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# Surrealism as a revolutionary movement

- Features -

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**Surrealism has been an international movement since its inception. However, in the following pages we will focus mainly on the Paris surrealist group, initially around André Breton, but which continued its activity after the death of the author of the Surrealist Manifestos.**

The revolutionary aspiration was at the very origin of Surrealism and first took a libertarian form, in the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) by André Breton: "Only the word freedom is all that still exalts me". In 1925, the desire to break with Western bourgeois civilization led Breton to move closer to the ideas of the October Revolution, as evidenced by his review of Leon Trotsky's *Lenin*. Although he joined the French Communist Party in 1927, he nevertheless retained, as he explained in the pamphlet *Au grand jour*, his "right to criticize".

It was the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930) which drew all the consequences of this act, by affirming "totally, without reserve, our adherence to the principle of historical materialism". While asserting the distinction, the opposition even, between the "primary materialism" and the "modern materialism" defended by Friedrich Engels, André Breton insisted on the fact that "surrealism considers itself indissolubly linked, as a result of the affinities that I have pointed out, to the approach of Marxist thought and to this approach alone".

## A marvelous Marxism

It goes without saying that his Marxism did not coincide with the official vulgate of the Comintern. One could perhaps define it as a "Gothic Marxism", that is to say a historical materialism sensitive to the marvelous, to the dark moment of revolt, to the illumination which tears, like a flash, the sky of revolutionary action.

In any case, it belongs, like that of José Carlos Mariategui, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse, to an underground current that runs through the twentieth century: romantic Marxism. That is to say, a form of thought that is fascinated by certain pre-capitalist cultural forms and that rejects the cold and abstract rationality of modern industrial civilization – but which transforms this nostalgia for the past into a force in the fight for the revolutionary transformation of the present. If all romantic Marxists rebel against the capitalist disenchantment of the world – a logical and necessary result of the quantification, mercantilisation and reification of social relations – it is in André Breton and Surrealism that the romantic/revolutionary attempt to re-enchant the world through imagination reaches its most striking expression.

Breton's Marxism also distinguished itself from the rationalist/scientist, Cartesian/positivist tendency, strongly influenced by eighteenth century French materialism – which dominated the official doctrine of French communism – by its insistence on the Hegelian dialectical heritage of Marxism. In his lecture in Prague (March 1935) on "the surrealist situation of the object" he insisted on the capital significance of the German philosopher for Surrealism: "Hegel, in his *Aesthetics* tackled all the problems that can currently be considered, on the level of poetry and art, as the most difficult and that with unequalled lucidity he resolved most of them [...]. I say that even today it is Hegel who must be questioned on the merits or otherwise of surrealist activity in the arts." A few months later, in his famous speech at the Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture (June 1935), he returned to the attack and did not fear to proclaim, against the grain of a certain anti-German chauvinism: "It is above all in the philosophy of the German language that we have discovered the only effective antidote against the positivist rationalism which continues to wreak havoc here. This antidote is none other than dialectical materialism as a general theory of knowledge."

## Breton and Trotsky

The rest of the story is well-known: increasingly close to the positions of Trotsky and the Left Opposition, most of the surrealists (without Louis Aragon!) would definitively break with Stalinism in 1935. This was in no way a break with Marxism, which continued to inspire their analyses, but with the opportunism of Stalin and his acolytes who "unfortunately tended to annihilate these two essential components of the revolutionary spirit" which are: the spontaneous refusal of the living conditions proposed to human beings and the urgent need to change them.

In 1938 Breton visited Trotsky in Mexico. Together they would write one of the most important documents of revolutionary culture in the twentieth century : the appeal "For an Independent Revolutionary Art", which contains the following famous passage: "For cultural creation [the revolution] must from the very beginning establish and ensure an anarchist regime of individual freedom. No authority, no constraint, not the slightest trace of command! [...] Marxists can walk here hand in hand with anarchists". As we know, this passage is from Trotsky's own pen, but we can also assume that it is the product of their long conversations on the banks of Lake Patzcuaro.

It was in the post-war period that Breton's sympathy for anarchy would become more clearly apparent. In *Arcane 17* (1947) he recalled the emotion he felt when, as a child, he discovered a tomb in a cemetery with this simple inscription: "neither God nor Master". He expressed a general reflection on this subject: "above art, above poetry, whether we like it or not, there also flies a flag alternately red and black" – two colours between which he refused to choose.

From October 1951 to January 1953, the surrealists would collaborate regularly, with articles and notes, with the newspaper *Le Libertaire*, organ of the French Anarchist Federation. Their main correspondent in the Federation at that time was the libertarian communist Georges Fontenis. It was on this occasion that André Breton would write the flamboyant text entitled "La claire tour" (1952), which recalls the libertarian origins of Surrealism: "Where Surrealism recognized itself for the first time, well before defining itself, and when it was still only a free association between individuals spontaneously and en bloc rejecting the social and moral constraints of their time, it was in the black mirror of anarchism". Despite the break that occurred in 1953, Breton did not cut ties with the libertarians, continuing to collaborate on some of their initiatives.

## Unrepentant revolutionaries

This interest and active sympathy for libertarian socialism did not, however, lead the surrealists to deny their adherence to the October Revolution and the ideas of Leon Trotsky. In a speech on November 19, 1957, André Breton persisted and signed: "Against all odds, I am one of those who still find, in the memory of the October Revolution, a good part of that unconditional impulse that carried me towards it when I was young and which implied the total gift of oneself." Saluting Trotsky's gaze, as he appears, in Red Army uniform, in an old photograph from 1917, he proclaimed: "Such a gaze and the light that rises there, nothing will succeed in extinguishing it, any more than Thermidor was able to alter the features of Saint-Just." Finally, in 1962, in a tribute to Natalia Sedova who had just died, he called for the day when finally "not only would full justice be done to Trotsky but also the ideas for which he gave his life would be called upon to take on all their vigour and scope . "

Surrealism is perhaps this ideal vanishing point, this supreme place of the mind where the libertarian trajectory and that of revolutionary Marxism meet. But we must not forget that surrealism contains what Ernst Bloch called "a utopian surplus" , a surplus of black light that escapes the limits of any social or political movement, however revolutionary it may be. This light emanates from the unbreakable core of the night of the surrealist spirit, from its obstinate quest for the gold of time, from its desperate plunge into the abysses of dreams and the marvelous.

## After Breton

In 1969, some leading figures of Parisian surrealism, such as Jean Schuster, Gérard Legrand and José Pierre, decided that, given the death of André Breton in 1966, it was preferable to dissolve the Surrealist Group.

This conclusion, however, was rejected by many other surrealists, who decided to continue the adventure. Unfortunately, most academic or popular accounts of Surrealism take for granted that the group "disbanded" in 1969. For most art historians, Surrealism was nothing more than one of many "artistic avant-gardes", like Cubism or Futurism, which had a very short life.

Vincent Bounoure (1928-1996) was the one who gave the impetus to the new period of surrealist activity, and he remained an inspiring figure until his last day. A gifted poet and brilliant essayist, he was, like his companion Micheline, fascinated by the Oceanic art of New Guinea, on which he wrote several essays.

The other prominent figure in the group after 1969 was Michel Zimbacca (1924–2021), a poet, painter, filmmaker, and engaging character. His documentary on the "wild arts," *L'invention du monde* (1952), is considered one of the few truly surrealist paintings; Benjamin Péret wrote the mytho-poetic text that comments on the images. The surrealist group also met often in the apartment he shared with his partner Anny Bonnin, whose walls were decorated with marvelous paintings of himself and other surrealists, as well as a remarkable set of indigenous feathers from the Amazon. Bounoure and Zimbacca were the living link between the post-1969 surrealist movement and the group founded by André Breton in 1924.

## The Surrealist Liaison Bulletin

In the years 1970-1976, the Parisian surrealists who refused to give up regrouped – in close relation with their friends in Prague – around a modest journal, the *Bulletin de liaison surréaliste* (BLS). The Bulletin includes a debate on "Surrealism and revolution" with Herbert Marcuse. Among many other gems, an article by the anthropologist Renaud in support of the American Indians gathered at Standing Rock in July 1974.

In the last issue of the BLS of April 1976, a collective statement was published in support of a young Brazilian surrealist filmmaker, Paulo Paranagua, and his companion, Maria Regina Pilla, arrested in Argentina and accused of "subversive propaganda." Initiated by the surrealists, the appeal was published by Maurice Nadeau in the *Quinzaine littéraire*, and also signed by renowned French intellectuals, such as Deleuze, Mandiargues, Foucault and Leiris.

The Parisian surrealists maintained close relations with the Prague group, which lived in semi-clandestinity under the Stalinist regime imposed on Czechoslovakia after the Soviet invasion of 1968. They could meet informally in private homes, but their journal *Analogon* was banned and they could not exhibit their works or films. In 1976, at the initiative of Vincent Bounoure, the Paris and Prague surrealists published together, in France with Éditions Payot, a collection of essays, *La Civilisation surréaliste*.

## Continue despite the ebb

The surrealist group was always very political, since 1924. After 1969, this remained true, but that does not mean that it was a question of adhering to existing political organizations. Some members participated in Trotskyist organizations (Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, French section of the Fourth International), others in the Fédération anarchiste or the anarcho-syndicalist CNT. But most of the Parisian surrealists did not belong to any organization; the common spirit was anti-authoritarian and revolutionary, with a dominant libertarian tendency. It was this spirit that inspired their activities and the common declarations published during these years.

In 1987 a joint statement was issued in support of the Mohawk indigenous communities fighting for their lands against the Canadian state. Several other statements in support of the indigenous movements would be issued over the next few years. This is of course linked to the movement's anti-authoritarian and anti-colonialist tradition, and its rejection of modern Western civilization. But this empathy and keen interest in the "savage arts" is also an expression of a romantic/revolutionary anti-capitalist mindset: the surrealists believed - like the early romantic, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who praised the freedom of the Caribbean - that one could find, in these "savage" cultures - the surrealists did not like the word "primitive" - human values and ways of life that were, in many ways, superior to Western imperialist civilization.

*International Surrealist Bulletin* No. 1 was published in Stockholm, with the response of the groups from Paris, Prague, Stockholm, Chicago, Madrid and Buenos Aires to an inquiry into the current task of Surrealism. The Paris group insisted in its text on the fact that "Surrealism is not a set of aesthetic or playful recipes, but a permanent principle of refusal and negativity, nourished by the magical sources of desire, revolt, poetry [...]. Neither God nor master: more than ever this old revolutionary motto seems relevant to us. It is inscribed in letters of fire on the doors that lead, beyond industrial civilization, to surrealist action, the goal of which is the re-enchantment (and the re-erotization ) of the world.

## Their celebrations and ours

To protest against the pompous celebrations of the fifth centenary of the so-called "discovery of the Americas" (1992), the surrealists published in 1992 the *International Surrealist Bulletin* No. 2, with a joint declaration signed by the surrealist groups of Australia, Buenos Aires, Denmark, Great Britain, Madrid, Paris, the Netherlands, Prague, Sao Paulo, Stockholm and the United States. Inspired by an essay written by the Argentine surrealist poet Silvia Grenier, this document celebrates the elective affinity of Surrealism with indigenous peoples, against the Western civilization that has oppressed indigenous peoples and attempted to destroy their cultures: "in the struggle against this stifling totalitarianism, Surrealism is - has always been - the companion and accomplice of the natives . "The Bulletin was published in three languages – English, French, Spanish – by the Chicago Surrealists, who provided a cover collage of Franklin and Penelope Rosemont representing Columbus as Alfred Jarry's Père Ubu.

The Museum of Modern Art in Paris (Centre Georges-Pompidou) opened a major exhibition of surrealist art in the spring of 2002, under the title "Surrealist Revolution". The exhibition had in fact no revolutionary significance and attempted to present surrealism as a purely artistic experiment, using "new techniques". At the entrance to the museum, visitors could pick up a free four-page leaflet, which explained that "the surrealist movement wanted to take an active part in the organization of society" (?), that it had had a great influence on society, and in particular on "advertising and music videos"... Annoyed by this conformist jumble, Guy Girard suggested to the surrealist group that they prepare an alternative leaflet, on the same 4 pages, with similar letters, but a completely different content: Surrealism is described as a revolutionary movement whose aspiration for freedom and subversive imagination aimed to "overthrow capitalist domination" ; The leaflet was illustrated with images of women artists like Toyen and Leonora Carrington, almost absent from the exhibition, as well as a historical photo from 1927: "Our collaborator Benjamin Péret insulting a priest" ... The members of the group then carefully placed a pile of the surrealist leaflet on top of the "official" leaflet, so that visitors could pick it up. The funniest thing is that the curators of the exhibition, intrigued by the surrealist tract, removed their own futile piece, and replaced it with a new one, which tried to take into account the fact that Surrealism was a subversive anti-authoritarian movement that denounced "the Family, the Church, the Fatherland, the Army and colonialism" ...

The group's various tracts and statements were eventually published in the aforementioned book, *Insoumission Poétique. Tracts, Affiches et Déclarations du groupe de Paris du mouvement surréaliste 1970-2010*. (Paris, Le Temps des Cerises, 2010). Guy Girard edited the book, collected the material and illustrations, and wrote a brief

introduction for each document.

### *Dream time*

Between 2019 and 2024, five issues of a new Parisian magazine were published: *Alcheringa., le Surréalisme aujourd.'hui.* Alcheringa is a word from an Aboriginal language of Australia, meaning "the time of dreams", mentioned by André Breton in his essay "Main Première". Finally, in the summer of 2024, the International Surrealist Exhibition "Merveilleuse Utopie" organized by Joël Gayraud, Guy Girard and Sylwia Chrostowska took place at the Maison André Breton in Saint-Cirq-la-Popie.

Whatever its limitations and difficulties, the surrealist movement in Paris has kept alive, over the last 50 years, the red and black flame of rebellion, the anti-authoritarian dream of radical freedom, the poetic insubordination to the powers that be and the stubborn desire to re-enchant the world.

PS:

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