestos of their individual careers – Tschumi's 'Architecture and its Double,' (with the delightful misprint that transformed André Breton into the society photographer, Andre Beeton) and Koolhaas's 'Dalí and Le Corbusier,' his confrontation of Dalí with Le Corbusier in a foretaste of delirious New York and his own personal application of the method of critical paranoia.¹

To speak of 'Architecture and Surrealism,' as you well know, is a tricky subject – not only from the point of view of a historical study, but also as a topic within the Surrealist movement itself. One way to approach the question, of course, is, like Freud on Surrealist art, to dismiss it entirely. After all, as Dalibor Vesely remarked, 'architecture never became an integral part of Surrealist thought in the same way as painting, sculpture, and the creation of Surrealist objects.' Indeed as he observes, 'the Surrealists were not particularly interested in architecture and then only in a very personal and rather indirect way.'² This comment was echoed by Kenneth Frampton, in the same issue: 'It may be argued,' he wrote, 'that the Surreal in architecture does not exist.'³

Or rather that, as the evidence of Dalí's paintings, and his Pavilion for the New York World's Fair attests, when it does exist, it exists as a kind of literalization of fantasy and dreamscape, that is dangerously close to kitsch, or at least, simply scenographic, as in the environments of the movie *Barbarella*. The most commonly cited 'object' – the *Endless House* project by Frederick Kiesler – is properly speaking not Surrealist at all, but 'Correalist' in Kiesler's own terms. What Vesely termed the 'bitter encounter' of Surrealism with the principle of reality,⁴ seems to have kept architecture, at least as physical object, at bay.

And if we look for a 'theory' of architecture in Surrealism, the evidence is equally scanty: a few remarks by Breton against modern architecture and an ironic survey of Parisian monuments; Dalí on the edible nature of Gaudí's art nouveau; a note by Tristan Tzara on intra-uterine space in *Minotaure*; an essay by Jean Arp.

If we then turn to look for the 'influence' of Surrealism on architecture, we are similarly blocked by the ubiquity of fantasy in utopian and outsider architecture, and its lack of specific reference to the Surrealist movement itself. Can we really say that the Palais Idéal of the 'Facteur Cheval' was Surrealist simply because it was a favourite of Breton's? Or that Simon Rodia was Surrealist simply because Watts Towers utilized found objects? After all, there *is* no architecture without dream, myth, and fantasy; and would we then wish to say that all architecture is thereby Surrealist?

In what follows I want to avoid such overgeneralizations, and even foreclose that more radical extension of Surrealism offered by Vesely, that Surrealism was to be found in the hermetic thought of the Renaissance and the mythic thought of Romanticism – that, in his words, 'Surrealism does not represent another artistic or political avant-garde, but a sub-stratum of the whole modern culture.'⁵



Rather, I will hold that Surrealism should properly be considered an avant-garde movement; that while its thought certainly partook of modern culture, it was not the 'modern' that began with the Renaissance but rather that specific culture of modernism in the interwar period in Europe; and that consequently any consideration of Surrealism's 'architectural' implications has to be rooted firmly in the architectural discourse of the 1920s, or at least a conscious replay of this discourse in more contemporary terms. Considered in this way, Surrealism is a much more definitive and interestingly complex contributor to modernism in general, and to certain post-modern responses, than any generalized appeal to the dream, myth, fantasy, or the like could supply.

What I would advance, however, is perhaps a more radical assertion: that, despite the apparent obliviousness of the Surrealists to architecture, architecture would seem to be the most fruitful of all media for a truly Surrealist practice. It affords all the physical and psychological structures of 'home' – a concept deeply embedded in Surrealist thought as akin to the womb. It construes a topology of symbolic forms, from the stair to the cellar, that, from Freud on, have become topoi of dream analysis. Further, and more importantly, it manifests itself in that most ambiguous of all elements – *space* – within which psychic projection and introjection move freely and without fixed boundaries. It is thereby a site for all the spatial terrors and phobias that have haunted the medicine of the mind since the late nineteenth century. In other words, as I have argued in a recent book, it is, as the site of the uncanny, a perfect machine for Surrealist work. It was in all these senses that the Surrealist house was, in the words of Leonora Carrington's novel of 1937, a 'maison de la peur,' or house of fear. In short, if there is an identifiable Surrealism in architecture it is not so much in the melting blobs of Dalí, or the wild fantasies of outsider art, but as a spatio-psychical machine: an instrument, so to speak, of the uncanny.

But the Surrealist uncanny was not, as is generally thought, the result of the uncanny effect of its chosen fetish objects – gloves, shoes, and the like. These, indeed, do not at all fit the Freudian definition of the uncanny when viewed within the Surrealist discourse – familiar objects, once repressed, suddenly returning in unlikely forms. After all, these objects had not been repressed by Surrealism. If any uncanny feelings attached to these objects, they were not, that is, an uncanny experienced by Surrealism out of its own repressions. Rather what Surrealism motivated was the uncanny of the Other, which for Surrealism was the 'real' – the uncanny sense that the *normal* was nothing more than a complex of repressed objects. In the aesthetic sense of Surrealism, this normal was modernism itself and the uncanny of Surrealism was no more than the repressed of modernism, an apparent normal that in fact was a mask for the 'real' pathological.

In architectural terms, this search for modernism's repressed underlife was concentrated in three domains – domains that the modernists had clearly and polemically identified as the basis of their attack on tradition: the solid, load-bearing wall that afforded traditional protection and privacy; the bourgeois house and its kitsch-like trappings of 'home' or 'Heimat'; and the objects of everyday life, which, while for the most part mass-produced, were still encumbered with ornament and encrusted with historical references. Against these three hold-outs of tradition in modernity, the modernists, led by Le Corbusier, asserted the technological and ideological virtues of the glass wall and its



transparency to light, air, and nature; the horizontal flat slab house that allowed for no more damp basements or cluttered, musty attics – the house raised on pilotis and with a garden on the roof; and the clean, functional, forms of typical objects – ‘objets-types,’ that would, like the ocean liner, the airplane and the motor car, be shaped by calculations of use and economy. With self-conscious irony, the Surrealists, led by André Breton took on each of these domains in turn. Transparency was first in line. For Breton the glass house did not represent that ‘machine for living in’ trumpeted by Le Corbusier, but rather might be envisaged, again ironically, as an oneiric machine, a machine for dreaming:

As for me I continue to inhabit my glass house (*ma maison de verre*), where one can see at every hour who is coming to visit me, where everything that is suspended from the ceilings and the walls holds on as if by enchantment, where I rest at night on a bed of glass with glass sheets, where *who I am* will appear to me, sooner or later, engraved on a diamond.⁶

Reading this passage, which does not entirely, as we might imagine, join Breton to his modernist contemporaries, Walter Benjamin was drawn to remark, ‘To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism that we badly need. Discretion concerning one’s own existence, once an aristocratic virtue, has become more and more an affair of petit-bourgeois parvenus.’⁷ In this way Breton poses the notion of a glass house of the soul, a psycho-geographic glass house one might say, against the ideology of the glass house of the body – the aerobic-glass house. Others were less convinced of the virtues of transparency. We remember Man Ray’s photograph of Duchamp’s *Large Glass* gathering dust, but also Georges Bataille’s ironic encomium of dust:

Storytellers have not imagined that Sleeping Beauty would have awoken covered by a thick layer of dust; neither have they thought of the sinister spiders’ webs torn by her red hair as soon as she stirred. Yet sad blankets of dust endlessly invade earthly dwellings and soil them uniformly: as if attics and old rooms were being arranged for the imminent entrance of obsessions, of ghosts, of larvae fed and inebriated by the worm-eaten smell of old dust. When the big servant girls arm themselves, each morning, with big feather dusters, or even with vacuum cleaners, they are perhaps not entirely unaware that they are contributing as much as the most positive scientists to keeping off the evil ghosts who are sickened by cleanliness and logic. One day or another, it is true, dust, if it persists, will probably begin to gain ground over the servants, overrunning with vast quantities of rubble abandoned buildings, deserted docks: and in this distant epoch there will be nothing more to save us from nocturnal terrors.⁸

Glass, once perfectly transparent, is now revealed in all its opacity.

In this sense, the well-advertised antipathy of Breton to Le Corbusier, reflected more than the general opposition of Surrealism to modernism. Certainly, for Breton, modernist functionalism was ‘the most unhappy dream of the collective unconscious,’ a ‘solidification of desire in a most violent and cruel automatism.’⁹ And we know how the counter modern argument was elaborated by other Surrealists: Dalí in his exaltation of the art nouveau, with its ‘terrifying and edible beauty;’ Jean Arp’s



championing of the 'elephant style' against the 'bidet style;' Tzara's indictment of modern architecture as 'the complete negation of the image of the dwelling.' All posed a volatile and elusive sensibility of mental-physical life against what was seen as a sterile and over-rationalized technological realism: the life of the interior psyche against the externalising ratio. And yet, we begin to discern, in Surrealism's quest to uncover the modernist repressed and to reveal an uncanny in the other, a sense of complicity, or at least a dialectical dance, that, I shall argue, made of Surrealism the most modernist of modernisms.

Le Corbusier himself summarized the apparently opposing positions succinctly in his only contribution to a quasi-Surrealist journal – a note on the work of the psychologically troubled artist Louis Soutter, a relative, in an article published in *Minotaure* in 1936. To Soutter's statement, 'The minimum house or future cell should be in translucent glass. No more windows, these useless eyes. Why look outside?,' Corbusier replied, 'This affirmation of Louis Soutter ... is the very antithesis of my own ideas, but it manifests the intense interior life of the thinker.'¹⁰ For Le Corbusier, looking always, as Beatriz Colomina has observed, towards a universally transparent exteriority, the attempt to re-envision the objects of daily life metaphorically was misguided, leading to a dangerous imbalance in the human 'technico-cerebral-emotional equation,' the creation of a 'sentiment-object' rather than an object of use.

Here we arrive at the second modernist repression experienced by Surrealism as uncanny. In the Corbusian 'home of man' technology took the form of more or less benign 'objet-types' and perfectly controlled environments that allowed for the full play of the natural body in nature. The line between nature and the machine, between the organic and the inorganic seemed crystal clear; organicism was a metaphor, not a reality. But for Surrealism, the boundaries between organic and inorganic were blurred; the body itself, invaded and re-shaped by technology, in turn invades and permeates the space outside, even as this space takes on dimensions that themselves confuse the inner and the outer, visually, mentally, and physically. As Walter Benjamin presciently observed, 'The work of Le Corbusier seems to arise when the "house" as mythological configuration approaches its end.'¹¹

Surrealist attempts to reincarnate this 'mythological configuration' repressed by modernism explain the collages of Max Ernst, and, more interestingly, the monstrous merging of animal and human so characteristic of Surrealist imagery. The gentle horse-headed women and boys that populate Leonora Carrington's *House of Fear* and its illustrations by Ernst seem deliberately to transpose the attributes of the centaur and the unicorn in gender and implication. As Carrington herself remarked, 'A horse gets mixed up with one's body...it gives energy and power. I used to think I could turn myself into a horse.'¹² From the figure of Fear, in the *Castle of Fear*, who 'looked slightly like a horse,' in Carrington's text and Ernst's collages, through the *Oval Lady*, who holds the secret of turning herself into a living version of her rocking-horse, to little Francis, a mask for Carrington herself, who grows a horse's head, these equine presences play on the register of sexual and mental ambiguities with evident autobiographical reference. It was, after all, Father who burned the rocking horse to punish the *Oval Lady* for even desiring to be a horse; and Francis whose horse's shape at



once displayed his shame at failing to be woman and his androgynous desire. Carrington's horse-people seem to prefigure Donna Haraway's separatist cyborgs.

Carrington's homes for androgynes are equally filled with a mixture of organic and inorganic objects: thus Uncle Ubriaco's workroom in 'Little Francis' was:

A spacious apartment on the ground floor filled with half-constructed constructions and wholly demolished bicycles. The walls were lined with bookshelves that held books, spare tyres, bottles of oil, chipped figureheads, spanners, hammers, and reels of thread.¹³

A series of books – *Man and Bicycle*, *Intricacies of Pedals*, *Tobson's Essays on Spokes and Bells*, *Free Wheels and Ball Bearings* – was piled beside a heterogeneous collection that included starved cockroaches in a small cage, a string of artificial onions, a spinning wheel, ladies' corsets of a complicated pattern, and a great many cogwheels.

For Carrington and the Surrealists in general, these semi-organic and dream-objects were arrayed to counter the implacable rationalism of purely technological modernism, epitomised in the shape of the Father, who in the 'Oval Lady' seemed 'more like a geometric figure than anything else,'¹⁴ and who achieved grotesque proportions in the character of Egres Lepereff, 'The Great Architect' in 'Little Francis.' Based on Serge Chermayeff, appointed a surrogate parent during Carrington's stay in London, this designer of guillotines for the execution of boys like Francis, espoused 'Good machinery and efficient planning,' which 'are always artistically moving.' 'My platform...was pleasing,' purred the Architect, 'though utterly devoid of anything save the merest mechanical necessities. It was a symphony of pure form.'¹⁵ Francis himself was less certain that 'architecture... in modern art is the nearest form to pure abstraction,'¹⁶ observing innocently, 'But if you build abstract houses, the more abstract you make them the less there'll be there, and if you get abstraction itself there won't be anything at all.'¹⁷

Such a new mythology of the counter abstract demanded a new form for the house as a whole; one defined by Tzara as an 'intra-uterine' space. 'The architecture of the future,' he wrote in *Minotaure* 'will be intra-uterine if it has resolved the problems of comfort and material and sentimental well-being, if it renounces its role of interpreter-servant of the bourgeoisie whose coercive will can only separate mankind from the ways of its destiny.'¹⁸

The Surrealists' call for what Tzara termed an 'intra-uterine architecture,' was thus conceived as a radical criticism of the house of Le Corbusian and Miesian rationalism. 'Modern architecture,' Tzara argued, 'as hygienic and stripped of ornaments as it wants to appear, has no chance of living...because it is the complete negation of the image of the dwelling.'¹⁹ Against the horizontal extensions and the dissolution of the barriers between public and private implied by the Domino model, Tzara posed the maternal and sheltering images of 'uterine' constructions which, from the cave to the grotto and the tent, comprised the fundamental forms of human habitation:

From the cave (for man inhabits the earth, 'the mother'), through the Eskimo yurt, the intermediary form between the grotto and the tent (remarkable example of uterine construction which one enters through cavities with vaginal forms), through to the conical or



half-spherical hut furnished at its entrance with a post of sacred character, the dwelling symbolises pre-natal comfort.²⁰

Entered through 'cavities of vaginal form,' these conical or half-spherical houses were dark, tactile and soft. They imitated the self-constructed shelters of childhood. Here Tzara was directly, if literally, following Freud. Freud's interpretation of the uncanny desire for intra-uterine existence was evolved from his analysis of the 'Wolf Man' written in winter 1914-15 and published in 1918 under the title 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis.'²¹ The Wolf Man's complaint, noted Freud, 'was that for him the world was hidden by a veil,' a veil that could only be torn through the action of the bowels. But this veil was also a kind of mysterious generator of the uncanny: 'Nor did he keep to the veil. It evaporated into a sense of twilight, into *ténèbres*, and into other impalpable things...' During the treatment it became clear that this veil was the response to the circumstances of his birth 'with a caul [*Glückshaube*, or "lucky hood"]' that, until the onset of castration fears, made him feel he 'was a child of fortune':

Thus the caul was the veil which hid him from the world and hid the world from him. The complaint that he made was in reality a fulfilled wish-fantasy: it exhibited him as back once more in the womb, and was, in fact, a wish-fantasy of flight from the world. It can be translated as follows: 'Life makes me so unhappy! I must get back into the womb!'²²

In this way Freud was able to explain the peculiar functions of intestinal movements, that, tearing the veil, precipitated a sort of 're-birth' that was in turn connected to the primal scene of his parents' coitus, imaged in the vision of the wolves in the tree. The tearing of the veil corresponded to the opening of his eyes, and thence the opening of the window; the womb-fantasy itself was linked to his attachment to his father, an indication of his desire to be inside the mother's womb in order to replace her during coitus, to take her place with regard to the father. Thus, concluded Freud triumphantly, 'two incestuous wishes were united.' In concert, Tzara wrote:

When one returns what was torn away during adolescence and childhood, man could possess those realms of 'luxe, calme et volupté' that he constructed for himself beneath the bed covers, under tables, crouching in cavities of earth, above all at the narrow entry; when it is seen that well-being resides in the *clair-obscur* of the tactile and soft depths of the only hygiene possible, that of pre-natal desires, it will be possible to reconstruct the circular, spherical and irregular houses that mankind has conserved from the time of the caves to the cradle and the grave, in his vision of intra-uterine life which knows nothing of that aesthetics of castration called modern. This will, in valorising these arrangements with the acquisitions of actual life, not be a return to the past, but a real progress, based on the potentiality of our most strong desires, strong because latent and eternal, the possibility of being liberated normally. The intensity of these desires has not changed much since the stage of man's savagery; only the forms and satisfactions have been broken up and dispersed over a larger mass, and, enfeebled to the point of being lost, with their acuity, the sense of true reality and



quietude, they have, by their very degeneration, prepared the way for that auto-punitive aggressivity that characterises modern times.²³

In Tzara's mingling of popular psychology and primitivism – his observations on architecture were published in *Minotaure* following Michel Leiris's illustrations of Dogon huts in 1933 – we can identify a double nostalgia. On the one hand, the return to archetypal forms marks an identification with the origins of civilization and an explicit critique of its technological results, human and material; on the other, the notion of womb as origin, displays a familiarity with Freudian explanations of desire and the repressed or displaced routes of homesickness: 'There is a joking saying that "Love is homesickness," Freud had written in his 1919 essay on the uncanny, 'and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: "This place is familiar to me, I've been there before," we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body.'²⁴

What might well be the most 'Surrealist' of architectural evocations of such a house was developed, interestingly enough, by an artist-architect who had worked for Le Corbusier – Matta Echaurren, who in response to a demand from Breton, sketched the outlines of an 'intra-uterine' design for an apartment dedicated to the senses. Published in *Minotaure* 11, in 1938, this project was a deliberate attack on the commonplaces of the bourgeois home. The perspective view shows materials and forms that merge nature and the inorganic, the mathematical and the tactile. It was, Matta noted, 'a space that will bring into consciousness human verticality.' A true vertigo-machine, composed of 'different levels, a stair without a hand rail to overcome the void,' it was also a space of psychological interaction. Its columns were 'psychological Ionic;' its furnishings 'supple, pneumatic.' Matta specified inflatable rubber, cork, paper and plaster for the soft areas, all for better contrast, framed in an 'armature of rational architecture.'²⁵ The whole space simulated a kind of artificial womb. In a text edited for Matta by Georges Hugnet, the idea of this 'soft house' was set out:

Man looks back at the dark pulsions of his origin which enveloped him with humid/dank walls where the blood pulsed close to the eye with the noise of the mother...we must have walls like damp sheets which deform themselves and join with our psychological fears... the body insinuated as into a mould, as into a matrix based on our movements.²⁶

It was the task of the architect, Matta concluded, 'to find for each individual those umbilical cords which put us in communication with other suns, objects in total freedom which would be like plastic psychoanalytical mirrors.' Against what Le Corbusier had polemically defined as a 'Mathématique raisonnable,' Matta posed his 'Mathématique sensible,' proposing an 'architecture of time' against the modernist 'architecture of space.' We know that Frederick Kiesler's *Endless House*, designed in multiple versions between 1924 and 1965, was similarly conceived. Hans Arp spoke of this 'egg' like form as if it were the egg of Columbus: 'In his egg, in these spheroid egg-shaped structures, a human being can now take shelter and live as in his mother's womb.'²⁷

In the end, the Surrealist attack on modernism, an attack launched simply enough by revealing that which modernism had repressed, was entirely founded on the (popularised and crudely assimilated) principles of psychoanalysis. The blurring of lines between the mental and physical, the organic and inorganic, that was, for the Surrealists, one of the characteristic pleasures of art nouveau,



was immediately transformed, by Dalí among others, into a formulation that stressed the fatal intersection of the biological and the constructional, building and psyche, architecture and hysteria, in order to produce the ultimate object of desire, or, at least, its reification. Characterized by its mimesis of the digestible – gates with panels like pieces of calves-liver, columns with bases that seemed to say ‘eat me!’, buildings that as a whole might be assimilated to cakes – it was an architecture that, in Dalí’s words ‘verified that urgent “function,” so necessary for the amorous imagination: to be able in the most literal way possible to eat the object of desire.’²⁸ Opposed to modern functionalism in every way, the Style 1900 discovered its real functions in the appetites and desires.

A ‘traumatism’ for art, this style equally modeled itself on the postures of human trauma and psychosis. Using Charcot’s photographs of female hysterics at the Salpêtrière, Dalí drew a ‘psycho-pathological parallel’ between these images of ‘ecstasy’ and the carving of the art nouveau:

Invention of ‘hysterical sculpture.’ – Continuous erotic ecstasy. – Contractions and attitudes without antecedents in the history of statuary (I refer to the women discovered and understood after Charcot and the School of the Salpêtrière). – Confusion and ornamental exacerbation in relation to pathological communications; precocious dementia. – Close relations to the dream; reveries, day dreams. – Presence of characteristic oneiric elements: condensation, displacement, etc. – Blossoming of the sado-anal complex. – Flagrant ornamental coprophagy. Very slow, exhausting onanism, accompanied by a huge feeling of guilt.²⁹

The well-known theory of Surrealist inspired ecstasy that followed, summarized in Dalí’s collage ‘le phénomène de l’extase,’ with its focalisation of ears (‘always in ecstasy’) and juxtaposition of Charcot’s photographs with art nouveau sculpture, also included a telling image of a tipped chair, empty as if having thrown its contents out of the picture.

This uncanny property of objects to adopt the characteristic behaviour of their owners, thence to take revenge, this habit of the inanimate to take on the characteristics of the animate, and vice-versa, had already been recognized by Freud. In a passage that seemed to anticipate Ernst’s collages, he speaks of a naive story recounted in a war-time issue of the English *Strand Magazine*:

I read a story about a young married couple who move into a furnished house in which there is a curiously shaped table with carvings of crocodiles on it. Towards evening an intolerable and very specific smell begins to pervade the house; they stumble over something in the dark; they seem to see a vague form gliding over the stairs – in short, we are given to understand that the presence of the table causes ghostly crocodiles to haunt the place, or that the wooden monsters come to life in the dark, or something of the sort. It was a naive enough story, but the uncanny feeling it produced was quite remarkable.³⁰

This sensation, evoked, Freud explains, by an ‘over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality,’ was the precise equivalent of Dalí’s architecture of ‘hyper-materialism.’ Le Corbusier characterized the sensibility, accurately enough, as a disturbance in the balance of ‘our technico-cerebro-emotional equation,’ an over-investment of ‘sentiment’ in objects, to the extent that:



The feeling for cause and effect falters. We are seized by disquiet because we no longer feel well-adapted; we revolt against our enforced servitude to the *abnormal*.³¹

And yet, of course, modernism's own object imaginary was hardly less disquieting. Walter Benjamin, indeed, went beyond Dalí's simple opposition to make the conceptual link between the technical vision of modernism and the apparent anti-technical stance of art nouveau. Benjamin, who cited Dalí on the 'delirious and cold buildings' of art nouveau³² formulated a vision of the Jugendstil that was, in reality, an 'attempt of art to take the measure of technique.'³³ Precisely because, Benjamin argued, the Jugendstil considered itself no longer 'menaced' by technique, it could identify itself with technique. Thus he quoted Dolf Sternberger on relation between the curving lines of art nouveau and their modern counterpart:

In the characteristic line of the Art Nouveau are brought together – united in a montage of imagination – the nerve and the electric wire (and which in particular brings into contact the world of organism and of technique by means of the intermediary form of the neurovegetal system).³⁴

For Benjamin, this intersection of technology and nature was represented by the displacement of symbols from Romanticism to Modernism.

Here we may begin to trace the affiliations of Surrealism and modernism on the level of technique, affinities that were announced by Benjamin himself in the aphorism: 'The reactionary attempt that seeks to detach the forms imposed by technique from their functional context and to make natural constants out of them – that is to say, to stylise them – is found sometime after art nouveau, in a similar form, in futurism.' The structure that united the two, in Benjamin's terms, was fetishism. For it is fetishism that, in its multiple displacements, 'suppresses the barriers which separate the organic from the inorganic world,' that is as 'at home in the world of the inert as in the world of the flesh.'³⁵ Such confusions of identity were, as Sigfried Giedion noted, the inevitable product of the modern mechanization of the dwelling in its mission of repression against the bric-a-brac of the nineteenth century.³⁶ Giedion observes of the interiors of Ernst's *Une Semaine de bonté*:

Of the billowing drapes, of the murky atmosphere, Ernst's scissors make a submarine cave. Are these living creatures, plaster statues or models of the academic brush found reclining here or rotting? To this question no answer can or should be given. The room, as nearly always, is oppressive with assassination and non-escape.³⁷

Surrealism and Purism alike, indeed, fetishized precisely the same *types* of objects: what for Surrealists were 'objets trouvés' or vehicles of oneiric desire, and for Le Corbusier were 'objets-membres-humains,' or the physical extensions of the body. As Le Corbusier himself recognized:

The new 'Surrealists' (formerly Dadaists) claim to lift themselves above the brute nature of the object and are ready to recognise only relationships which belong to the invisible and subconscious world of the dream. Nevertheless they compare themselves to radio antennae; thus they raise radio onto their own pedestal... the supremely elegant relationships of their metaphors... are all the time very clearly dependent on the products of straightforward conscious effort... the finality necessary to polished steel.³⁸



To prove the point Le Corbusier cited De Chirico, writing in the first number of *La Révolution surréaliste* in December 1924: 'They are like levers, as irresistible as those all-powerful machines, those gigantic cranes which raise high over the teeming building sites sections of floating fortresses with heavy towers like the breasts of ante-diluvian mammals.'³⁹

In this dependency of Surrealist fantasy on the real objects of the machine world, 'type-objects' and 'sentiment-objects' were joined in their common aim to overcome technique in its banal manifestations in favour of a technological imaginary that would transform technology into the human and vice-versa, into the prosthetic and potentially critical devices of the cyborg. It was not by chance that Walter Benjamin identified Olympia, the automat doll of E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'Sandman,' and subject of Freud's analysis of the uncanny, as the ideal woman of the art nouveau. 'The extreme point of the technical organization of the world,' concluded Benjamin, 'consists in the liquidation of fertility.'⁴⁰

This then is the context that inspired Benjamin to the aphorism, which I will now cite, that underlies my argument. Noted as if at random in the *Passagenwerke*, it reads:

'To embrace Breton and Le Corbusier – that would be to draw the spirit of contemporary France like a bow which strikes with knowledge to the heart of the present.'⁴¹ If, this afternoon, I have broken ground on Breton's side to make this embrace historically supported, I know that Stanislaus von Moos's talk tomorrow will do the same for Le Corbusier, thus allowing this conference to claim a fulfillment of Benjamin's desire.⁴²

¹ Cf. Dalibor Vesely, 'Surrealism, Myth and Modernity,' Bernard Tschumi, 'Architecture and its Double,' and Rem Koolhaas, 'Dalí and Le Corbusier: the Paranoid-Critical Method,' in *Architectural Design*, 48, nos. 2-3, 1978, pp. 88-95, 111-116- and 152-163 respectively.

² Vesely, 'Surrealism, Myth and Modernity,' op. cit., p. 91.

³ Kenneth Frampton, 'Has the Proletariat No Use for a Glider?,' *Architectural Design*, 48, nos. 2-3, 1978, p. 96.

⁴ Vesely, 'Surrealism, Myth and Modernity,' op. cit., p. 91.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁶ André Breton, *Nadja* (Paris :Gallimard, 1964), pp. 18-19.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism,' in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Peter Demetz ed., transl. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 180.

⁸ Georges Bataille, 'Poussière,' *Documents*, 1, no. 5, 1929, p. 278.

⁹ André Breton, 'Crise de l'Objet' (1935), cited in Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays on the Modern Unhomey* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), p. 150.

¹⁰ Le Corbusier, 'Louis Sutter. L'inconnu de la soixantaine,' *Minotaure* 9, October 1936, p. 62.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Passagen-Werk,' in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), p. 513.

¹² Leonora Carrington, *The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1988), p. 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

¹⁸ Tristan Tzara, 'D'un certain automatisme du goût,' *Minotaure*, 3-4, December 1933, p. 84.

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

²⁰ *Ibidem.*

²¹ Sigmund Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,' *Collected Papers*, vol.3, trans. Alix and James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1959).

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 580-1.

²³ Tzara, 'D'un certain automatisme du goût,' op. cit., p. 84.



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- ²⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), in *Art and Literature*, The Pelican Freud Library, vol. 14 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 368.
- ²⁵ Matta Echaurren, 'Mathématique sensible - Architecture du temps' (adaptation by Georges Hugnet), *Minotaure*, 11, 1938, p. 43.
- ²⁶ Ibidem.
- ²⁷ Cited by Vesely, 'Surrealism, Myth and Modernity,' op. cit., p. 94.
- ²⁸ Salvador Dalí, 'De la beauté terrifiante et comestible de l'architecture modern'style,' *Minotaure*, 3-4, December 1933, p. 72.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 73.
- ³⁰ Freud, 'The Uncanny,' op. cit., p. 367.
- ³¹ Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, translated and introduced by James I. Dunnett, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1987), p. 72.
- ³² Benjamin, 'Passagen-Werk,' op. cit., p. 680, citing Salvador Dalí, 'L'âne pourri,' *Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, I, 1930, p. 12.
- ³³ Benjamin, ibid., p. 680. The first attempt was that of realism, the second, art nouveau.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 694.
- ³⁵ Ibid., pp. 693, 118.
- ³⁶ See the evocative passages on Max Ernst and 'mechanized adornment,' in Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 360-1, 387-8.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 388. The illustration discussed, Fig. 199, p.341, is Ernst's *Night Shrieks in Her Lair...*, from *La Femme 100 têtes*, Paris, 1929.
- ³⁸ Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, op. cit., p. 77.
- ³⁹ Ibidem.
- ⁴⁰ Benjamin, cited in Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, op. cit., p. 157.
- ⁴¹ Benjamin, 'Passagen-Werk,' op. cit., p. 573.
- ⁴² Stanislaus von Moos's keynote address dealt with the relation between Le Corbusier and Surrealism.

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Louis Aragon, *A Wave of Dreams* (1924)

Translated by Susan de Muth (2003)

Introduction by Dawn Ades

In 1924 the surrealist movement emerged from the period of trances and dreams. It was not the only one to lay claim to this word coined by Apollinaire, but it quickly saw off its rivals such as Ivan Goll, whose single issue review *Surréalisme*, which appeared in October 1924, attempted in vain to wrest 'surrealism' back from those who were making of it a new way of life, and to fix it as a form of modernist expression rooted in film. 'Surrealism' was a term already in use during the period of trances, whose power as a word was firmly harnessed by Breton in his description of those trance sessions in 'Entry of the Mediums' (*Littérature* November 1922): 'by it we have agreed to designate a certain psychic automatism which corresponds quite closely to the dream state..'. It is true, as Aragon implies in his later comment quoted below about *Une Vague de rêves*, that his text lays more importance on these experiences than does Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto*. The latter, laying out a possible future for a practice of automatism that will explore the hidden realm of the unconscious, underplays the experiments in self-hypnosis in favour of the earlier experiments in automatic writing undertaken, Breton claims, under the influence of Freud. Aragon's text is a vital account of the experience of the *mouvement flou* and the embrace of chance and the unknown, but he does not place it under the signboard of Freud. Dreams loosen the sense of self and usher in chance and the unexpected.

October 1924 saw not only the publication of Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto* and Aragon's *Une Vague de rêves* but also the opening of the Bureau of Surrealist Research at 15 rue de Grenelle where the public were invited to enter and tell their dreams. Memorable descriptions in Aragon's text of this 'romantic lodgings for unclassifiable ideas and revolutions in progress' suggest that it might have been contemporaneous with, rather than anterior to, this crucial consolidation of collective activity.

Translator's Introduction

In an interview with Dominique Arban which appears on the back of the 1990 Seghers edition of *Une Vague de rêves*, Aragon made the following comments about the text:

'...André Breton's Surrealist Manifesto, written in the summer of 1924, was actually preceded by my text *Une Vague de rêves* which was submitted to the journal *Commerce* in June and published in October 1924. There was also a pamphlet edition of this text on its own, as is more usual with scientific journals, bound between russet covers. Since we had no publisher's imprint for the edition I suggested we added the acknowledgement: *hors-Commerce* and it is in this text that a first attempt at defining the words which constituted the vocabulary of surrealist theory can be found. I have no wish to place this work in competition with Breton's Manifesto which expands on these ideas and is important in its own right. But in *Une Vague de rêves* I was describing something that had taken place a little earlier. I am not making any grandiose claims but the significance of this pamphlet - which is now worth a great deal of money by the way - was subsequently overlooked. While later, the desire to diminish my presence in the history of surrealism meant that the potential contribution of this testimonial remains to be properly realised [...]. While the definitions are not yet those we find in the Surrealist Manifesto, the words surreality and surrealism are used and widely defined in my text as if they were indeed part of a manifesto for the surrealist movement which came into being just a few months later.'



A Wave of Dreams

Preface

(from *Volpone* by Ben Jonson)

Why droops my Celia?
Thou hast in place of a base husband found
A worthy lover; use thy fortune well,
With secrecy and pleasure. See, behold
What thou art queen of; [He shows her the treasure]
not in expectation,
As I feed others, but possessed and crowned.
See, here, a rope of pearl, and each more orient
Than that the brave Egyptian queen caroused;
Dissolve and drink 'em. See, a carbuncle
May put out both the eyes of St Mark;
A diamond would have bought Lollia Paulina
When she came in like star-light, hid with jewels
That were the spoils of provinces; take these,
And wear, and lose 'em; yet remains an earring
To purchase them again, and this whole state.
A gem but worth a private patrimony
Is nothing; we will eat such a meal.
The heads of parrots, tongues of nightingales,
The brains of peacocks, and of ostriches
Shall be our food, and, could we get the phoenix,
Though nature lost her kind, she were our dish.

A Wave of Dreams

Sometimes I quite suddenly lose the whole thread of my life: sitting in some corner of the universe, near a smoky dark café, polished bits of metal set out before me, tall, mild-mannered women ebbing and flowing around me, I wonder how I finally washed up here beneath this arch that is really the bridge they have named sky. This is the moment of oblivion, the moment when vast fissures in the Palace of the World widen into daylight: I would give up the rest of my life - a paltry sum - if only it could endure. For then the mind detaches a little from the human machine and I am no longer the bicycle of my senses, a grindstone honing memories and encounters. And then I grasp chance within me, I grasp all of a sudden how I surpass myself: I *am* chance,¹ and having formed this proposition I laugh at the thought of all human activity. This would certainly be a glorious moment to die, this certainly is the moment when the ones who simply leave one day with a clear gaze do kill themselves. It is at this point, in any case, that thought begins; thought nothing like that looking-glass game many are so good at yet which holds no dangers. Anybody who has experienced this vertigo even once can no longer endorse the mechanistic ideas at the heart of nearly all man's present endeavours, and his entire peace of mind. Now the ill-considered axiom at the bottom of what seemed to be the purest thought-process is clear to see: clinging to some other, forgotten system no longer under scrutiny, it evaded critical evaluation yet left the unchallenged concept like a rut in the mind. This is why philosophers talk in proverbs and feel they have to prove everything. They shackle their own



imaginations with foreign rings, robbed in famous graves. By making out that Truth has many facets, they believe in only partial truths.

I lived in the shadow of a great white building adorned with flags and uproar. I was not permitted to distance myself from this castle, Society, and those who climbed its steps created a dreadful cloud of dust on the doormat. *Our country, honour, religion, goodness...* it was hard to distinguish any of the innumerable words they hurled wildly into the echoes. Yet I gradually made out the beliefs they held most dear. These boiled down to very little. 'The inclination of every being to persist in its being' is one of their favourite expressions, though they rather disparage hedonism; they use the pejorative phrase 'marred by Teleology'" to condemn anything and everything; and then there is this phrase which they particularly like and use to usher in the paragraphs of their intellectual lives: "Let us draw aside the veil of words for a moment". Little do they suspect that such processes lead them only to realize hypotheses, and *a posteriori* hypotheses at that. Their minds are monstrous hybrids, born of the grotesque conjugation of oyster and buzzard. But the hunchbacks of Thought have no fear that superstitious passers-by might brush against their deformity for good luck. They are the Kings of the World and the gaolers of the dungeon whence I hear their jovial songs and the sound of the keys they are jangling.

Every now and then a visitor would concern himself with how I was occupying my time in what was described (without irony) as my self-imposed seclusion. And if he fleetingly engaged with the strangeness of my existence, not knowing whether it was me he should doubt or himself, his eyes would swiftly glaze over with incredulity at everything I said. How could he believe that I am not in search of happiness? That thought exists only in words? Yet sometimes such a visitor, influenced by fashion, would lay claim to Idealism himself. Then it would become apparent that what I had before me was yet another shame-faced realist, like so many well-meaning men these days, subsisting on a compromise between Kant and Comte. By abandoning the commonplace notion of reality for the concept of reality within they believe they have made a great leap forward - but their idol, the Noumenon, has been exposed as a very mediocre piece of plaster. Nothing can make people like this understand the true nature of reality, that it is just an experience like any other, that the essence of things is not at all linked to their reality, that there are other experiences that the mind can embrace which are equally fundamental such as chance, illusion, the fantastic, dreams. These different types of experience are brought together and reconciled in one genre, Surreality.

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The complicated provenance of ideas is quite awe-inspiring. The concept of surreality could only emerge from a human consciousness already well acquainted with extraordinary schools of thought and the stacked-up events of centuries. Where then does it choose to spring up? It is 1919: André Breton is engaged in some very specific deliberations, resolving a particular poetic problem, at the point where the fundamental ethics of this problem are just becoming clear, and while applying himself to understanding the mechanism of the dream he rediscovers on the threshold of sleep the



threshold and nature of inspiration. When he makes this discovery - of great significance in its own right - he does not immediately realize its further implications, and neither does Philippe Soupault who participates with him in the first surrealist experiments. What most impresses them is an Energy, a sense of no longer being themselves, an incomparable feeling of well-being, a liberation of the mind, an unprecedented ability to produce images and the supernatural tone of their writings. In all that now originates from them - and they have no sense of authorship in these creations - they recognise the matchlessness of certain books, of certain words which still exhilarate them. They suddenly perceive a great poetic unity which runs from the prophetic works of all peoples to *Les Illuminations* and *Les Chants de Maldoror*. Between the lines they read the unfinished testimonies of people who once followed the System: in the flashlight of their discovery *Une Saison en Enfer* sheds its mysteries, the Bible and other confessions of Man put aside their masks of images. But this is the dawn of Dada, and what they deduce above all from their discoveries is the fallacy of 'genius'; their indignation mounts as they see how they've been duped by this illusion, by this fraud which suggests that literature is the result of a certain method, conceals that method, and then conceals the fact that this method is actually within everybody's reach. Knowing they can expose it any time they wish, the first few surrealist pioneers allow this literary swindle to go unchallenged, wholly immersed in their first encounters with the enchanting depths. Initially they carry on in all tranquillity, for the world simply laughs at their songs.

What will suddenly alert them to the abyss beside which they have set up camp, what opens their eyes to the field of comets they've been tilling unawares, is the unforeseen impact of surrealism on their lives. They'd thrown themselves into it as if it were the sea, and now, just like a treacherous sea, surrealism threatens to sweep them out to the open ocean where the sharks of madness cruise. I have often thought about the man who first came up with the idea of recording the vibrations of the voice: he put little sound-sensitive plates, carbon and copper wires all together into a machine and then actually did hear the unmistakable sound of the human voice. In the same way the first surrealists forced themselves into states of utter exhaustion with the excesses they viewed as mere games, and saw the marvellous arise before them, the overwhelming hallucinations more usually produced by ecstatic religious states or narcotic drugs. At that time we used to meet in the evenings like hunters, comparing what we'd bagged that day, the tally of beasts we'd invented, the fantastic plants, the images we'd shot down. In the grip of a tremendous momentum, we spent more and more time on the practices which led us into our strange inner lands. We delighted in observing the curve of our own exhaustion, and the derangement which followed. For then the marvellous would appear. At first each one of us thought himself subject to some peculiar mental disorder and struggled against it. Then it revealed its true nature. It was as if the mind, having reached a turning point in the subconscious, lost all control over where it was drifting. Images which existed in the mind took physical forms, became tangible reality. Once we were in touch with them they expressed themselves in a perceptible form, taking on the characteristics of visual, auditory and tactile hallucinations. We experienced the full force of these images. We could no longer control them. We had become their



domain, a setting for them. In bed, at the moment of falling asleep, in the street with eyes wide open, with the full apparatus of dread, we held out our hands to phantoms. Rest, abstention from surrealism made these phenomena disappear, gave us space to comprehend how close they were to the phenomena induced by chemical preparations, and at first we suspended our experiments through fear, but they gradually reclaimed their rights over our curiosity. The nature of the troubled mental states brought on by surrealism, by physical fatigue, by narcotics, and the way these resembled dreams and mystical visions together with the semiology of mental illness led us to evolve this proposition which, alone, can explain and link all these factors: the existence of a mental substance. The similarity between hallucinations and sensations compelled us to think of this mental substance as being different to thought, with thought itself, in all its perceptible manifestations, being only one particular example of it. The way we experienced it was through its concrete power, through its power to become concrete. We saw that it could pass from one state into another, and that these transmutations evidenced its existence as well as its nature. We would see a written image, for example, which had initially emerged arbitrarily, as if by chance, reach out to our senses, divest itself of its verbal element and take on the substance of phenomena we had only previously experienced in our imaginations, never knowing it was possible to induce them outside, in a tangible form. We now felt that every mental and physical experience we had was a direct result of our participation in this paradoxical exercise. Then, imagining the opposite of what we were experiencing, we reduced each sensation, each thought we wished to analyse, to a single word. *Absolute nominalism* was dazzlingly exemplified in surrealism and it gradually dawned on us that the mental substance described above was, in fact, vocabulary itself. *There is no thought outside words*: the whole surrealist experience evidences this proposition, nothing new in itself yet greeted, nowadays, with more scepticism than all the vague opinions (constantly contradicted by facts) of realists who are swept along to the Pantheon one lovely rainy evening.

We have seen then what the Surreal is about. But to really understand the concept we have to extend it; view it perhaps like the horizon which continually flees before the walker, for like the horizon this concept exists between the mind and what it knows it will never reach. Having weighed up its experience of Reality - in which it indiscriminately mixes everything that exists - the mind naturally juxtaposes what it knows of the Unreal. Only when the mind has gone beyond these two notions can it begin to envisage a wider experience, one where these other two experiences co-exist, and that is the Surreal. Surreality, the state where these concepts are fused by the mind, is the shared horizon of religion, magic, poetry, dreaming, madness, intoxication and this fluttering honeysuckle, puny little life, that you believe capable of colonizing the heavens for us.

*

Clouds disperse on the smallest breath and the same wind brings them back. An idea too has its golden fringes. The sun plays a little with the phantoms. They dance well without ballet slippers and that broken chain at their ankles sets the price of their steps. Oh phantoms with mutable eyes, children of the shadows, wait for me, I'm nearly there and you turn away. Do not go beyond the



acacia blossom, the guard of honour, the tribune, here I am: and yet you turn down other hawthorned byways with your scarves woven from reflections and dominoes of perpetual abstraction. How to follow an idea? Its paths are full of farandoles. Masks appear on balconies. The whole of life solicits us as we pass with our wives on our arms, offering us violets: everyone's problems in posies. My dear, yet another salesgirl and over there another kiss. Dada was a moral trial and a phantom in its way. We lived out a haunted existence where the mind was not allowed to engage with concepts. A vague sentimental thread of the surreal ran through our intentions, like a foretaste of the abyss, anonymous as yet and faceless. One fine day the spectre tore himself free with his skeleton hands and made for the heights. A prolonged period of stupefaction followed this parting of the clouds.

The number of surrealists had grown. Young people intent on intoxication, derangement, frustration, who didn't miss the conflagrations of noise and demonstrations they'd left behind, still smouldering and certainly most beguiling. They instantly gave themselves up to vice, they hurled themselves into it. The surrealist idea needed something - a circumstance like a ring on the finger of a woman just met, like a drawing on the wall of a waiting room - to take a new twist towards the unexpected. And this came about beside the sea when René Crevel met a lady who taught him how to get into an extraordinary hypnotic trance which was something like sleepwalking. In this condition he would utter the most beautiful, prolonged speeches. An outbreak of trances swamped the surrealists.

By following an invented protocol - with varying degrees of exactitude - many of them discovered that they too had this ability. Towards the end of 1922 - have you noticed how great flashes of inspiration often occur at this time of year? - there are seven or eight of them who live only for these moments of oblivion, when they talk with the lights out, without consciousness, like drowning men in the open air. These moments multiply by the day. They want to spend more and more time in oblivion. When told what they have uttered they are intoxicated by their own words. They fall into trances everywhere. All they have to do now is the opening ritual. Robert Desnos has only to close his eyes in a café and, regardless of the sound of voices, the bright light, being jostled by passers-by, he starts to speak; amid the beer glasses and saucers the whole Ocean collapses with its prophetic din and vapours decorated with long oriflammes². Those who consult this prodigious man of trances have only gently to prompt him for outpourings of prophecy, the voice of magic, revelation and Revolution, the voice of the fanatic and the apostle to burst forth. In other circumstances, even if he entered this delirium only rarely, Desnos would become the leader of a religion, the founder of a city, the tribune of a people in revolt. He speaks, he draws, he writes. Coincidences start to characterize the outpourings of the sleepers. The era of collective hallucinations is born together with this question: are they really, after all, hallucinations? Those who submit themselves to these incessant experiments endure a constant state of appalling agitation, become increasingly manic. They grow thin. Their trances last longer and longer. They don't want anyone to bring them round any more. They go into trances to meet one another and converse like people in a far away world where everyone is blind, they quarrel



and sometimes knives have to be snatched from their hands. The very evident physical ravages suffered by the subjects of this extraordinary experiment, as well as frequent difficulties in wrenching them from a cataleptic death-like state, will soon force them to give in to the entreaties of the onlookers leaning on the parapet of wakefulness, and suspend the activities which neither laughter nor misgivings have hitherto interrupted. And so the spirit of criticism reclaims its rights. People question whether or not they were really in a trance at all. Deep down some deny the whole adventure. The idea of simulation is tossed back into play. Personally I could never really get to grips with this suggestion. Is simulating something any different to thinking it? And once something has been thought, it exists. Nothing will change my mind on that. Besides, how can the inspired nature of the spoken dreams that unfolded before me be explained if they were simulated? The whole spectacle had made such an impact that delirious explanations were called for: the hereafter, re-incarnation, the marvellous. Such interpretations were greeted with sniggers and incredulity. In fact they were nearer the mark than was commonly supposed. A combination of chance events had made us the eager witnesses of phenomena which were essentially no different to all the supernatural facts that humble human reason throws into the future's basket of oblivion along with other equations it can't work out. What is not in doubt is that this is part of surrealism's apparatus, where faith in the trance in relation to the spoken word corresponds to speed in written surrealism. And like speed, faith in the trance (and the dramas that accompany it) removes the impediment of self-censorship which so restrains the mind. Freedom, that wonderful word, at last has a meaning: Liberty begins where the marvellous is born. Now one can envisage collective surrealisms, surrealism convincing whole nations of miracles and military victories and what actually happened at the Marriage at Cana and the battle of Valmy. At the foot of this magical mill it is true, and this alone is true, that the peasants' water was changed into wine and blood and all the while the hills were singing. Oh disbelieving madmen, you too have lowered your heads before armed words as they raised a large patch of sky.

*

An idea once formed does not limit itself to just being, it reflects upon itself: it exists. And so for two years the concept of surreality revisited itself, dragging with it a universe of determinations. And in this introspection it rediscovered first the images which presided over its genesis, like a son might do his parents when his body has been transformed in all its parts and the parts are all assembled, ready for great mysteries and quite forgetting the old people. At its starting point Surrealism rediscovers the dream, whence it came. But now the dream is illuminated by the flash of surrealism and assumes its meaning. As a result, and for the first time since the world began, when André Breton writes down his dreams they retain the characteristics of dreaming in the telling.* This is because the man who is gathering them has accustomed his memory to experiences other than the meagre realities of the waking. And Robert Desnos learns to dream without sleeping. He contrives to speak his dreams at will. Dreams, dreams, dreams, with each step the domain of dreams expands. Dreams, dreams, dreams, at last the blue sun of dreams forces the steel-eyed beasts back to their lairs. Dreams, dreams, dreams on the lips of love, on the numbers of happiness, on the teardrops of carefulness, on the signals of hope, on building sites where a whole nation submits to the authority of



pickaxes. Dreams, dreams, dreams, nothing but dreams where the wind wanders and barking dogs are out on the roads. Oh magnificent Dream, in the pale morning of buildings, leaning on your elbows on chalk cornices, merging your pure, mobile features with the miraculous immobility of statues, don't ever leave again enticed by dawn's deliberate lies. Clear away this unbearable clearness, this bleeding from the sky which has splashed in my eyes for too long. Your slipper is in my hair, smoked-faced genie, dazzling shadow rolled up in my breath. Seize the rest of my life, seize every life, rising tide with spume of flowers. Omens over towers, visions at the bottom of ink pools, in the dust of cafés, migrations of birds along the sidelong trajectories of soothsayers, hearts consulted by bloody fingers, the times unfurl from the draperies, rumours usher in your reign and your cyclone, adorable siren, incomparable clown of the caverns, oh dream with backdrop of coral, colour of waterfalls, scent of the wind! 1924: under this number, its dragnet behind, trailing a harvest of moon-bream, under this number adorned with disasters, strange stars in its hair, the contagion of dreaming spreads through city districts and countrysides. From clear fields prodigious examples arise. Who is that man on the shoreline of myths and the sea where all is snow and silence? Another man, closed to all, lives in his caravan with an army of servants. Another, who barely opened his eyes on this world, died in front of the police and his father just as the carriage was passing beneath the walls of a prison; and that woman, that woman who had written on the café wall: 'It is better to wipe glasses than gunshots.'³ And another, what did he do all that time in China between two dreams which have the sound of sea salt.

Another, another: you painted night and it was the night itself. And you, the sky, and it was the entire emerald of destiny. Another dream, yet another dream: the desert above towns, all the shutters identical and the muffled footsteps of life, one would kill for a great deal less. It is for much less that this one is killing himself: a pipeful of romantic rubbish, the decor just how we like it, and a fine chronometer fashioned of gold on the table. And that tall one over there, isn't he ashamed of his impossible little songs? He never imagined that a life eventually gets itself organised. What good did it do that other man in his little cardboard clinic to lay a cold hand on the feelings of mankind and the innocence of family relationships? Saint-Pol Roux, Raymond Roussel, Philippe Daudet, Germaine Berton, Saint-John Perse, Pablo Picasso, Georges De Chirico, Pierre Reverdy, Jacques Vaché, Léon-Paul Fargue, Sigmund Freud, your portraits adorn the walls of the dream chamber, you are Presidents of the Republic of dreams. And now here are the dreamers.

*

There is a surrealist light: at the time of day when towns burst into flame it is the light that falls on the salmon pink display of silk stockings; it is the light that blazes in the Benedictine shops and its pale sister in the pearl of mineral water depots; it is the light that mutely illuminates the blue travel agent's with trips to the battle fields, Place Vendôme; it is the light that stays late at Barclays on the Avenue de l'Opéra, when ties are transformed into fantoms; it is the beam of flashlights on the murdered and on love. There is a surrealist light in the eyes of every woman. A great chunk of realism



has just been demolished on the Boulevard de la Madeleine and through the gap you can glimpse a landscape which extends to the works at the Moulin-Rouge, cité Véron, to the demolitions of the Parisian fortifications, to the sculpture park in the Tuileries, to the Gobelins blazing the word "PARDON" in neon through the night, to the vaults of the metro where golden Poulain chocolate horses cavalcade, to diamond mines where smugglers run the risk of avaricious laparotomies, to the sulphur springs where little dogs die. Georges Limbour, hating the almighty sun, more readily tolerates the dawn of the hereafter. He couldn't be prised from the top of the staircase whence the crowd hurled him in the nights of Mainz⁴ because of his loathing for crosses and flags and all the gaudy triumphalism of war. André Masson presides over the release of doves at every crossroad: the beautiful knives he will have seen everywhere are ready to be seized at last. If the houses in Paris are mountains it's because they're reflected in Max Morise's monocle: and didn't he defile the great crucifix in the station at Argent (Cher)? I have seen Paul Eluard trampled by policemen and drivers on a piano and in shattered lightbulbs, there were 30 of them against this starburst. A little later I saw him in the foothills of Champagne in a land of ophite stones. Then he entered the darkness of earth where moral eclipses are chandeliers at a ball unbounded by the ocean, then he came back, he is looking at you. Delteil? That's the young man Francis Jammes pleaded with in the name of his white hair, that young carnivore who passes his days in the Meudon woods with bloodstained images. Man Ray, who has tamed the biggest eyes in the world, dreams in his own way with knife rests and salt cellars: he gives the light meaning and that's why it knows how to talk. Suzanne are you blonde or brunette? She changes with the wind and you can believe her when she says: *water is man's equal*. Who is that prisoner caught in a giant trap? The gestures that Antonin Artaud makes at a distance echo strangely in my heart. Mathias Lubeck, you don't mean it, you're not really going to re-enlist in the colonial service? He says his greatest shame is not being tattooed. Jacques Baron, on his boat, has just met some beautiful white women: dear friend, do you remember that evening when I left you near Barbès and there were so many prowlers, you weren't thinking about tropical seas then, you were heading on impulse towards summer. André Breton, there's a man I can say nothing about: if I close my eyes I see him again at Moret, beside the river Loing, in all the dust-haze of the tow-path. Philippe Soupault was recognised for many years just by his curly hair, he used to talk to chair upholsterers and laugh unnervingly near noon. Denise, Denise: does the café of colours in that little road where we always stop still sing so marvellously every time you pass, are people still killing themselves in the canal and in rue Longue and everywhere you take your clear shadow and your shining eyes. Jacques-André Boiffard gently refuses to trim his black sideburns. He wears a velvet cap. Everyone please note: he's looking for a job, but doesn't want work. Magic holds no secrets for Roger Vitrac who is setting up a Theatre of Arson where people die as in a forest. He's also organising a revival of the Cult of Absinthe, whose scorched spoons have all been turned over. Jean Carrive, the youngest known surrealist, is notable most of all for his magnificent sense of rebellion: he is rising on the future with a stockpile of blasphemies. Pierre Picon is expanding his empire into Spain. Francis Gérard, less prudent than everyone else, has just thrown himself into the waters of existence: would you know of a woman for him - extremely beautiful and able to make of this twenty-year-old a fallen man forever?



Simone is from the land of humming-birds, those tiny flashes of music, she looks like the time of lime trees. Beaten up by spectators at the little Casino, and various cafés in the capital, Robert Desnos has often tried out death as a word: *Words*, he says, *are you myths which match the myrtles of Death?*⁵ Earthquakes are where Max Ernst, painter of cataclysms as others of battles, feels most at ease and contented. He finds it strange that the earth isn't constantly quaking. René Crevel has never noticed that this planet is solidly fixed with help from meridians and latitudes: he is more of a sleepwalker than anyone. Great rages, fierce resolve make Pierre Naville a strange being: I can easily see him destined for some kind of assassination attempt, I wish I could read palms and find out if he will be extremely unhappy. Marcel Noll, my dear old Noll: you will not attempt to desert us but whose slave are you if not of the phantoms at the bottom of your eyes? You see, people are but dust. Imagine, Charles Baron has left the hotel where you used to drop in on each other. He tells me news of his brother. He still receives the favours of that admirable woman to whom I present my compliments once more. But the one who can do everything, the one who quite simply ranks among heroes, the man who has never resisted existence, the one who is found at the Soleil Levant, the one who defies common sense with every breath he takes, is Benjamin Péret, of the beautiful ties, the kind of great poet they simply don't make any more, Benjamin Péret who has a whale on a leash, or maybe a little sparrow. What a shame Georges Malkine is in Nice today. Since he left I have no idea what is elegant and much of the mystery of this badly-lit town has left for the Côte d'Azur. Maxime Alexandre? He thinks I've forgotten him. One does not forget despair. The most recent news I've had from Renée Gauthier is not good. This prevents me from speaking about that young woman, torn as she is between some kind of passion and an innocence that nothing could make her lose. My dear Savinio, leave Rome and come here, pushing that cart with its piles of Niobide corpses. All the people I've listed expect you. Great things are bound to happen. We've suspended a woman from the ceiling of an empty room and worried men come there every day, bearers of weighty secrets. That's how we got to know Georges Bessière, like a punch in the face. We're working on a task that's enigmatic even for us, in front of a volume of *Fantômas*⁶ fixed to the wall by forks. Visitors, born in faraway climes or at our own door, are helping us design an extraordinary machine which is for killing what exists so that what does not exist may be complete. At 15, rue de Grenelle we've opened romantic lodgings for unclassifiable ideas and revolutions in progress. Whatever hope remains in this universe of hopelessness will cast its last delirious glances at our ridiculous street stall: "*It's all about coming up with a new declaration of human rights.*"

*

In a novel by Marcel Allain, after a thousand twists of fate and thirst, prolonged perils and mirages, the mysterious Coeur-Rouge finally reaches the legendary tomb at the foot of the Celestial Empire where he hopes to find the power-giving ring, and what does he see on the dusty slab of the desecrated burial place as the birds of night fly away? The well defined impression of a Wood-Milne heel. It seems certain, my friends, that we're dropping our prey to chase after shadows again, that we plumb the depths of the abyss quite in vain. Through the whole of eternity we search for shadows and



silence, but what endures is only this one great failure. Why isn't there a monument in every town: *To Phaeton, from a grateful humanity?* But what does it matter? He had a taste for vertigo and he fell!

If I suddenly consider the course of my life, if I forget the training my mind has had - and that's easy - if I master but a little of the meaning of this life that thwarts me, which evades me, suddenly... what does any of it mean? Suddenly. I expect nothing from the world, I expect nothing from nothing. The meaning of life, ah that, well: of what use would such a revelation be to me, and how could I apply that knowledge? To know! The stone in the abyss knows only its acceleration or rather doesn't know it. The only way to look at Man is as the victim of his mirrors, crying out to himself in the pathetic tones of his own histrionics: What is going to happen? As if he had a choice. Oh raging sea of all futility, I am the cliff you erode. Rise, rise, child of moons, oh tide. I am the one who is worn right through, may the wind carry me away. It's a simple thing, when night is too dense, with her spectres and terrors, to stretch out my hands to the beams flashing from revolving lighthouses far away. If I combine the marvellous constellations with the mental flash that designed them, it's a simple thing. If I sing very quietly. If I go, if I come. If I think. If I simply open these eyes which have seen nothing.

But among all the tunes that I sometimes hum there's one that still gives me an unrestrained illusion of Spring and meadows, an illusion of true Freedom. I have sometimes lost that tune and then I find it again. Free, free: when the chain of bright rings flies away through the watered silk of sky, when the ball and chain becomes the servants of ankles, when handcuffs are jewellery. And the hermit carves an inscription on the walls of his cell and this makes the sound of wings on the stone. And he sculpts above the rivet the feathered symbol of all the world's loves. For he is dreaming, and I am dreaming, swept away, I dream. I am dreaming of a long dream where everyone would be dreaming. I do not know what will come of this new undertaking of dreams. I dream at the edge of the world and the night. Oh what did you want to say to me, men in the distance, shouting with your hands cupped round your mouths, laughing at the sleeper's gestures? At the edge of the night and of crime, at the edge of crime and of love. Oh Riviéras of the unreal, your casinos without age limits open their playing rooms to those who wish to lose! Now is the time, believe me, never to win again.

Who is there? Ah good: let in the infinite.

The author would like to thank Jean Ristat for kindly giving her permission to publish this translation of *Une Vague de rêves*.

¹ The French reads '*l'occasionnel c'est moi.*' (translator's note)

² A kind of royal standard, a silk banner on a gilt pole. (t.n.)

* See in *Clair de Terre* the narrative dimension of *Five Dreams*.

³ '*Il vaut mieux essuyer les verres que les coups de feu*' : in French, this is a pun on the verb 'essuyer,' which means 'to wipe,' and the expression 'essuyer un coup de feu,' to be shot at. (t.n)



⁴ Limbour was in Mainz as editor of *L'Echo du Rhin*. He gave an impromptu speech against the occupying French forces and was arrested for sedition. (t.n)

⁵ a play on words translated by Timothy Ades. The reader may like to read this out loud to get some of the effect: Mots, dit-il, êtes-vous des mythes et pareils aux myrthes des morts? (t.n)

⁶ *Fantômas* was a series of pulp novels written by Marcel Allain. (t.n)



Rose Sélavy

By Robert Desnos

Translated by Timothy Adès

Translator's Note

This is one of surrealism's essential texts.

The group around André Breton started sessions of hypnosis or self-hypnosis on 25 September 1922. It was René Crevel's idea, and at first he was voluble, but Desnos had earlier practised automatic writing, transcribing some of his dreams, and he soon became the one who spoke, drew or wrote under hypnosis. On the 28th they got him to write a poem.

Marcel Duchamp had invented Rose Sélavy (*Éros, c'est la vie; arrosez la vie ...*) as a fascinating female *altera ego*, and pronounced the first few crude examples of her intricate, spooneristic, poetic tongue-twisters. On 7 October, Picabia asked Desnos for more of these, and Desnos said at once '*Dans un temple en stuc de pommes ...*' Soon the puns were flowing, especially if Breton was present. A hundred and seventy-four sentences appeared in *Littérature* no. 7, Dec 1922. 'Words have finished playing,' wrote Breton: 'words are making love'; and in 1924: 'Surrealism is the order of the day and Desnos is its prophet.' And later: 'Anyone who never saw his pencil, unhesitating and prodigiously fast, commit these amazing poetic equations to paper, and who could not rule out premeditation as I could, might well appreciate their technical perfection and wonderful skill, but cannot imagine how much it all meant at the time, and the positively oracular importance it took on,' (*Nadja*, 1928). But the novelty and the effect had worn off: Desnos became aggressive, the audience nervous. The sessions ended after some alarming incidents early in 1923. Breton said he, Éluard and Desnos would write no more: Desnos dissented.

'I wasn't afraid to mystify,' Desnos said later. 'The mystifier may unwittingly do important things.'

These translations have been done very freely in the hope of catching the poetry, originality and mystery of the original.



Rrose Sélavy

- 1 In an apple-plaster temple the pastor distilled the sap of psalms.
Dans un temple en stuc de pomme le pasteur distillait le suc des psaumes.
- 2 Rrose Sélavy asks if Baudelaire's 'The Wicked Blooms' hath unblocked wombs: hopefully, Omphalé, you've a view.
Rrose Sélavy demande si les Fleurs du Mal ont modifié les mœurs du phalle: qu'en pense Omphale?
- 3 Travellers, pamper the Pamplona fillies with peafowl feathers.
Voyageurs, portez des plumes de paon aux filles de Pampelune.
- 4 Is the solution of a sage the pollution of a page? [*un page*, a page-boy.]
La solution d'un sage est-elle la pollution d'un page?
- 5 I love sir's bosom that wears opossum.
Je vous aime, ô beaux hommes vêtus d'opossum.
- 6 QUESTION FOR ASTRONOMERS: Will Rrose Sélavy for decades enter the annual cadastre in the astral quadrant?
QUESTION AUX ASTRONOMES: Rrose Sélavy inscrira-t-elle longtemps au cadran des astres le cadastre des ans?
- 7 Oh, my knackered noddle, star-struck nacreous nodule.
Ô mon crâne étoile de nacre qui s'étiole.
- 8 Where Rrose Sélavy lives, they love wolves and fools who are heaven's and all men's outlaws.
Au pays de Rrose Sélavy on aime les fous et les loups sans foi ni loi.
- 9 Will you harass Rrose Sélavy as far as the decimal numbers nothing dismal encumbers?
Suivrez-vous Rrose Sélavy au pays des nombres décimaux où il n'y a décombres ni maux?
- 10 Rrose Sélavy wonders if the demise of seasons decides the destiny of demesnes.
Rrose Sélavy se demande si la mort des saisons fait tomber un sort sur les maisons.
- 11 Pass me my Barbary quiver, says the barbaric vizier.
Passez-moi mon arc berbère, dit le monarque barbare.
- 12 Thunderous planets above scare the quails, lovers of Rrose Sélavy's wondrous plants whose leaves are scales.
Les planètes tonnantes dans le ciel effrayent les cailles amoureuses des plantes étonnantes aux feuilles d'écaille cultivées par Rrose Sélavy.
- 13 Marcel Duchamp, *marchand du sel*: Rrose Sélavy knows the salt-seller well.
Rrose Sélavy connaît bien le marchand du sel.
- 14 EPITAPH: Torment Rrose Sélavy no more, for enigma's my genius. Nor can Caron con it.
ÉPITAPHE: Ne tourmentez plus Rrose Sélavy car mon génie est énigme. Caron ne le déchiffre pas.
- 15 Adrift on endless waters, will Rrose Sélavy eat first her hands, then her fetters?
Perdue sur la mer sans fin Rrose Sélavy mangera-t-elle du fer après avoir mangé ses mains?
- 16 Aragon harvests *in extremis* the spirit of Aramis on a bed of tarragon.
Aragon recueille in extremis l'âme d'Aramis sur un lit d'estragon.



- 17 André Breton doesn't come dressed as a mage to combat an image of the thunder-hydra,
bitter and barking.
*André Breton ne s'habille pas en mage pour combattre l'image de l'hydre du tonnerre qui
brame sur un mode amer.*
- 18 Francis Picabia, too frank for
A confidant of beavers, or,
Red-caped and draped in *toison d'or*,
A prancing Cassis picador.
*Francis Picabia l'ami des castors
Fut trop franc d'être un jour picador
À Cassis en ses habits d'or.*
- 19 Rose Sélavy wonders if love is the fly-paper that prepares soft sofas for foreplay.
*Rose Sélavy voudrait bien savoir si l'amour, cette colle à mouches, rend plus dures les
molles couches.*
- 20 What set your complexion withering, little girl, boarding where your eye came by another ring?
*Pourquoi votre incarnat est-il devenu si terne, petite fille, dans cet internat où votre œil se
cerna?*
- 21 The riverside diversion of a racecourse, there's Rose Sélavy's resource.
Au virage de la course au rivage, voici le secours de Rose Sélavy.
- 22 Rose Sélavy may don prison's drab garb, yet her mount ranges on mountain-ranges.
Rose Sélavy peut revêtir la bure du bagne, elle a une monture qui franchit les montagnes.
- 23 Rose Sélavy passes the palm that lacks the glamour of martyrs to Lakmé the lamb-herd of
Chartres on the Beauce's flat metal calm, by name beauty.
*Rose Sélavy décerne la palme sans l'éclat du martyre à Lakmé bergère en Beauce figée
dans le calme plat du métal appelé beauté.*
- 24 Do you think Rose Sélavy knows those ticklish jokes that make for tingling cheeks?
Croyez-vous que Rose Sélavy connaisse ces jeux de fous qui mettent le feu aux joues?
- 25 Rose Sélavy is perhaps the apprentice apache who flanned her brat with the flat of her hand.
*Rose Sélavy c'est peut-être aussi ce jeune apache qui de la paume de sa main colle un pain
à sa môme.*
- 26 Does the canoodling of shoddy wenches condone the idling of shady haunches?
Est-ce que la caresse des putains excuse la paresse des culs teints?
- 27 Time is an agile eagle in a temple.
Le temps est un aigle dans un temple.
- 28 What if Rose Sélavy, on a night of Yule, steers for the snare of the snow-white pole?
Qu'arrivera-t-il si Rose Sélavy, un soir de Noël, s'en va vers le piège de la neige et du pôle?
- 29 Ah, lover! All over!
Ah! meurs, amour!
- 30 Why's it my luck to pick from the pack, at hazard, a friend more fickle than the lizard?
Quel hasard me fera découvrir entre mille l'ami plus fugitif que le lézard?
- 31 A curate in a chalet sees the cachet of delicacy in the lees of his chalice: does he meet his
celestial match with malice?
*Un prêtre de Savoie déclare que le déchet des calices est marqué du cachet des délices:
met-il de la malice dans ce match entre le ciel et lui?*



- 32 This crater affords the Missouri its source and Sarah's court its mystery.
Voici le cratère où le Missouri prend sa source et la cour de Sara son mystère.
- 33 Nomads en route for the North, do not pause at the port to trade your pomades.
Nomades qui partez vers le nord, ne vous arrêtez pas au port pour vendre vos pommades.
- 34 Rose Sélavy sleeps well as a small fellow out of a well wolfs her loaf at twelve.
Dans le sommeil de Rose Sélavy il y a un nain sorti d'un puits qui vient manger son pain la nuit.
- 35 If silence is golden, Rose Sélavy lowers her eyelids for close-down.
Si le silence est d'or, Rose Sélavy abaisse ses cils et s'endort.
- 36 Craning on the careen, the poet seeks a rhyme: do you see Rose Sélavy as the queen of crime?
Debout sur la carène le poète cherche une rime et croyez-vous que Rose Sélavy soit la reine du crime?
- 37 When caravels were making fast at La Havana, were caravans snaking past Laval?
Au temps où les caravelles accostaient La Havane, les caravanes traversaient-elles Laval?
- 38 EASTERN QUESTION: At Santa Sophia a kirkstall of cork's a seat of insanity.
QUESTION D'ORIENT: À Sainte-Sophie sur un siège de liège s'assied la folie.
- 39 Rose Sélavy proposes that the perishing compost of passions become the nourishing repast of nations.
Rose Sélavy propose que la pourriture des passions devienne la nourriture des nations.
- 40 What is this unfounded tide whose sour flow floods Rose's steely soul?
Quelle est donc cette marée sans cause dont l'onde amère inonde l'âme acérée de Rose?
- 41 Benjamin Péret's regimen is perfect: his early bath is his yearly bath.
Benjamin Péret ne prend jamais qu'un bain par an.
- 42 P. Éluard: poet, the élite of the sheets.
P. Éluard: le poète élu des draps.
- 43 EPITAPH FOR APOLLINAIRE:
Weep dirges, giants and geniuses, on the void's edges.
Pleurez de nénies, géants et génies au seuil du néant.
- 44 Amorous voyager on the tender chart, why nourish your nights on a cinder tart?
Amoureux voyageur sur la carte du tendre, pourquoi nourrir vos nuits d'une tarte de cendre?
- 45 THE MARTYRDOM OF ST SEBASTIAN: The garters suit him but his bust's wrong.
MARTYRE DE SAINT SÉBASTIEN: Mieux que ses seins ses bas se tiennent.
- 46 Rose Sélavy has seen the archipelago where sea-queen Irene with an ash-sprig rules her isles.
Rose Sélavy a visité l'archipel où la reine Irène-sur-les-Flots de sa rame de frêne gouverne ses îlots.
- 47 From Everest mountain I am falling down to your feet for ever, Mrs Everling.
[Desnos composed this one in English.]
- 48 Would André Breton be already damned to tonsure in hell cats of jade and amber?
André Breton serait-il déjà condamné à la tâche de tondre en enfer des chats d'ambre et de jade?



- 49 Rose Sélavy calls on you not to mistake the verrucas of the breast for the virtues of the blest.
Rose Sélavy vous engage à ne pas prendre les verrues des seins pour les vertus des saintes.
- 50 Rose Sélavy wouldn't bet egotism gets you a wet bottom.
Rose Sélavy n'est pas persuadée que la culture du moi puisse amener la moiteur du cul.
- 51 Rose Sélavy can't believe the religion of catholics arose from the contagion of relics.
Rose Sélavy s'étonne que de la contagion des reliques soit née la religion catholique.
- 52 Seized with reckless love, the Alpine parson spreads his frocks to the rocks to ease his loins.
Possédé d'un amour sans frein, le prêtre savoyard jette aux rocs son froc pour soulager ses reins.
- 53 RROSE SELAVY'S MOTTO:
Beyond the polite to be decent
Beyond the poet to be dishonoured.
DEVISE DE RROSE SÉLAVY:
Plus que poli pour être honnête
Plus que poète pour être honni.
- 54 Forego the absurd parabolos, go for Rrose Sélavy's misheard parables.
Oubliez les paraboles absurdes pour écouter de Rrose Sélavy les sourdes paroles.
- 55 EPIPHANY: In the small hours, dreams moor at the mole to unload beans.
ÉPIPHANIE: Dans la nuit fade les rêves accostent à la rade pour décharger des fèves.
- 56 In the paradise of diamonds the carats are amorous, the spiral is crystal.
Au paradis des diamants les carats sont des amants et la spirale est en cristal.
- 57 Roman persimmons taste to pages as if gnawed in rages by jaws of Moors.
Les pommes de Rome ont pour les pages la saveur de la rage qu'y imprimèrent les dents des Mores.
- 58 Let rockets be fired, the crooked-faced races are tired!
Lancez les fusées, les races à faces rusées sont usées!
- 59 Rose Sélavy declares her skull's nectar is the elixir that bitters the sky's bile.
Rose Sélavy proclame que le miel de sa cervelle est la merveille qui aigrit le fiel du ciel.
- 60 At Rose Sélavy's 'agapê' or love-feast, papal paste is tasted in an agate-glazed sauce.
Aux agapes de Rrose Sélavy on mange du pâté de pape dans une sauce couleur d'agate.
- 61 Learn that Rose Sélavy's celebrated gesture is etched in celestial algebra.
Apprenez que la geste célèbre de Rrose Sélavy est inscrite dans l'algèbre céleste.
- 62 People of Sodom, fear the fire of heaven, prefer the fever of the rear.
Habitants de Sodome, au feu du ciel préférez le fiel de la queue.
- 63 Keep to the ramp, rulers and rules braving the cellar with no lamp.
Tenez bien la rampe rois et lois qui descendez à la cave sans lampe.
- 64 Is your tribe forever at a tribunal, dear downhearted departed?
Morts férus de morale, votre tribu attend-elle toujours un tribunal?
- 65 Rose Sélavy links persons ... with the Tropic of Cancer.
Rose Sélavy affirme que la couleur des ... est due au tropique du cancer.



- 66 Classy torsos on tables of nurses, you will be carcasses in hearses!
Beaux corps sur les billards, vous serez peaux sur les corbillards!
- 67 Maladies issue from every orifice of cadavers' palaces.
Du palais des morts les malaises s'en vont par toutes les portes.
- 68 Rocambole blows his cornet to start carnage and swims clear, cartwheeling off a lofty crag.
Rocambole de son cor provoque le carnage puis carambole du haut d'un roc et s'échappe à la nage.
- 69 Rose's desire of love for ever dies of cirrhosis of the liver.
De cirrhose du foie meurt la foi du désir de Rrose.
- 70 Lovers with tuberculosis, use your phthisical advantages.
Amants tuberculeux, ayez des avantages phthisiques.
- 71 In the Elysian fields, Rrose Sélavy wears decessful weeds.
Rrose Sélavy au seuil des cieux porte deuil des dieux.
- 72 Savage gales range over Rrose Sélavy, who reaches without outrage the age of oranges.
Les orages ont pu passer sur Rrose Sélavy, c'est sans rage qu'elle atteint l'âge des oranges.
- 73 Jacques Baron's fun, bayonet-jerks on gun!
Ce que Baron aime c'est le bâillon sur l'arme!
- 74 Morise's ideas are iridescent with obsolescent promise.
Les idées de Morise s'irisent d'un charme démodé.
- 75 Simone's silences launch the crunch of demonesses' lances.
Simone dans le silence provoque le heurt des lances des démons.
- 76 Mad broads with eyes undaubed sail through yards and yards of fire in yawls.
Les yeux des folles sont sans fard. Elles naviguent dans des yoles, sur le feu, pendant des yards, pendant des yards.
- 77 Evil opinions of singsongs prise open villains' prisons.
Le mépris des chansons ouvre la prison des méchants.
- 78 The sport of the departed is to spread and be rotted.
Le plaisir des morts c'est de moisir à plat.
- 79 Janine, we do all love her, the day-lily's such a wheedler.
Aimez, ô gens, Janine, la fleur d'hémérocalle est si câline.
- 80 On what pole does the ice-pack splinter the poets' smack?
Sur quel pôle la banquise brise-t-elle le bateau des poètes en mille miettes?
- 81 Rrose Sélavy knows the goblin of gloom cannot gobble the globe.
Rrose Sélavy sait bien que le démon du remords ne peut mordre le monde.
- 82 Rrose Sélavy tells us the world's rattle is the ruse of male rulers embattled in the whirl of the monthly muse.
Rrose Sélavy nous révèle que le rôle du monde est la ruse des rois mâles emportés par la ronde de la muse des mois.
- 83 LA RROSE DICTIONARY: Latinity - the five Latin nations ...
DICTIONNAIRE LA RROSE: Latinité - Les cinq nations latines. La Trinité – L'émanation des latrines.



- 84 To command all the magic of boules, imagine the candle of the males. [*Boules: the lobbing game*]
Nul ne connaîtrait la magie des boules sans la bougie des mâles.
- 85 Rose Sélavy submerged the moral wheedler in a mere of mineral water.
Dans un lac d'eau minérale Rose Sélavy a noyé la câline morale.
- 86 Into the sport of every Croesus Rose Sélavy slips the very heart of Jesus.
Rose Sélavy glisse le cœur de Jésus dans le jeu des Crésus.
- 87 ADVICE TO CATHOLICS: Sagely await the day of faith when death shall have you enjoy the scythe.
CONSEIL AUX CATHOLIQUES: Attendez sagement le jour de la foi où la mort vous fera jouir de la faux.
- 88 Rose Sélavy's going down a mine, making ready for Armageddon.
Au fond d'une mine Rose Sélavy prépare la fin du monde.
- 89 Ernest, says his pretty sister, by your third right digit, buy my birthright.
La jolie sœur disait: « Mon droit d'aînesse pour ton doigt, Ernest. »
- 90 Cravan wends on the wave and his cravat waves in the wind.
Cravan se hâte sur la rive et sa cravate joue dans le vent.
- 91 In Vaché's roguish drawls, words crashed like waves on rocky shores.
Dans le ton rogue de Vaché il y avait des paroles qui se brisaient comme les vagues sur les rochers.
- 92 Give some alms to the rich and etch in the rocks the effigy of Simone.
Faites l'aumône aux riches puis sculptez dans la roche le simulacre de Simone.
- 93 QUESTION: Mystical cancer, how long will your song be a mystery canticle?
QUESTION: Cancer mystique chanteras-tu longtemps ton cantique au mystère?
- 94 ANSWER: Aren't you aware your misery preens like a queen on this mystery's train?
RÉPONSE: Ignores-tu que ta misère se pare comme une reine de la traîne de ce mystère?
- 95 Is a watery death a wreath for the doughty?
La mort dans les flots est-elle le dernier mot des forts?
- 96 The act of the sexes is the axis of the sects.
L'acte des sexes est l'axe des sectes.
- 97 Sweeter than glory are the shrouds and shadows of the globe.
La suaire et les ténèbres du globe sont plus suaves que la gloire.
- 98 Our brows harbour cemeteries that a maze of boundaries on summits omits.
Frontières qui serpentent sur les cimes vous n'entourez pas les cimetières abrités par nos fronts.
- 99 Will the morning of caresses reveal to us the carmine of goddesses?
Les caresses de demain nous révéleront-elles le carmin des déesses?
- 100 The eyeliners of goddesses lull the idleness of goners.
Le parfum des déesses berce la paresse des défunts.
- 101 The militias of goddesses disregard the delights of missals.
La milice des déesses se préoccupe peu des délices de la messe.



- 102 On her trapeze Rose Sélavy appeases the distresses of our divine mistresses.
À son trapèze Rose Sélavy apaise la détresse des déesses.
- 103 Do poesy's Vestals take you for vesicles, Petals?
Les vestales de la Poésie vous prennent-elles pour des vessies, ô! Pétales
- 104 Love's images, fishes, will your poisonless kisses make me lower my eyes?
Images de l'amour, poissons, vos baisers sans poison me feront-ils baisser les yeux?
- 105 In the land of Rose Sélavy, males scour the shores in warships, females pick and scratch at sores.
Dans le pays de Rose Sélavy les mâles font la guerre sur la mer. Les femelles ont la gale.
- 106 For all malefactors, atonement; for all male punters, an ointment.
À tout miché, pesez Ricord. [À tout péché, miséricorde: for every sin, there is mercy. Ricord: famous doctor.]
- 107 Words, are you myths which match the myrtles of death?
Mots êtes-vous des mythes et pareils aux myrtes des morts?
- 108 Can Rose Sélavy's artful talk turn a swan into a stork?
L'argot de Rose Sélavy, n'est-ce pas l'art de transformer en cigognes les cygnes?
- 109 The laws of our desires are dice of no leisure.
Les lois de nos désirs sont des dés sans loisir.
- 110 Impatient heirs, usher your forebears into the chamber of thunders.
Héritiers impatients, conduisez vos ascendants à la chambre des tonnerres.
- 111 I live where you live, urchin whose mug is the magic of journeys.
Je vis où tu vis, voyou dont le visage est le charme des voyages.
- 112 Phalanx of angels, prefer the phallus to the angelus.
Phalange des anges, aux angélus préférez les phallus.
- 113 Do you know the jolly lovely faun of folly? She is yellow.
Connaissez-vous la jolie faune de la folie? – Elle est jaune.
- 114 Does your bloodstream carry cowbells at your blubbing's beck and call?
Votre sang charrie-t-il des grelots au gré de vos sanglots?
- 115 Does piety in dogma consist in pitying dogs?
La piété dans le dogme consiste-t-elle à prendre les dogues en pitié?
- 116 For the fleshly calèche it's a long lane, will the carnal car go far?
Le char de la chair ira-t-il loin sur ce chemin si long?
- 117 What are cuckolds thinking?
Hints for women cooking: Don't mimic the apostrophagic madeleine, copy the carnivorous virgin.
Qu'en pensent les cocus?
Recette culinaire: plutôt que Madeleine l'apostrophaque, femmes! imitez la vierge carnivore.
- 118 You crows rifling fine torsos' haunches, when will you stifle your torches?
Corbeaux qui déchiquetez le flanc des beaux corps, quand éteindrez-vous les flambeaux?
- 119 Prometheuth! Promitheth, promitheth!
Prométhée moi l'amour.



- 120 O laugh, the waves, coachmen are chortling! Olaf, the waves, catch many rattling! All of the waves crash ricocheting!
Ô ris cocher des flots! Auric, hochet des flots au ricochet des flots.
- 121 The species of fair fools loves phials and false pieces.
L'espèce des folles aime les fioles et les pièces fausses.
- DEFINITIONS OF POETRY FOR:
DEFINITIONS DE LA POÉSIE POUR:
- 122 Louis Aragon: Hear the scales play hopscotch at the edge of souls.
À la margelle des âmes écoutez les gammes jouer à la marelle.
- 123 Benjamin Péret: Belly of flesh, flurry of brush.
Le ventre de chair est un centre de vair.
- 124 Tristan Tzara: What harms earth worse than a glass-work or a verse-work? What say you, earthworm?
Quel plus grand outrage à la terre qu'un ouvrage de vers / verre? Qu'en dis-tu, ver de terre?
- 125 Max Ernst: The red ball rolled and bowled.
La boule rouge bouge et roule.
- 126 Max Morise: For a disappointed fig, dig a fascinating dyke.
À figue dolente, digue affolante.
- 127 Georges Auric: Isn't this the import of the muses:- behind the museums' portals, the bed-rolls of mortals?
La portée des muses n'est-ce pas la mort duvetée derrière la porte des musées?
- 128 Philippe Soupault: Geese and zebus are neguses in this rebus.
Les oies et les zébus sont les rois de ce rébus.
- 129 Roger Vitrac: Don't take the moon's halo hung to light the lagoon for the poets' hallo sung too like the moon.
Il ne faut pas prendre le halo de la lune à l'eau pour le chant «alla» des poètes comme la lune.
- 130 Georges Limbour: The Norman's destiny is the North's mendacity.
Pour les Normands le Nord ment.
- 131 Francis Picabia: Numbers in bronze make a ragamuffin bonze: I rubbed out the second reverend, are you ready, Rose Sélavy?
Les chiffres de bronze ne sont-ils que des bonzes de chiffes: j'ai tué l'autre prêtre, êtes-vous prête, Rose Sélavy?
- 132 Marcel Duchamp: On the road was a blue bull by a blanched bench. Tell me now, what reasons for white mittens?
Sur le chemin, il y avait un bœuf bleu près d'un banc blanc. Expliquez-moi la raison des gants blancs maintenant?
- 133 G. de Chirico: Remit your outrage twenty times on your métier.
Vingt fois sur le métier remettez votre outrage.
- 134 Paul Éluard, when will you call repetitions Preteritions?
Quand donc appellerez-vous Préteritions, Paul Éluard, les répétitions?
- 135 O lapse of senses, wager years on wordless pensées.
Ô laps des sens, gage des années aux pensées sans langage.



- 136 Rivers! Come and bring the pawnbrokers the poor broken bridge-crumbs.
Fleuves! portez au Mont-de-Piété les miettes de pont.
- 137 A fairy's blushes burn as a bonfire blazes.
Les joues des fées se brûlent aux feux de joies.
- 138 Mysterious are the hysterias of foundered mortals under nettles.
Le mystère est le hystérie des morts sous les orties.
- 139 In the silence of highland snows, Rose Sélavy smiles at the science of filing nails.
Dans le silence des cimes, Rose Sélavy regarde en riant la science qui lime.
- 140 Our misfortunes are hair-combs of hoar-frost in fuddled tresses.
Nos peines sont des peignes de givre dans des cheveux ivres.
- 141 Fair ladies! False horses in your fiery tresses.
Femmes! faux chevaux sous vos cheveux de feu.
- 142 Say the trances of confusion, not the contusions of France.
Dites les transes de la confusion et non pas les contusions de la France.
- 143 From what plain will the platinum Reginas rise to our retinas?
De quelle plaine les reines de platine monteront-elles dans nos rétines?
- 144 Fear is a pure femur under ingrate granite.
La peur, c'est une hanche pure sous un granit ingrat.
- 145 Man Ray's gaze unsleeves the mayhem-ranters, romancers orating in the harsh breeze.
*Les menteurs et les rhéteurs perdent leurs manches dans le vent rêche quand les regarde
Man Ray.*
- 146 Lover, if you suffer pain, never fear the river Seine.
Si vous avez des peines de cœur, amoureux, n'ayez plus peur de la Seine.
- 147 To a heart that pays, nothing is worth its aim.
À cœur payant un rien vaut cible.
(À cœur paisible, rien ne vaut tant:
To a heart at peace, nothing is worth the same.)
- 148 Vile force does more than gentle sense.
Plus fait violeur que doux sens.
(Plus fait douceur que violence:
Gentleness does more than violence.)
- 149 Wordplay, wet spray.
Jeux des mots jets mous.
- 150 Soft, sunlit, bland, oft built on sand.
Aimable souvent est sable mouvants.
- 151 Robert Delaunay: Rowboat Water-born! Beware the barb.
Robert Delaunay: de l'eau naît, gare à hameçon.
- 152 My fear in the mirror appears as a marine vapour.
Ma peur se reflète sur le verre comme un vapeur sur la mer.
- DEFINITION OF ART BY RROSE SÉLAVY:
- 153 The merciless cow with tuberculosis loses in one month half an udder.
La vache tuberculeuse traite sans pitié jusqu'à perdre par mois la moitié d'un pis.



- 154 Desnos does not pale as he deals with desires on his pole.
Sans pâlir, Desnos a fait mourir sur son pal bien des désirs.
- 155 Scale the ladder, Drieu la Rochelle, to shock the Lord.
Monte à l'échelle, Drieu la Rochelle, pour étonner Dieu.
- 156 Will Rose Sélavy discover the alcohol river quaffed by choleric llamas in America?
Est-ce que Rose Sélavy découvrira en Amérique le fleuve d'alcool où boivent les lamas cholériques?
- 157 Praying in pews with bibles is like spraying the eclipse with pebbles.
Aller jeter ses prières à l'église, autant jeter ses pierres à l'éclipse.
- 158 In an abbess's cranium, a crab grapples an ass.
Dans le crâne de l'abbesse se livre le combat du crabe et de l'ânesse.
- 159 Rose Sélavy has learnt that nobility's noble title is no buttock's notable tackle.
Rose Sélavy a découvert que la particule des nobles n'est pas la partie noble du cul.
- 160 Poor pawns in art pare as their share the lion's part.
C'est dans l'art que les pions se taillent leur part du lion.
- 161 Why are life's ifs and buts the problem prey of pale bolts and nuts?
Pourquoi le problème de la vie est-il la proie des vis blêmes?
- 162 On the anti-artistic ice-pack, Rose Sélavy starts an Antarctic savings bank.
Rose Sélavy fonde une banque antarctique sur la banquise antiartistique.
- 163 Rose Sélavy tarts up the fates and her dart starts the feasts.
Rose Sélavy met du fard au destin puis de son dard assure ses festins.
- 164 The period of debauches pips the stupor of poor wretches.
L'heure du stupre prévaut sur la stupeur des pauvres hères.
- 165 Mankind's thoughts take kindly to a schoolkid's impots.
Les pensées des hommes aiment les pensums.
- 166 What's the fatal dogma of Christ, after all, but the mere crystal of fops?
Le dogme fatal du Christ ce n'est après tout que le cristal des fats.
- 167 Assassin of psalteries, have you slaughtered the salvation of saints?
Assassin des luths as-tu tué le salut des saints?
- 168 Max Ernst's cavernous eyes assess the caves of statues' amusement, carved with his Muse's maxims: Ernestine.
Les yeux caves de Max Ernst estiment les cavernes où s'amuse les statues et où s'inscrivent les maximes de sa muse: Ernestine.
- 169 Is a predilection for the female the dilemma of fiction and the numeral?
La dilection des femmes est-elle le dilemme de la fiction et des nombres?
- 170 The human brood is a phantom squad with a squirt of blood.
Les enfants des hommes sont une somme de fantômes et de sang un peu.
- 171 Female phantoms perched on elephants scriben on heavens the mysterious omega that fits planetary equations.
Juchés sur des éléphants les fantômes femelles inscrivent au ciel l'oméga mystérieux égal des équations planétaires.



- 172 The self-regard of Rrose Sélavy forges clear as the circle closes like a shroud.
L'orgueil de Rrose Sélavy sait s'évader du cercle qui peut se clore comme un cercueil.
- 173 The gross legate from the cloister has all the éclat of a goitre.
Le gras légat sorti du cloître a vraiment l'éclat d'un goitre.
- 174 Swells don't respect tolling knells when looking-glasses won't reflect their longing glances.
Les fats ignorent la vertu des glas quand les glaces refusent de refléter leur face.
- 175 At the stars' gala this name is written in astragals: Gala.
Au gala des astres s'inscrit en astragales ce nom: Gala.
- 176 Does the knife in severing the souls' affliction unveil to pals affection's fiction?
La lame qui tranche l'affliction des âmes dévoile-t-elle aux amis la fiction de l'affection?
- 177 Without rage in agony, place against blank pages' irony the silence worse than mirth.
À l'ironie des pages blanches oppose, sans rage agonie, le silence pire que le rire.
- 178 The hurricanes that occlude Orion don't obtrude on our vision.
Les orages qui masquent Orion à nos visages n'en suppriment pourtant pas la vision.
- 179 This wall is so fragile! Waves, field-mice so agile, seeking your fate by night.
Qu'il est fragile ce mur! flots mulots agiles qui cherchez votre lot dans la nuit.
- 180 Gastronomers! Will astronomers' dreaming snores drown you on marine sea-shores?
Gastronomes! les rêves des astronomes vous noieront-ils sur les grèves?
- DEFINITIONS OF POETRY FOR:
- 181 Paul Éluard: Love's throes, in what late hours did I browse your sloes?
Affres de l'amour dans quelle nuit ai-je savouré votre fruit âpre?
- 182 André Breton: And no better matter than to drop the mitred nutters (whoops!) into a hopper.
Le plus beau titre des hommes, c'est de jeter à la hotte (hopp!) les pitres coiffés de mitres.
- 183 Robert Desnos: Love's limbs, how soon shall I limber love's noose?
Corps d'amour, quel jour me pendrai-je à la corde d'amour?
- 184 Jacques Baron: Female torsos just like cameos tough male torsos like female cameos.
Jacques Baron: Les corps des femmes comme des camées le corps des forts comme des camées de femmes.
- 185 Simone Breton: Daniel Defoe, devise a daffy simoon for Simone.
Daniel de Foe inventez un simoun fou pour Simone.
- 186 123 calls up at once the number 1234 for spirits smitten with lucidity. Esau died for lack of water.
123 appelle immédiatement le chiffre 1234 pour les esprits épris de lucidité. Esaü est mort, manque d'eau.
['Esaü' is pronounced S-A-U. Adding O, 'eau,' would have made him 'saoul,' drunk.]
- 187 It's far handier than to look at the chest, horned with breasts clairvoyant in cornea, of stars not yet born here.
C'est encore infiniment plus commode que de regarder la poitrine, encornée de seins clairvoyants en cornée, des étoiles non encore nées.
- 188 Bemused apple-peels of abbeyes, your boo-hoos bamboozle bees.
Pleurs ébahis, pelures des abbayes, vous trompez les abeilles.
- 189 Where La Parysi's is, there is paralysis.
Où est la Parysi's est la paralysie.



- 190 Enamelled rails, you sail like untrammelled royals above our travails.
Rails d'émail, vous passez comme des rois sur nos émois.
- 191 What is secreted by the Andean or Pyrenean eagle's secret perineal gland?
Que secrète la glande secrète du périnée de l'aigle des Andes ou des Pyrénées?
- 192 Rose Sélavy's miracles are vows mauve as éclairs.
Les miracles de Rose Sélavy sont des aveux mauves comme les éclairs.
- 193 O Telemachus, tell me cameos.
Télémaque, tel est camée.
- 194 To our birds at rest on reeds, what good is the dormant dormouse whose eyes are as gold?
Qu'importe au repos de nos oiseaux sur les roseaux le loir, aux yeux comme de l'or, qui dort?
- 195 When Man Ray is coming away, we'll see a Far West war-fest.
Quand Man Ray is coming away ... on pourra voir un Far West war festin.
- 196 In a sub-zero cattle-stall, Tristan Tzara rattles his last.
Dans les stalles de glace râle Tristan Tzara.
- 197 Love in the fingers of foes, what rogue rifled the wafers?
Amour aux mains hostiles, quel malin déroba les hosties?
- 198 Does the public fate of a community affect the pubic heat of common property?
Les malheurs des concitoyens n'influent pas sur la chaleur des cons mitoyens?
- 199 Love! lobster in frozen fjords.
Amour! homard dans les fjords froids.



Jake Chapman on Georges Bataille: an Interview with Simon Baker



Jake and Dinos Chapman, CFC77296660, 2002,
wood and mixed media, 76 x 55 x 15 cm
Photo: Stephen White
Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London
(c) the artists

Introduction

In the last twenty years Georges Bataille has achieved something of a posthumous own goal. The author who wrote that admiring the marquis de Sade only diminished the force of his ideas is himself now widely admired. Surrealism's most trenchant critic, its 'old enemy within' has also become a permanent fixture in the academic study of surrealist visual and literary cultures. Bataille, who once declined an invitation to collective surrealist action with the pithy 'too many bloody idealists' seems to have become an ideal intellectual figurehead for a generation of theorists, and at the same time is held up by practicing artists as an antidote to mainstream art history and criticism. This recuperation by the very avant-garde discourses that Bataille seemed most anxious to avoid, raises doubt about the efficacy of critical theory within a culture industry at its most depressingly efficient. But it also raises questions about how many contemporary artists are genuinely indebted to Bataille's thought and how many merely append his philosophy to themselves as a flag of convenience. Jake and Dinos Chapman have, in recent years, made a point of highlighting the redundancy of a politics of transgression in the context of an art world that seems infinitely accommodating. In the following interview, Jake Chapman talks about the Hayward Gallery's forthcoming exhibition on the journal Documents, and explains why Bataille continues to be vital to the production of art in a culture apparently unencumbered by idealism but hell-bent on cathartic recuperation.



Simon Baker: What was the context in which you first discovered Bataille?

Jake Chapman: That's actually a very difficult question. That requires memory. I think it was studying Nietzsche actually. The first book by Bataille that I read was *On Nietzsche* [Sur Nietzsche, 1945].

SB: So your approach was through philosophy rather than the visual arts?

JC: Yes, I was lucky enough when I was a student to come across a lecturer called Chris Want, who redirected my interests away from the usual modernist sensibility, and towards more philosophical thinking regarding art. I think, actually, that art school was quite instrumental in as far as it was a place of non-education. It's endemic to the art school system that it demonstrates very well how insufficient it is as an educational establishment, as a place to offer any kind of information about how to make art or think about art. At that time [the late 1980s] there was the first tidal wave of New York Now, Jeff Koons, and the Haim Steinbach show, and it was interesting because the work came, by amphibious landing, off the back of things like [Guy Debord's 1967] *Society of the Spectacle* and all that Situationist stuff, which was obviously a very bad reading of people like Nietzsche and Bataille. Then you started unpicking Guy Debord, realizing how shaky it was, and trying to work out what the sources were.

SB: So *On Nietzsche* led directly to how you started thinking about your work?

JC: Yes, but I wouldn't want to make a distinction between thinking about art and thinking about its textual and philosophical contexts. The two are obviously not differentiated; it's impossible to have one without the other. Thinking about making a work of art is thinking about thinking, before it's making a work of art. I've always been very tactical and strategic about how I commit ideas to objects.

SB: Do you think that that part of Bataille's work, *On Nietzsche*, has been instrumental in the way that Bataille has been rehabilitated?

JC: Rehabilitated is a really good word for what's happened to Bataille. He gets domesticated and pacified. What's important for an understanding of Bataille, although understanding is the wrong word, perhaps it should be use, what's important for a use of Bataille is an understanding of the relationship between rhetoric and logos. For Nietzsche, the idea of detaching the dialectic from its rational mooring by introducing the idea of rhetoric is central and I think it's also fundamental to Bataille: the volatile argumentation, the argumentation that doesn't follow linear or teleological modes of enquiry. The thing about a book like *The Accursed Share* [La Part maudite, 1949] is that the magnitude is absurd, and the attempt is absurd, and you follow these labyrinthine arguments, which are very difficult to untangle, and yet I think that itself is very important to the way that it works.





Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Great Deeds against the Dead*, 1994, mixed media, 277 x 244 x 152 cm.
Courtesy The Saatchi Gallery, London
(c) The artists

Image and Text

SB: Can you say the same for Bataille's attitude to images, or rather, to the relationship between image and text? Is his deployment of images something that interested you?

JC: This makes me think about what becomes morbid. Why, at what point did I become equally fascinated in what Bataille calls 'horripitulation' - the image of *Tears of Eros* [*Les Larmes d'Eros*, 1961] that comes over and above everything that seems to be about modernity and the progressive logic of images, so that one stops and can't go any further. The same thing fuels an interest in people like Sacher-Masoch and Sade who have the same kind of repetitious stutter: they get stopped.

Bataille's interest in Sade and Deleuze's interest in Sacher-Masoch, stem from the fact that they don't present a concept of future, only a concept of the infinite present. That's what stops Bataille or prevents him following concepts of teleological logic.

SB: Do you mean something like the photograph of the Chinese execution in *Tears of Eros*, which Bataille owned and carried around, and yet never seems to have been able to get any further than?

JC: Yes - It's an odd association, but someone like Wittgenstein had the same problem with the gestalt switch. It's exactly the same thing: it's one thing that becomes two things and once that thing can oscillate both forwards and backwards, its demonstration of immanence makes it possible to just simply move forwards.

SB: How might that attitude to images be demonstrated?

JC: I think explaining it would lose the effect of the mechanism of the paradigm switch. The point about those images is that they're neither one thing nor the other. Our reciprocation of images, our understanding of images, is always prestitial. What I mean is that an image of a person being tortured comes with the commitment that one has to assume that it's an ethical reading that one should have. What's central to Bataille is that that ethical reading is there but it's made manifest by an absolute transgression of ethics. The paradigm switch is divided into a libidinal pleasure that's formed by the transgression of the ethics that that image is supposed to trigger or incite.



SB: The idea of ethics is interesting in as much as Bataille was given that image of torture by his analyst. Giving the patient this kind of shock is hardly an ethical thing to do.

JC: It's actually central to psychoanalysis: the idea of abreactive therapy, shock therapy, the idea that you can shock yourself into moral conduct. One of Bataille's core ideas is that transgression is immanent to Christianity. This is one way in which Bataille is quite commonly misread, as if he's trying to extract transgression from morality and isolate it as though it's an avant-gardist technique with some kind of civilizing quality to it: that once you can rescue transgression you can kill God and so on. That really misunderstands Bataille and, for example, his interest in Sade. For Sade there's an intimate necessity to have God to formulate the concept of atheism, and to make transgression a repetitive act that has value.

SB: Does Bataille's journal Documents [1929-1930] have specific relevance for you?

JC: Well, I do own it, and read it etc., but beyond that it would be a bit like saying how do you use Tears of Eros. It's one of those things that Bataille does as an anthropologist to illustrate the collaborative potentials of lots of material. In the case of Tears of Eros it's slightly fallacious, slightly romanticized. The thing that really interested me about Bataille's writing is its difficulty: the problem with Documents and Tears of Eros is that they seem to try and demonstrate points, and to try and summarize something, which is really antithetical to what Bataille does.

SB: Isn't Tears of Eros just a recapitulation?

JC: Yes, but he's doing in that book, to the images in it, what people did to him. The only thing that's interesting in that book is that very tiny argument about the images of torture, to which are left the poetics, which are absolutely lacerated in the rest of the book. Tears of Eros is like a very bourgeois catalogue essay - it's terrible, it's an awful book - he wrote that book falling down the stairs.

SB: As far as you're concerned, summarizing is like reducing or boiling down?

JC: Yes, it becomes a terminology for usage, and that's not what I find interesting about Bataille. What I find interesting is the lunacy, the points at which an argument spirals towards something which is not logic. Which doesn't mean that it's irrational madness, it's just a different kind of lucidity. Bataille writes about Gilles de Rais [Gilles de Rais, 1965] and in a sense he's like Gilles de Rais: pre-capitalist and feudal. The text is filled with ridiculous aphorisms and allegories, which are not consistent with contemporary writings: he writes as if he's possessed by Gilles de Rais. If you wanted to precipitate or boil down to the general ingredients of Bataille then you can do it but you'll always be losing the thing which is central to Bataille's work: it's always in excess, always evasive.

SB: Your criticisms seem focused particularly on Tears of Eros and Documents, which are both very visual.

JC: Thinking about that, that's an intensely projected phobia on my part: a phobia of the



idea of images used as examples of good argument.

SB: Does Documents really do that? The role of the image is something that interested Bataille but it's always an interest balanced on a knife edge.

JC: No it doesn't do that, but it's a phobia on my part because I'm intensely suspicious about prioritizing ocularity: the idea that the world can be reduced to just sight. One of the things I really like is when he talks about the blindness of his father. The sun is so searing that his father can see red through his eyelids. Bataille's arguments about enlightenment also use luminosity as its structure: but once you start thinking about the sun as a kind of excessive, catastrophic energy then it surpasses any kind of enlightenment notion of photon particles being useful, and blinds logic. So in that sense I'm much more interested in notions of blindness in Bataille than I am with sight. Part of my phobia about imagery and my romantic attachment to literature is the idea that literature makes different claims on the reader. The viewer comes to expedite this massive Kantian assumption about imagery and aesthetics: Kantian machines, walking eyes that don't blink. Whereas with someone who reads a text, the relationship with a text is a very physiological one, it's very different to looking at art. That's something that Sade demonstrates very well in *The 120 Days of Sodom*: the content itself has to be so exhaustive that it induces fatigue. This is almost a kind of Greenbergian idea. Instead of the content having content it becomes the act as a kind of act of convulsion, as a physiological task. So while the book may be

encyclopaedic in terms of its descriptions of death and torture, ultimately the reading is nothing to do with that, it's to do with a kind of individual passage of wasteful time: it's impossible to read. The best way to read Sade is in the American translations - they're hilarious.

SB: Hasn't Sade, like Bataille, been very badly recuperated?

JC: Yes, existentialised beyond recognition, mainly through Freud. I read lots of Freud and am very interested in his absorption of Sacher-Masoch and Sade that stank of some kind of attempt to fuse them. They became the polarities of clinical psychology: two absolutely excessive writers, one who's absolutely ambivalent and the other who appears to be, who might be, psychopathic. Reading Freud, I was interested in how you could underpin this huge attempt to colonize the unconscious, to write it. Thinking about Freud's relationship to surrealism and surrealism's relationship to Freud, the most interesting things about Freud are all the negations and denials. For someone who tried to produce a methodological structure for interpreting and colonizing psychological processes, what's interesting about psychoanalysis is that it can't deliver its very project. It collapses and has catastrophic moments and becomes the form for its own representation. It becomes a self-reflexive form of representation not by its prejudged ambition or stated intent, but by default. The thing about the surrealists is that they do the same thing: they mix, miserably, the object of their claims with their threats and predations. My problem with the surrealist debate in general is the overriding notion of surrealism that treats the



unconscious as though it's a metaphysical domain. The shift from classical notions of beauty and nature: external things that require imitation in order to achieve some kind of perfect harmonic idealism. It's the idea of romanticism that intrajects nature internally and says man is nature and therefore any kind of manifestation of his expression is nature as well. The problem with the surrealists is that they develop the concept of the unconscious and think that that's where the true nature is and constantly attempt to find this truth. The problem with surrealism is that it becomes hyper-metaphysical because it condemns the conscious and puts metaphysics in this noumenal realm, which is the unconscious, and then goes in search of it.

SB: Are you interested in any of the other writers associated with Bataille? Those who participated in the College of Sociology like Leiris or Klossowski?

JC: Yes, Klossowski particularly, *Sade my Neighbour* [*Sade mon prochain*, 1947] and all of that. I think it's Klossowski who really elaborates a clear definition of the concept of transgression: he says 'acts of transgression have been carried out as though those acts had never been carried out'. Klossowski also understands the elliptical relationship between an act of brutality or atrocity and the moral remorse that recuperates it back into the ellipsis.

SB: But it's striking that if we run through the co-ordinates you discuss, Nietzsche, Sade, Freud, and add Hegel, we're looking at the same co-ordinates that interested Bataille and the surrealists in the 20s and 30s.

JC: Yes, but without the surrealists' utopian imperative, and Bataille has remained peculiarly enigmatic in a way that someone like Klossowski hasn't. Klossowski's very straightforward about his project, what he wants to do, in a way that Bataille isn't. With Bataille there's an infinite source of energy there, which is not always coherent. You can't strip Bataille. You can't do that with Bataille because the aim and the ambition melt.

SB: Would this explain why Bataille might still be interesting, whereas the influence of surrealism seems to have ossified?

JC: Yes, but it's also down to the very tangible link between early modernity and the symptomatic cure of surrealism, where modernism got back on track again and started thinking about representation in a much more scientific way. If we talk about surrealism we usually think of the pictorial naivety of the surrealists. I watched Clement Greenberg on TV the other night, his formalism is so radical it's absolutely stunning: just the idea of this incredibly flat canvas with its claim to realism is really interesting. The reason they're realistic is because they're real materials: absolute materialism. What Greenberg is attempting to do is reductive, but it still retains its complexity. There is something slightly anti-humanist about Greenberg's position. He's saying; forget all this other detritus and just have this thing. Let's reduce art to this kind of mechanistic materialistic activity without all the metaphysical aspects, if, how and where the meaning is inside it.





Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Insult to Injury*, 2003 (detail)

Francisco de Goya 'Disasters of War', Portfolio of 80 etchings reworked and improved, 37 x 47 cm

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London

Photocredit: Stephen White

(c) The artists

SB: Is there a residual element of surrealist tactics in your own use of the book to present your work: the way that you've assembled texts and images and published them in such a way that they infiltrate different areas in different ways? Like the recent publications accompanying your exhibitions at White Cube [2002] and MoMA, Oxford [2003].

JC: You mean the photographs by children? [in the MoMA catalogue]

SB: Yes, and the text in the front of the family collection book, which seems to relate directly to the strategic use of text and image in *Documents* for example?

JC: Yes, I was just thinking I've been incredibly harsh on surrealism. There is something incredibly interesting about automatism and those sorts of machinic ideas, and also the investment in technology. But still again there's a tendency to positivize the interest in technology, which is a problem for me.

Transgression and Recuperation

SB: There is also a tradition of weird, non-recuperated gestures in surrealist culture, the things that slip through the cracks.



JC: I think that thinking about our little incursions, and strategies of squeaks and blips, they are kinds of political attempts, which become quite banal if you take the fundamental point that whatever is contributed to a discourse gets subsumed into the discourse. The problem is the dialectic as a mechanism, and so of the people you mentioned in that lineage [Nietzsche, Sade, Freud and Hegel] I would avoid Hegel like the plague. The skill of the dialectic is that it can suffer any form of argumentation and the synthesis will perform modifications, but the one thing which remains intact throughout any kind of contestation, however hostile or problematic is the dialectic, so it remains as an insistent form: it's a depressing concept.

SB: But isn't that central to Bataille's pessimism?

JC: Yes, and translating that into producing art, the pessimism is that it's recuperated into aesthetics (not that it should be recuperated to politics or to other kinds of discourse), because there is a necessary imperative that makes its collapse immanent. But the collapse isn't the problem; the problem is that if you compare our work with that of many of our contemporaries it appears very traditional. It parasitically, or vampirically, depends upon all the forms of art production which should, under the conditions of progressive modernity and liberal humanism, have been buried for being Luddite or non teleological. So our excavation of all these zombified art techniques visit the healthy, vital, modernist body with all the diseases which give it its momentum. The problem for us is that we may try to exhibit these little insurgent acts, silly texts and silly

art, and things which are symbolically destructive, but we understand fully that however much our anxieties and our attacks force a public to suffer, we understand that part of the bourgeois principle for the consumption of radical culture is, as Sacher-Masoch says, a desire merely to be teased, to be terrorized. So really, all any such form of terror does is ornament a critical culture with the notion that it's placing itself in some kind of mechanism of enquiry and investigation. And gives the impression that somehow that investigation and enquiry is unimpeded by any kind of structure, which is obviously not the case. Ultimately, the more fractious our work gets, the nastier the work gets, the more it becomes systematically accommodated and accommodating. Even that's wrong: it doesn't get systematically accommodated because it is already accommodating. The accommodation is prior: that's the problem. Which makes me slide inexorably towards Greenberg: the only possibility for a kind of immunized art would be a very reductive, very inhuman, very anti-human form of formal art, which says all I can offer is impoverishment and that's that: it goes nowhere. Carl Andre talks about his works of art in terms of a memorial aesthetic. These things are laid down almost like stones from cemeteries, which I think is an amazing idea: he recognised the fact that to produce culture is to produce culture. That, in itself, is not even heresy, it's enervation.

SB: Can you say specifically how you draw on Bataille's writing in the production of your work?

JC: I would tend not to treat Bataille in such a direct way, but I can say that Bataille seeps



into everything that we do. I think that we treat our work as though it was an assemblage of all the influences and co-conspirators that asserted themselves in its production. We're simply components in that massive mechanism if you like; but I can't, say, think of anything specific in terms of partisan relations.

SB: Does Bataille's formulation of the concept of transgression relate to the way that work like your own is sometimes suggested as being part of a necessary force?

JC: Yes - a good social service like the children who killed Jamie Bulger.

SB: Isn't that formulation problematic for you?

JC: It is and it isn't - in our enlightened bourgeois minds there seems to be something strange about thinking about transgression. Transgression seems to be indebted to a pre-enlightenment discourse of heresy and Christianity. We assume that we should be able to think through our relationship to ethics, that we should be able to construct good causes and good reasons for our good conduct that are not established through the threat of acts of violence or hell. Something that Nietzsche understands and that Bataille understands is that however much God, the event, passes, there's still the sacrificial: the transgressive moves into the secular. There have been some amazing descriptions from Liberia of kids of 14 and 15 running around shooting up everything, wearing women's wigs and makeup and nail polish. It makes you think about the idea that violence is necessarily recuperated to moral re-investment. How can you do that? There's an excess there. It's

really interesting given some of the arguments about the Iraq war and the relationship between 9/11 and Iraq. There are these very metered and metric responses, and then you have these eruptions in Liberia, and the reluctance of the USA to commit troops in any kind of symbolic way. With the advent of the secular culture divorced from the sacrifices and symbolic restitutions of God, you can't commit one American soldier to be killed, because death is heresy. How can you fight when death is heresy? In Liberia they're making a very deep symbolic shift from normal everyday cultural life, to war, and in a sense, their shift has more of an ethical conduct about it, more understanding of the imperatives of that difference than the Americans'. America is conducting war like it's a lethal injection, like curing a disease. It's deeply protestant, deeply metric. During the bombing of Iraq, the whole thing was conducted as if it was something taken from Kant's judgement of taste and aesthetics. The idea was that 9/11 couldn't be constructed in terms of taste and aesthetics: Stockhausen was vilified for claiming it as an aesthetic spectacle, and yet, a year later, the bombing of Iraq is described as 'shock and awe', which are aesthetic terms.

SB: There is also a strange prioritization of visual culture, through which, in the early days of the conflict, it seemed that less time was invested in water and electricity than in removing 'dangerous' mosaics and statues. It's almost surprising there weren't advanced guards of art historians pointing out the most 'effective' statues.

JC: Yes - 'bomb that one, it really works.'



SB: It was an incredible investment in the power of the image.

JC: It comes back to something like the Taliban blowing up the Buddhist sculptures. You have two opposing forms of symbolic competition for who's being symbolic, the idea that these Buddhist sculptures are the property of the human condition, which in itself is a kind of secularized ideological construct, rather than of a set of people who are manifesting a current, live, vital religious opposition to something that they're treating as current, live and vital. It's strange that we prioritize the idea that these objects have some transcendent value, by this generalizing dynamic, rather than the idea that someone has a straightforward local opposition to something that has a direct and local meaning for them.

SB: Let's bring it back to how people respond to your own work - that's what's most obviously problematic. If the work is just described in terms of the possibility of moving beyond a limit, it doesn't really matter what you do, does it?

JC: That's true, and there's always a recuperation, always; always a recuperation to use. If a work of art, for Bataille, is a demonstration of absolute profligate waste, absolute surplus, within the condition of its consumption, it's always recuperated back. The best argument for a work of art pertaining to that surplus value is that it's an act of absolute pure capital, pure taste without purpose. I think you could assert that about high modernist art but it's impossible to say that now, because contemporary art is anthropological, and it's social. The thing about

Bataille is that ultimately, his work is about intensity. The thing about our work is that it's logically tied into the melodramas that allow it to be morally useful. There are certain choices we have to make: do we want the work to be dialectically useful? Do we want it to be critical? I find the concept of critique to be pretty reprehensible. Once you turn critique into a method, the concept of critique is a bit like transgression. How can you produce a work of art that's neither critical nor redemptive? It's impossible. The work emerges and oscillates in that environment where it will necessarily be redeemed. This is the problem. If we have a concept of how to make a work of art better than the last one, does this necessarily mean that we're making a critical work of art, and then are we contributing to the idea of a civilized teleology?

SB: Is that a problem to do with the fact of having to exhibit the work, and how you exhibit it - staging one exhibition then the next, then the next?

JC: It's to do with the prejudices and presuppositions of exhibiting and yes, to the idea of succession. Temporality implies a kind of Darwinian evolution, the idea that there's some ideal being pursued. I think the presumption that there is some kind of refinement going on towards an ideal perfection, an absolute success and idealization is inherent to all forms of the understanding of art. In our work we have attempted to make perverse jumps and lateral jumps: by the very nature of having two people making the work we hope the chronology will at least lattice rather than be linear. Two people making the work should at least



contribute to more directions. We want to avoid the idea that the work provides forensic evidence of some kind of progressive direction.

SB: Is this particularly problematic for a retrospective or something like the Turner prize exhibition?

JC: I think we started from the point of view of thinking about the death of painting: the anxiety of painting being dead. Well it occurred to me, why panic? Why the anxiety about the death of something? Because it means that something had to replace it in its endeavour towards some kind of perfection. Well in that sense the death of painting is a very good place to start: if painting is dead then it should be killed over and over again. In a wider sense I assume that to be true of all art, not just painting. One of the things that is central to the production of our art is the cynical, pessimistic, fatalistic view that the work will always be part of, recuperated to, the very discourse that it has distaste for. So it's just a matter of how you manifest this distaste. It's something that Sacher-Masoch says: 'whips and furs are merely the means by which I terrorize myself.' There's something really nice about that because it says that the pleasure, the aim, the ambition, is simply local, simply cathected into some kind of perpetual circuitry, which is local and libidinal.

SB: That's why Sade breaks through so much in Bataille's writing. He offers a place in which you can say that this is something which is completely local.

JC: The problem arises between people like Bataille and Sade and Sacher-Masoch, as people who are trying to invest intensity at a local level. And this again is the problem for me and Dinos making art: the more you gravitate towards the local, you can't help but invest it with universal concepts. Although we make art for very selfish reasons, we do suspect that there will be some kind of harmonic reaction from people with the same preoccupations. But the selfish pleasure one gets from making a work of art is actually a pleasure of being disembodied. While it seems to be the tenure of the artist to express a latent ego, to make it manifest, really, the real condition for that ego in making a work of art is being completely severed: you produce an object which is schizophrenically not you. I think that's the same with the Chinese torture image: you have a connection with something that you have no connection with and yet it's a very intimate connection. I suppose that the way Bataille talks about it is that it's an image that refuses recuperation: it can't be appropriated. It's an image that you apprehend perpetually - it's about an attempt at an absurd apprehension.





Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Hell*, 1998-2000 (detail),
mixed media, 9 wood and glass vitrines
Courtesy the Saatchi Gallery, London
(c) The artists

Documents and Appropriation

SB: The issues of apprehension and appropriation resonate with the problem of putting on an exhibition about Documents. It's like the potential problem that Bataille expressed about Sade: appropriating his material just to excrete and void it. Bataille's

critique of the surrealists' uptake of Sade was that by admiring him they essentially confined him.

JC: The surrealists as a group are a really interesting case: they had all sorts of utopian aims. One of which was an anthropomorphic colonization of the unconscious, which I think



they should have been shot for. The mistake of surrealism was to assume that the conscious represented a massive form of oppression produced by the burgeoning super-ego, and that therefore the way to avoid that was to reanimate the unconscious, which should be something to do with liberation and freedom. Bataille screams and repeats that the unconscious is inhuman, that it's not anthropomorphic, that it doesn't have a representation. I think that differentiates Bataille from the surrealists.

SB: One way of understanding Documents is that if it's any kind of critique, it's a critique of the organizing principles of surrealism. There's a materialism set out in Documents, which renders that whole surrealist philosophy redundant. This brings us back to the way that Documents asserts the material existence of the objects that appear in the pages of the journal. There are lots of stone things and wooden things alongside canvases. In exhibiting the objects, they will no longer be equivalent as they are in the pages of the journal, so how can the materialist aims of the journal survive this form of representation?

JC: That's a problem with the gallery. You can go to the Tate where they're trying to produce a non-linear, non-historical hang but it just doesn't work. It just indicates that one makes presumptions about what one expects of an art gallery. An art gallery is equivalent to a science laboratory in as much as it offers a kind of atemporal control environment for its objects.

SB: If we take Bataille at his word, wouldn't repetition be a good way to overcome that problem. If you want something to continue to

work you have to keep returning to the same place?

JC: Yes, like Beckett's stones in pockets - he takes a stone and puts it in his pocket, takes the next stone and puts it in another pocket, and produces a language; produces a complex engagement with repetition and with a system which then becomes almost algorithmic and computational. I suppose it's the same thing. There's always that idea with Bataille that he wants to refuse the utile and move towards the sacrificial. It's Deleuze and Guattari who describe critique as being the protestantization of the earth: against that logic it's going to be very difficult.



Jake and Dinos Chapman, CFC74378524, 2002, wood and paint, 125 x 45 x 48 cm

Photo: Stephen White

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London

(c) the artists





Jake and Dinos Chapman, CFC76311561, 2002,
wood and paint, 92 x 58 x 49 cm

Photo: Stephen White

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London

(c) the artists



Jake and Dinos Chapman, CFC78396086, 2002,
wood and paint, 46 x 99 x 37 cm

Photo: Stephen White

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London

(c) the artists

SB: Isn't one of the ethical issues that relates to Documents, the way that anthropological and ethnological objects are brought to the service of saying something about modernist art, but in a counter-intuitive way?

JC: I was involved in a panel discussion at the British Museum recently, and I came into a strange conflict with an anthropologist whose hostility centred around our work, the Chapman Family Collection. He cited an example and put up a projection of one of our carvings, a McDonalds-ish mask, alongside an authentic African mask, the same kind of pattern, the same configuration, as the type that we'd copied. He was asserting the idea that we had stripped the symbolic meaning from this work, that we'd detached this image from its system of exchange, from its symbolic housing. What interested me was the idea that he, by force of logic, was making an argument for the idea of symbolic exchange without noticing that he too was lifting it from its symbolic place, and that his discourse, his logic, was itself deeply symbolic. He was demonstrating that there was some kind of theft going on, some lack of authenticity, without noticing that his rational system of description was in itself as symbolic as the 'primitive'. He completely misunderstood that, he completely misunderstood that the symbolic is symbolic.

SB: One of the principal characteristics of Documents was the way that it drew anthropology into a context, which was, to use one of your own words about Bataille, absurd. It was an absurd project putting all that material together, which released something of the absurdity of the discourses that it addressed. It seems from your experience that there remains a need to deal with these issues. Is this something that an exhibition based around Bataille and Documents could do?



JC: That sounds OK as long as it's not reductive: as long as it's exponential. I can imagine you could get all kinds of little squeaks about Bataille, whether it's the concept of sacrifice, or the sacred, as a way of finding some kind of structural mechanism in which Bataille can be used as a scaffold. You come back to the fundamentalist idea that if you want to make an exhibition about Bataille then you paste images of Dachau and Rwanda and whatever and let people walk in and walk out.

SB: What do think about the potential of contemporary art as an aspect of the exhibition?

JC: As long as the contemporary art doesn't serve merely as a support for general claims being made about Bataille. Bataille exists in such a strange place in relation to contemporary art. If you think about any critic writing about contemporary art at the moment, any mention of Bataille causes convulsions, like a serious case of food poisoning, because you're allowed to be interested in Bataille, but not allowed to be really interested. He's either

riddled with a kind of inauthenticity or he's so sacred that his name renders you inauthentic.

SB: Rather than contemporary art merely justifying Bataille, couldn't its inclusion emphasise Bataille's continuing potential for provocation: surely that's reason enough to warrant such a strategy?

JC: It's all good, and it's either that or a kind of punishing productivity where you end up with no action, with nothing, because the commitment to action has been stripped away by the forces of an absurd superego. We come across this all the time: take the Turner Prize as an example. We thought we wouldn't accept being in the Turner Prize but then we realized how vain and protestantized that would be: to limit and not act where action was invited. We can make all our traumas and our concerns inherent in the work: so we can produce something. Our productive reaction to any kind of incitement is towards overkill, to produce to the point of the product being genocidal.





Jake and Dinos Chapman, installation, Turner Prize, Tate Britain, London, October 2003 - January 2004

Foreground : Sex, 2003, cast bronze

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London

(c) the artists

background : Insult to Injury, 2003

Francisco de Goya 'Disasters of War', Portfolio of 80 etchings reworked and improved, 37 x 47 cm

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London

(c) the artists

Photocredit : Tate. Dave Lambert & Mark Heathcote

Jake and Dinos Chapman have been nominated for the 2003 Turner Prize and their most recent work can be seen at Tate Britain until January 2004. A retrospective exhibition of their work is at the Saatchi Gallery until March 2004. Jake Chapman has also published Meatphysics, Creation Books, 2003.



For more information, please visit <http://www.whitecube.com/flash.html>

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City Gorged With Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris by *Ian Walker*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 2002, 228 pp., 72 b & w ills, £17.99, ISBN: 0 7190 6215 2 (paperback)

As early as 1921 André Breton wrote: 'The invention of photography has dealt a mortal blow to the old modes of expression, in painting as well as in poetry.'¹ However, Breton's defence of surrealist visual art, 'Surrealism and Painting,' paid little attention to photography, noting only that photography was 'endowed with a special power of suggestion' but that it could not be trusted to produce the 'faithful image that we aim to retain of something that will soon be gone forever.'² Fascination with its effects, awareness of its potential to revolutionise the visual arts and distrust of its mimetic nature - this summarises surrealist attitudes towards photography as expressed in a few early texts.

The subsequent written history of surrealist art also focused on painting and drawing, ignoring the important presence of a wide range of photographic material to be found in surrealist journals. In recent years, though, photography has come to occupy a significant place in discussions of surrealist visual art, largely thanks to the 1985 exhibition *L'Amour fou*, which argued convincingly for the centrality of photography to surrealist art and thought. The exhibition (co-curated by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston) was polemical and selective, establishing the parameters of a debate which continues to define discussions of surrealist photography and a 'canon' of surrealist photography which has acted as a point of reference within subsequent scholarship. In her catalogue essays, Krauss chose to resurrect the 'constructed' photography of Jacques-André Boiffard, Brassai and Man Ray, over the so-called 'straight photography' of Eugène Atget and Henri Cartier-Bresson (and in fact the 'straight' work of Boiffard and Brassai). *L'Amour fou* made a strong statement, wresting attention away from painting (and Breton) and towards photography (and Bataille). However, as Ian Walker maintains in his new study of surrealist photography, *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*, the polemical cast of Krauss's project is to some extent the expression of a particularly American reaction to its own tradition of documentary photography as it was institutionalised by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The European perspective, Walker suggests, is a different one, able to offer a less polarised view in which various avant-gardisms are understood to inflect documentary photography from its inception.

This ruminative book, rich with original observation and wide-ranging in its treatment of interpretative material, is in part just such a European response to *L'Amour fou* and its concern with constructed photography. Walker attempts to give a more balanced view - or to balance the view - by offering a defence of so-called 'straight' photography as perhaps even more 'surrealist' than constructed photography (in this respect, Walker takes up a point made by Steve Edwards in his energetic 1987 review of *L'Amour fou*³). Whereas Krauss focused on the ways in which constructed photography manipulated its indexical nature in order to produce surreal effects, Walker reads the 'surrealist use of



straight photography as a simultaneous exploitation and subversion of the standard realist frame within which the medium was then primarily situated' [p.5].

Walker's discussion takes up a number of themes (The City, The Street, *Terrain Vague*, The *Démodé*, The Ethnographic Other) and individual oeuvres (Atget, Boiffard, Brassai, Cartier-Bresson, Lotar). This structure has the advantage of lending thematic coherence to a fragmented and chronologically disparate body of work. It means that the surrealist aspects of Brassai's 'Paris Graffiti' series can be considered even though it was produced after Brassai had disassociated himself from the movement. Likewise, Henri Cartier-Bresson can be identified as a paradigmatic surrealist photographer despite his work not having appeared in any surrealist periodicals. The thematic structure also allows for theoretical issues to be re-visited and developed in relation to different material over the course of the book.

Walker is aware of the ways in which changes in the conditions of reception have altered or occluded 'originary' surrealist meanings. He takes it as given that the legacies of surrealism survive not only in works themselves but in a number of more recent critical frameworks (e.g. Barthes, Debord) for which the original work acts as a kind of palimpsest. Nonetheless, the attempt to excavate this surrealist moment remains a central occupation for the author. This effort is rewarded, as in Walker's valuable and long overdue reading of the four photographs by Eugène Atget which appeared anonymously in *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1926. Here, Walker proves a sensitive reader of the subtle ironies and possible meanings that are produced by the juxtaposition of photograph and text, rediscovering the strange, oneiric qualities of some of Atget's photographs - qualities that have often been side-lined or explained away in the subsequent construction of Atget as the father of documentary photography. This chapter also considers a less well known but perhaps even more fascinating surrealist 'use' of Atget by E.L.T. Mesens in the December 1928 issues of *Variétés*. Mesens forcefully juxtaposed a series of Atget's photographs, drawing out and making explicit a hidden political agenda. In this chapter Walker glosses his readings through references to essays by Walter Benjamin, although there is perhaps a more specific connection in evidence. In his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility' Benjamin was also drawn to the political significance of Atget's photographs.⁴ For Benjamin the way the viewer is challenged to take up a position *vis-à-vis* the material presented in the photograph indicated a new era for photography in which a contemplative attitude to the work of art was replaced by a vigilant attitude to the prescription of meaning in the photograph. Benjamin likened the process to 'reading', and thought that the introduction of captions would make the extraction of information from a photograph even more efficient. Although Mesens's photographic essay does not include captions, his editing - which creates short eloquent political statements - does, I think, make a visual case for Benjamin's argument.

While Walker's book offers thoughtful readings of such major photographic figures in their surrealist contexts, it is perhaps most valuable for considering those photographs which were and remain



anonymous - the series of found and appropriated images placed in surrealist periodicals - in *La Révolution surréaliste*, *Documents*, *Minotaure*, and *Variétés*. In a chapter entitled 'La Révolution surréaliste and the urban spectacle', Walker discusses, case by case, four photographs that appeared in *La Révolution surréaliste*, showing how meanings were generated by the siting of these photographs within surrealist texts and through their surrealist captioning. He shows how a 'straight' photograph with an apparently obvious content and meaning can take on a range of poetic, philosophical and political meanings in a surrealist context. But Walker insists on their ambivalence - on the way in which the surrealist context fails to provide a conclusive meaning. He suggests that this equivocation is structural - that the surrealist inclusion of such photographs worked both to 'affirm' and to 'attack' that which was represented. For instance, in his analysis of a photograph of what may be the Nice carnival (Walker makes his tentative identification based on a comparison with a film still from Jean Vigo's 'A Propos de Nice', 1929, also of the Nice carnival) reproduced in the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, he suggests that the celebratory nature of the carnival, occurring outside of the everyday, threatened the rational bourgeois order and was thus valued as surrealist. On the other hand, it could also be seen as a civil event aimed at managing and containing the eruption of excess energies.

One of the explicit claims Walker makes is that the 'stricter' the reality presented by the photograph, the more potentially subversive and surreal its effect. In the process of being represented photographically, the everyday world is transformed. The surreal appears in those photographs in which the logic of realism presented by the photograph is interrogated, undermined and transformed. A strictness of approach can, according to Walker, yield the surreal when it is applied to a highly diverse selection of photographs. So it appears in pictures that capture the banal surface of the city as an anguished *ennui* - for example Emiel van Moerkerken's *Octroi de Paris*, 1935 [p.121]. Or again in the lyrical indeterminacy of Lotar's *Somewhere in Paris*, 1929. [p.130]. Or even, apparently, in the extraordinary, as in Lotar's abattoir photographs, but also, Walker claims, in his camerawork for Buñuel's *Las Hurdes*, 1933. In comparing these two Lotar contributions, Walker detects 'a clinical gaze at a reality that is so far beyond the bounds of accustomed normality that it becomes surreal. It is in the very strictness of its documentary approach that its Surrealism lies' [p.131]. It is debatable whether or not this last move is entirely consistent with the overall tendency to prioritise the ordinary as the proper subject of surrealist photography - here Walker seems to extend his notion of documentary to include the bizarre or strange, and it is in the strangeness of the subject matter, rather than in the effect of photography, that the 'surreality' is supposed to lie.

To put it another way, does Walker's inclusion of such a wide range of effects and subject matter (the ultra-banal *and* the extraordinary) tacitly suggest that all photographic representation is inherently surrealist? It has been thirty years since Susan Sontag found surrealism 'at the heart of the photographic enterprise'.⁵ Sontag saw the duplication of reality itself, its exaggeration and distortion through reproduction as rendering all reality surreal. At the same time she detected in photography a



detached attitude to the world, which could easily become comfortable irony or moral equivocation in the face of social life.

So, is there something surreal about the precision with which the camera is able to record reality? Or is it rather the case that 'straight' photographs become surrealist only through their 'siting' in surrealist texts or through a surrealist editing process which juxtaposes images in a meaningful way? Is there a peculiarly surrealist 'content' - a type of photographic narrative that we can identify with surrealism? Is there a surrealist photographic style, the product of those photographers making photographic choices consonant with a surrealist aesthetic?

Walker's answers to these questions are for the most part suggestive, developed through close readings that demonstrate how 'surrealism' operates photographically. He does, however, look to some familiar theoretical literature (Barthes, Bazin), which has offered an ontological explanation of the photograph as both icon and index, and to more recent writers (Sekula, Tagg) who have insisted on the conventional nature of its meanings. Walker points to the many dichotomies associated with photography - only to come to the perhaps less than revealing conclusion that photographs are both 'actuality and artifice, both emanation and material product' [p.18].

It is possible that Walker wishes to connect these dualisms with a surrealist project of the reconciliation of opposites. There seems to me to be an attempt in the book to read photography in terms derived from the surrealist interest in intoxication and the dream, aimed at, in the words of the First Manifesto, 'finding and fixing the point' at which the 'real and the imagined [...] cease to be perceived as contradictions'.⁶ If surrealism sought to sublimate dream and reality, then photography would indeed appear to deliver a surreality wherein a 'hallucination [...] is also a fact'.⁷ Walker lays the ground for a connection between surrealist ideas and the peculiarly ambivalent nature of photography as a medium through his use of the terms 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity'. He points out, for example, that the surrealists 'well knew that subjective desire inevitably invades any attempt at objectivity [...] it was the unification of the two that was their aim' [pp. 11-12].

Now while it is indeed true that the medium of photography offered many opportunities for the surrealists to consider the ways in which subjective experience hampers or subverts photographic objectivity, a more precise and sustained examination of these terms is needed in order to understand how they might intersect with the surrealist notions of the dream state and reality. Walker's book moves between many good moments of theoretical clarity where he avoids reifying a static 'real' against which 'subjective' experience is pitted, and other passages, like the one quoted above, where a vague assertion of the unification or opposition of these terms is thought to suffice for the analysis. An example of the much more reflective approach is his chapter '*Nadja*: a "voluntary banality"?' Here Walker builds on Dawn Ades's 1985 catalogue essay for *L'Amour fou*, 'Photography and the Surrealist Text'⁸, by showing how Breton's use of Boiffard's 'straight' photographs, contrary to



assumptions about photographic objectivity, serve to problematise rather than support Breton's assertion that *Nadja* is a 'true story'. The photographs become indices not of the spaces of the (public) city but of the (private) lives of Breton and Nadja. Although they function as documents, what they 'document' is transformed by their presence in the text. This is not to say that these photographs become 'illustrations' of an inner, subjective life - an obverse of the attempt to 'illustrate' through description, the exterior, 'objective' *mise-en-scène* of nineteenth-century novels so vehemently criticised by Breton in the First Manifesto. Breton valorises 'facts' only insofar as they are shown to be fortified by subjective experience. Walker notes that Breton, on different occasions, described Boiffard's photographs for *Nadja* as 'inadequate' and 'beautiful'. In a passage that navigates the terms of the debate more reflectively, Walker argues that we need both of Breton's judgements to capture the unusual value of photography in the context of the project of *Nadja*, a value he situates in 'the space between' inadequacy and beauty, or between 'the plainness of the actual pictures and the meanings that they held for Breton himself.' [p.59] There is, then, no contradiction between Breton's desire to have Boiffard photograph sites in Paris for *Nadja* in the style of medical report *and* his request that Boiffard photograph those places 'taken at the special angle from which I had looked at them.'⁹

City Gorged with Dreams exposes its reader to a wide range of material and offers useful summaries of relevant important interpretations. It is written in an engaging and clear style, and will be of great benefit to those introducing surrealist photography to undergraduate audiences. The illustrations are of a reasonable standard, though not comparable with those to be found in more luxurious publications on photography. The bibliography serves to introduce readers with some background to a good range of further literature. Walker makes an important contribution to the field with a book that will no doubt continue to provoke further debates about the significance of photography for surrealist artists and writers.

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¹ André Breton, *Max Ernst, Beyond Painting* (New York: Wittenborn Schulz, 1948), p. 177.

² André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 32.

³ Steve Edwards, 'Gizmo Surrealism', *Art History*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1987, pp. 509-517.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility' in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935-1938 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2002), p. 108.

⁵ 'Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision.' Susan Sontag, 'Melancholy Objects' in *On Photography* (New York: Penguin, 1979), p. 52.



⁶ André Breton, 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism' (1930), in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1969), p. 123.

⁷ André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What is Cinema: Vol. I* (Berkeley: University of California, 1967), p. 13. Quoted in Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, p. 11.

⁸ Dawn Ades, 'Photography and the Surrealist Text' in *L'Amour fou* (New York: Abbeville, 1985), pp. 153-189.

⁹ André Breton, *Nadja* (New York: Grove, 1960), p. 151-52.



Du surréalisme considéré dans ses rapports au totalitarisme et aux tables tournantes. Contribution à une histoire de l'insensé by Jean Clair, Mille et une nuits, Paris, 2003, 215p., 14 €, ISBN 2-842-05732-5 (paperback)

Jean Clair has never liked Surrealism; still less has he ever liked André Breton. Perhaps the aging Breton borrowed a sum of money from the young Jean Clair and never paid it back. Perhaps Breton gunned down Jean Clair's brother in somewhere like Dodge City. One can only speculate as to the reasons why the man behind the 1980 ground-breaking exhibition, *Les Réalismes*, the author of immensely penetrating and erudite articles on *Arte Metafisica*, melancholy and totalitarianism, Duchamp, and Giacometti, should so completely throw his scholarly virtues to the wind whenever he discusses André Breton. Vainly does he claim at the start of his latest book to approach the subject '*sine ira et studio*,' for in fact the reader can feel the seething hostility behind every word he writes. Clair has a personal animosity that would be well summed up in the French word '*hargne*.'

This is not to say that Surrealism does not merit a critical approach, but the movement in general and Breton in particular have already been the object of genuine critical studies that have revealed their limitations far more effectively than Jean Clair's effort. He claims that Surrealism was contested in the 1920s and 1930s, but that from the 1950s onwards it became the object of an academic cult celebrated through myriad colloquia and large-scale exhibitions.¹ Now, this may well be true within a radius of a couple of kilometres of the Centre Pompidou and the Musée Picasso, of which Jean Clair is director, but it certainly is not true beyond. Breton has always been and continues to be described with such epithets as 'pope' or 'dictator.' There has been very searching criticism of Surrealism, not to say condemnation of the movement, particularly from a feminist perspective. Does Jean Clair mention any of this? Not in the least: although there are scholarly-looking footnotes throughout the book, there is no awareness shown of any of the secondary literature on Surrealism, let alone the many bull's-eyes scored on the movement by Marxism, feminism and gender studies. Jean Clair would give the naïve reader the impression that he alone is battling against the massed legions of blindly obedient academics and media intellectuals whom Breton is regimenting in his service and commanding from beyond the grave.

What are the main faults of Surrealism in Jean Clair's eyes? He declares that his intention is not to examine Surrealist works of art, nor to scrutinise the creative aspects of the movement, but instead to focus on Surrealism as an ideology. Some may take issue with this reduction of avant-garde activity to its political and social significance, but here Clair does have a point. Surrealism aimed to be more than a literary-cum-artistic movement, so why not treat it as such? Clair's gripes can be summarised succinctly: Surrealism is authoritarian and structured around the dubious charisma of a tyrannical leader; its ideas are shrouded in a murky haze of occultist verbiage, and it has no genuine points of contact with contemporary science, such as might anchor it in the true movement of ideas of its time;



and finally it exists in a Parisian vacuum where people habitually pontificate on the gravest of issues with no consequence whatsoever for the real world. This last charge contains no doubt a degree of truth, although what denizen of the intellectual or academic milieus could claim to be free from all stigma in this respect? However, it is here that Clair's animus expands to embrace, not just Montmartre and Saint-Germain-des-Prés, but the whole of France. He contrasts the experience of French life in the twentieth century with that of Germany and Italy where, under political dictatorships, people learned that words could be dangerous weapons.² Sounds impressive. And yet to make such an assertion is to ignore the German Occupation of France and the terrible episodes associated with the Collaboration, above all the deportations from France in the direction of the death-camps. On a longer term perspective, it draws a veil over all the political struggles, often violent, that mark modern French history from 1789 to the Algerian War and beyond. To such hasty generalisations are added a basic contradiction: on the one hand Surrealism is too innocuous to be taken seriously; on the other, for Clair, it is all part and parcel of the great totalitarian systems of the twentieth century. And here is where his grand strategy comes in.

What is the principal method of argumentation used to convince the reader of this equation between Surrealism and authoritarian politics? An incredibly obvious, almost naïve form of smearing by association. Clair constantly insinuates, and his insinuation appears at times to boil down to: André Breton = Rudolph Steiner = Adolf Hitler; or, Surrealism = theosophy/anthroposophy = Nazism. How so? By an appeal to an irreproachable authority figure, in this case Hannah Arendt, whose very valuable work on the origins of totalitarianism emphasises the role of secrecy in the creation of a dictatorial party (pp. 19-20). The logic of Clair's argument goes as follows: Hannah Arendt shows that Nazism has something about it of the secret society; therefore, any secret society must have something of Nazism about it – and Surrealism was a secret society. In all this there is no recognition of the very specific way in which Arendt analyses secrecy with respect to the Nazi party; no reference to the sociology of secrecy since Georg Simmel's pioneering work in this domain, showing that secrecy is a pervasive and inevitable ingredient of social life, capable of assuming many and varied forms. Clair gives us no examination of how secrecy actually manifests itself in Surrealism – for assuredly it does. For him, it is enough to assert that the Surrealists were interested in 'occultism.' Yet the latter word is given no definition, surprisingly in view of all the scholarly work in recent years on what is once more a highly complex subject. Instead the word is produced like a scarecrow, as though meant to induce panic in the implied reader who is evidently some sort of caricatural offspring of the Enlightenment. The most amusing slur concerns Breton's interest in things Celtic, Clair revealing that 'celtisme' would become a reference-point for right-wing nationalists. He not only seems to be unaware that Breton's enthusiasm for such mythology is a later development in his work, but also implies that anyone with a taste for Celtic twilight must lean towards Fascism. Obviously, for Clair, *Riverdance* is a kind of Nuremberg rally.



Far more worrying is his sloppiness with regard to certain fundamental facts. He situates Surrealism's engagement with Communism in 1930, probably because that is the year in which the conveniently entitled review, *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, was first published. But as anyone acquainted with the movement would know, Breton had actively been seeking an alliance with the PCF for some years. However, in a sublime gesture of contempt for the truth, Clair describes 1930 as 'late,' for by that time, he says, the totalitarian character of Soviet Communism was well-known to Parisian intellectuals.³ Does one really need to name all the famous figures of European culture who remained committed to Communism into the 1930s or who even converted to it then? André Gide? Louis Aragon? Walter Benjamin? All those associated with the Soviet effort during the Spanish Civil War?

To reinforce the Breton/totalitarianism association, we have long quotations about the SS (from Alfred Rosenberg, pp. 78-79), from Hitler's table-talk (pp. 79-80), from Trotsky (p. 80 – not bad as a connection, since Breton actually produced a manifesto with him). Do we have a proportionate amount of quotation from the work of the main object of this study? One would expect so, but the answer is: not really. In a book of about 200 pages I counted 14 quotations from Breton, some of them the same quotation, most of them short, none of them analysed. At one point (p. 91), Aragon is cited, but it is an example of his later, patriotic alexandrine verse – hardly an example of automatist spontaneity. Jean Clair is also one of those people who think that Breton wrote a text entitled *Le Premier manifeste du surréalisme* (e.g. p. 15). If I wanted to get really pedantic, I would refer to the fact that Alain Chevrier's article on Breton that is appended to Gauchet and Swain's volume, *Le Vrai Charcot*, is here (p. 161) attributed to Marcel Gauchet.

One could multiply these criticisms, but it would be like taking cake from a baby. No doubt the present review will be considered another example of Bretonian totalitarianism trying to crush all opposition, eradicating all free speech. But my objection is not to the idea that there should be criticism of Surrealism, but to the fact that it should be done in such a slapdash way. Jean Clair is capable of better. He uses quotations from Carl Einstein's work of 1935-1937, *Die Fabrikation der Fiktionen*, as epigraphs to each of his chapters. This promised to be interesting, if only something more developed could have been built thereon. Why should Einstein, the great commentator on primitivism turn against the avant-garde, as he does in this late 1930s volume? What are the tensions within the avant-garde - indeed within all utopian movements - between totalitarianism and freedom? These are really interesting questions, but the answers are not here.

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¹ 'Confisquée par les universitaires et par les dévots, son historiographie est à peu près inattaquable. [...]. Mais après les années cinquante, la critique s'est tue, l'image s'est faite simpliste et manichéenne. Elle brille aujourd'hui dans les hommages, les colloques et les expositions pour le grand public.' (p. 17).

² 'Contrairement à des pays où l'on a tendance à joindre le geste à la parole, et, à considérer que l'action doit suivre le discours, demeure en France la tradition d'une autonomie de la parole, mais aussi de sa gratuité, sinon de sa gloriole. Elle n'invite guère au passage à l'acte et, même, le décourage. Le mot n'engage en rien. Il y a une « franchise » du verbe, au double sens du terme, où la littérature est exonérée du devoir de rendre des comptes. La *forma mentis* est différente.' (p. 184).

³ 'Pourtant, quand Breton met son groupe au service du communisme, c'est tardivement, en novembre 1930, à un moment où l'on peut déjà savoir, dans les cercles intellectuels parisiens, ce qu'est la nature du despotisme soviétique. La terreur stalinienne a commencé à la fin des années vingt, les grandes purges en 1934. Cette erreur d'appréciation ne peut se comprendre, sinon s'excuser, que dans la mesure où le mouvement littéraire calquait son fonctionnement sur celui d'un groupe autoritaire.' (p. 21)



Trajectoires du rêve: du romantisme au surréalisme

Pavillon des arts, Paris, 7 March - 7 June 2003

Trajectoires du rêve: du romantisme au surréalisme, Vincent Gille (ed.), Paris Musées 2003, 240pp., 159 ills, 34 euros, ISBN 2 87900 767 4 (paper binding)

One suspects, in the wake of the Centre Pompidou's recent exhibition *La Révolution surréaliste* and the auctioning of the contents of André Breton's studio, that Parisian audiences have had their fill for the time being of monumental - and monolithic - spectacles around the historical placement of surrealism. But in overlooking the more modestly sized *Trajectoires du rêve: du romantisme au surréalisme*, at the rather less than spectacular Pavillon des arts on a semi-abandoned upper deck of the Forum des Halles, its display spaces all but empty of visitors on the Saturday of my visit, they will have missed a chance to consider an engaging set of ideas that may have produced one of the most interesting and speculative exhibitions around surrealism of recent years.

As Annie Le Brun writes in the introductory essay to the elegant accompanying catalogue, if we have always been fascinated by dream, the modern world has perhaps begun to stop interrogating its colours. This exhibition's central task was to consider the conception and exploration of dreams by artists, writers and scientists in Northern and Central Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a particular emphasis on surrealism and its environs. But rather than attempt an encyclopaedic overview of a rich but potentially vast subject, the show's curator Vincent Gille adopted an altogether more subjective and ambitious approach which succeeded in placing surrealism in a set of intellectual instead of purely artistic contexts, in order to question rather than define its place in the wider currents of European thought. If this produced some surprising omissions - Victor Hugo is present as a writer but not as an artist, for example, and Gille himself points to the absence of any German romantic painting - it has also allowed the curator to encourage a more sustained attention to some specific figures (Czech surrealists Jindřich Štyrský and Jindřich Heisler take a spotlight where they were entirely absent at the Beaubourg), and to encourage some pleasing revelations (paintings by Josef Šíma, whose work can often look rather wan in comparison to his surrealist contemporaries, here appeared as resonant and complex as the Max Ernst frottages they hung alongside).

The method of approach - albeit one that emerged explicitly in the exhibition's catalogue but less clearly in the exhibition itself - was constructed through a focus on the four poets Novalis, Gérard de Nerval, Victor Hugo and André Breton, chosen as four distinct but communicating moments crystallising a particular conception of dream and the mind. Around these poets - represented in the exhibition by rare manuscripts and discreet recitals from suspended speakers - Gille grouped a number of artists and photographers with the intention of mapping the exhibition's 'trajectories'; numbers of documentary items, objects and specimens from scientific contexts added a further layer



of complexity around this structure. The result was an evocative constellation in which precious polished stones (many formerly from the collection of Roger Caillois) might usher in the paintings by Šíma, early attempts to map the surface of the moon could wink across the room at a Brassai photograph, or an arcane item of early electrical apparatus could speak suggestively of the electrical metaphors in Breton's writings. The exhibition's openly subjective and associative strategies, moreover, as well as its articulation around poetry, all represented ways in which (as the catalogue argues) the project intended to adopt a sympathetic relationship to its participants, in particular to surrealism. We have some cause to be sceptical about such claims, given the trend in which it is often the installation design rather than intellectual conception of institutional exhibitions which attempts to mimic surrealism's spirit, generally with mixed results. But Gille's knowledge of and commitment to his chosen poets, his desire to reposition them at the confluence of poetic and scientific intellectual currents, and the adoption of some deliberately open curatorial approaches using free association and analogy rather than conventional art history (curators at the Musée nationale d'histoire naturelle were invited to suggest mineral specimens as though specific artists had chosen them) all augured well for some very different results from the institutional, art historical or commercial exhibitions audiences are more accustomed to.

While the catalogue lays out the structure and argument of the exhibition in a series of concise but informative essays by Gille and others, the installation itself tended, perhaps due to spaces that discouraged linear development, to combine or blur its component structures. What unfolds in both, however, is that the initial emphasis on the dream is in fact to be explored in a complex and potentially rather effusive manner. This might well have disappointed anyone expecting a clearer and more rigorous explanation of the specific theme of dreams, or indeed someone seeking a detailed discussion of the use of dreams within surrealism (the book which does just that, Sarane Alexandrian's *Le Surréalisme et le rêve*, is significantly never cited in the catalogue other than in its bibliography). It also might have made one wonder whether a more tightly-focused show could have produced some more explicit if no less intricate ideas. The visitor, first greeted by a spotlight vitrine of remarkable crystal specimens, began with the theme of the creation of visionary landscapes through automatic techniques, centred on the paintings of Alexander Cozens, as outlined by his *New Method* of 1785, in which random blots and stains generate landscape paintings in ways that are extraordinarily prescient of the Ernst and Šíma paintings hung nearby and the decalcomanias in the following room. A section devoted to spiritualist and mediumistic drawings and paintings by Lesage, Crépin, Hélène Smith and others, accompanied by photographic documentation of seances and drawings by Nadja, next to another proposing 'Paris, territoire du rêve' as explored by Brassai and the mid-nineteenth century engravings of Charles Meyron, invited in turn another, further, perception of imaginative space in the mythological and visionary art of John Martin's illustrations for *Paradise Lost*.

The emphasis of this first set of approaches to mental and imaginative states was then shifted with the smaller second room in which scientific ideas predominated. The choice of images, however,



implied ways in which, during the second half of the nineteenth century, an apparently rationalising apprehension of the mind and of mental spaces - and indeed the idealistic thrust of early scientific endeavour in general - might be seen as suffused with inherently poetic currents. August Strindberg's 'celestography' and crystallogrammes, early x-rays, Étienne-Léopold Trouvelot's extraordinary pastel studies of the moon and the planets, documentation of mesmerism or electrical auras, images purporting to photograph dreams by exposing plates on the patient's forehead, all suggested a context in which surrealism might be seen as emerging from, as much as reacting against, specific if sometimes highly speculative developments of nineteenth-century science and medicine. As Gille writes in the catalogue, both the scientist and the poet-dreamer might find tangible evidence in these developments of 'a new world larger than the world, more *real* than the real.'

The catalogue entries on these sections repeatedly argue that the prospecting by poets and scientists alike into the interior should in fact be read as an interrogation of the external world (and thus images of space, too, lie on what Gille terms the 'vector of communication' represented by dream). But they also help to build up a picture of how the impact of the discovery of magnetism and electricity may be traced through early neurological theories of the brain and its disturbances that provide a context for surrealism's interest in the unconscious, as well as for the popular interest in hypnotism that informed surrealism's experiments of the early 1920s and the persistent traces of electrical metaphors in Breton's writing. Works from Ernst and Iliasz's *Maximiliana*, 'photographisms' by Heisler, Štyrský's dream-diary drawings, and photographs by Uzac and Brassai in the final room introduced a display of early scientific instruments to produce and demonstrate electrical phenomena. In particular a gold-leaf electroscope, whose charged status for Breton in *Les Vases communicants* held more 'astonishing powers of suggestion' than any surrealist object, could be tested by the visitor who was invited to activate its peculiar eroticism by rubbing the wand with a piece of velvet.

For once, the exhibition's adoption of the customary dramatic low-lit installation punctuated with carefully positioned pools of light felt appropriate, not simply because of the requirements of delicate paper-based artefacts or because the theme of dreams points sternly towards the night. Anyone who has ever printed their own photographs in an old-fashioned darkroom will recognise the delicious coming together of science and poetry in a space that is secret and crepuscular but also logical and reasoned, and beyond its initial engagement with dreams, this exhibition also worked as an attempt to chart a history of light and darkness, and of the paths of enlightenment and clarity that are the central concerns of its four guiding poets. By placing works by romantic, surrealist and *art brut* writers, artists and photographers next to mineral specimens, experimental scientific documents and scientific apparatus, an argument emerged suggestive of ways in which it is more useful to see surrealism not as a simple rejection of rationalist hegemonies but as a point in a dialectic between the reasoned and speculative-scientific on the one hand, and the imaginary, dream and the unconscious on the other. While dreams, as Breton's 1938 anthology *Trajectoire du rêve* implied in the wake of psychoanalytic discovery, could be a far more direct and quantifiable path to knowledge than had once commonly



been thought, nineteenth-century science could also be more tenebrous, poetic and inspired than some of its logic-obsessed inheritors might like to admit.

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Paul Nash: Modern Artist, Ancient Landscape

Tate Liverpool, 23 July - 19 October 2003



Paul Nash, *Equivalents for the Megaliths*, 1935, oil on canvas, 457 x 660 mm © Tate, 2003

Paul Nash has remained relatively little known among the leading figures of his generation in British art such as Ben Nicholson and Henry Moore. He died young, aged 57, in 1946 and having lived through the difficult depression and war years missed out on the vigorous postwar public support for experimental art which helped raise others to international standing. A memorial exhibition at the Tate in 1948 and a retrospective there in 1975 had been the only major surveys before the show at Tate Liverpool in summer 2003.

Nash's early death is only one factor in the cautious reception of his work. His principal interest, landscape, has not carried the prestige in other European countries that it has in Britain. Nash, unfortunately for his reputation, has become known largely as a watercolourist, while he himself valued his oil paintings and invested most of his ideas and attention to oil painting, regarding the easier to sell watercolours in part as a way of making a living. Much of the richness of his work comes in the second half of his career, from the late 1920s onwards, when he evolved a personal modernism informed by both abstraction and Surrealism. But Nash had established a national reputation earlier, in 1918, for his work as an official war artist at the western front, and was then faced with a decade of Bloomsbury domination of British art with little incentive from colleagues or the market to explore anything new. Nash's 1920s work is worthy rather than innovative, and that too has cast a shadow over his reputation.



The Liverpool exhibition was a survey show, but a carefully edited one. Watercolours were shown only in certain places: at the beginning of Nash's career, when it was his principal medium, during the first world war, when he was sketching at speed close to the front line, and at odd points - the Surrealist moment around 1937 is an example - where he used the medium to realise different ideas from his oil paintings. The result of this sparing use of watercolours was to make Nash look less like a representative of the late picturesque, less the heir to Cotman and the early English watercolourists, whom he admired and who did indeed influence some of his work, but who in no way account for his prestige as a modernist. Secondly, the 1920s were edited down in such a way that the staidness that dominated British art, Nash's included, in the decade after world war one was little in evidence. The exhibition moved quickly from Nash's work at the front in 1917-18 to the revision of his art that started in 1929. The renewal of his art can be dated thus with certainty because it was conscious on Nash's part, the product of his own dissatisfaction with what he had been doing. The range and richness of ideas in his 1930s art gives an indication of how repressed an artist Nash had become. At the same time a flood of ideas bearing in at one time can have a disconcerting effect and it is this which the Tate's exhibition highlighted and sought to explain.

What was it like, the question was in effect asked, to be a British painter at a time, the early 1930s, when Surrealism was beginning to be a force in this country, while even Cubism was not securely embedded? Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism had died with the war, as Nash himself noted in 1933, and seemed a distant memory. What did modernism mean for British art in the early 1930s and how did it correspond to ideas of Britishness? Nash was keenly aware of this question, which is one the exhibition picks up on, not least in its title, 'Paul Nash: Modern Artist, Ancient Landscape'. Could one be a modernist in terms that would be comprehensible in Paris and retain allegiance not just to Nash's established subject, landscape, but specifically to the idea of 'ancient' landscape? Landscape, involving distance in space, raises questions of compatibility with the shallow space of Cubism, but if distance means not only distance in space but also in time, as 'ancient' implies, the problems of being a modern artist are redoubled. What this exhibition achieved, through a very detailed study of Nash's 1930s and 1940s work, was to show how these problems presented themselves in Nash's work.

One view has been that Nash was overstretched in his efforts to accommodate the new. It is a view that elevates the traditionalist Nash, the established middle of the road landscapist of the 1920s. The Liverpool show suggested something different: it proposed not that a major change of direction was anything other than difficult, but that the anxiety and unease that the conflicts within Nash's painting from 1929 present on the surface were part of the positive quality and character of his art. Nash's Britishness may at times sit uneasily with his modernism. But that was part of a strategy in the 1930s - how consciously arrived at it is hard to say - to use modernism, both abstraction and Surrealism, to challenge, even subvert, accepted ideas of landscape within English art.



Nash was friendly with several eminent British archaeologists of the interwar period, followed excavations at Avebury and Maiden Castle and particularly liked sites such as Badbury Rings that were not under excavation and remained untouched and overgrown in what he liked to think of as a natural state. Though in some respects he shared a Chestertonian romantic view of early Britain, Nash with his paintings of megaliths and stone circles was neither a sentimentalist nor the equivalent in art of popular historians of the 'our island story' genre, who tried to buttress national identity during the difficult period of economic depression and fascism by romanticising Britain as a country which gained strength from its long and unbroken history as a nation.

Instead, Nash made British landscape, its natural contours and archaeological features, personal and compelling by using abstraction and Surrealism to make it strange, to subvert its normal and expected appearance. Some of Nash's art looks rather mild-mannered now, his Surrealist personages a little less fearsome than they were probably intended to be. But some paintings, such as those where megaliths are transformed into modern materials or become infused with vegetable or semi-human life, show how he plays on our expectations of traditional landscape views only to undermine them with objects that are intrusive both as forms and because they are marked out as Surrealist which, by the standards of English landscape art, means foreign. The recurrent feeling of anxiety in Nash's later painting arises out of this sense of invasion, the presence of the alien.

Looking back from the later work to the earlier, to the dark ink and wash drawings around 1911-12 with which the exhibition starts, one finds already there the unsettling feel for a nature that is not necessarily beneficent or supportive. Not that these pictures contain Surrealist presences. Indeed it is the absence of figures but experience of presentiment, of some likely occurrence or undetermined event, that arouses our responses. The tradition of landscape Nash came from was not a topographical one, and the early drawings seen in retrospect look like Surrealism waiting to happen. The argument that Nash's later work is implied in the earlier can be made equally well through his first world war drawings of the shell-holed terrain and water-filled crater pools of the Flanders battlefields. Nash's anger at nature so maltreated is here revealed and it should not be surprising to find Nash's later work giving birth to monsters. The war was a permanent mark for Nash and others of his generation, an experience repressed over the following decade but not expunged. Nash's Surrealism was a late manifestation of the movement entirely within the Hitler period, and is easily thought of for that reason in terms of the irrational in fascism. But Nash is best seen as an artist of two world wars, with the trauma of the first concealed by efforts in the 1920s - political as well as cultural - to impose a sense of business as usual. When that policy came unstuck with the depression and the rise of fascism, there were two forces working on Nash to unsettle his art: memories of world war one and fear of it happening again.

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