SUBJECT (SELF AND SUBJECTIVITY)


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Further Reading


SURREALISM

Surrealism was a literary and artistic movement originating in Paris in the early 1920s. It rejected social, moral, and logical conventions and sought to revolutionize art, literature, and life in the name of freedom, desire, and revolt. It emerged from the social upheaval of post–First World War Europe (the term was invented by Apollinaire in 1917) and more especially from Dadaism, founded in Zurich in 1915, which rejected traditional Western values and promoted the irrational and the absurd through a series of “antiartistic” events based on provocation and profanation. In 1922, a group around Breton broke with the negative tactics of Dada, whose scandals were running the risk of becoming institutionalized, in order to explore a positive form of revolt. The year 1924 marked the official launch of the movement, with Aragon’s *Une vague de rêves* (A Wave of Dreams) that charts the activities of the group, Breton’s first *Manifeste du surrealisme* (First Manifesto of Surrealism) that defines its philosophical principles, and the launch of the surrealist journal *La Révolution surrea liste* (The Surrealist Revolution). Combining Rimbaud’s injunction to “Change life,” Marx’s “Transform the world,” and the Marquis de Sade’s libertarian ethos, the surrealists sought the liberation of the individual and the transformation of society. They were active in the fields of art, literature, film, philosophy, and politics. Above all, however, they formed “a community of ethical views” (Toyen). The mostly male group was made up of writers (Aragon, Artaud, Cahun, Desnos, Eluard, Péret, Soupault, and others) and artists (including Dali, Ernst, Magritte, Malfine, Miró, later Domínguez, Matta, Paalen), although its membership fluctuated with ideological and personal conflicts and crises, leading to defections and exclusions, as well as new directions for the group. In the 1930s it gained an international dimension with groups in countries such as Belgium (Magritte, Delvaux), Czechoslovakia (Styrsky, Toyen), Egypt (Hennein), England (Nash, Penrose), Latin America (Paz), Martinique (Césaire), and Yugoslavia (Ristich). The “heroic period” (Nadeau) of surrealism lasted until 1940, when several of its members, including Breton, went into exile to escape occupied France, although surrealist activities continued during the war years in New York, Mexico, and Paris. The group was reformed after 1945 with a new generation of members (including Bédouin, Mansour, Pierre, and Schuster). Following Breton’s death in 1966, the group was “auto-dissolved” in 1969. Surrealist groups continue to be active, however, in cities like Paris, Prague, Sao Paulo, and Chicago.

From the outset the surrealists stressed the experimental and scientific character of their activities. They set up a “Bureau des recherches surrea listes,” run by Artaud, and researched the unconscious (automatism, hypnosis, dream) in order to explore the “real functioning of the mind” (Breton). The journal *La Révolution surrea listes* (1924–1929), edited by Artaud then Breton, published collective texts, poems, surveys (on suicide, sexuality), as well as drawings, photographs, and paintings.

Surrealist theoretical declarations can appear paradoxical, contradictory, and diverse. The surrealists rejected the notion of a school with a fixed body of doctrine. Surrealism was considered as an open quest continuously redefining itself in terms of a project (“Surrealism is what will be,” 1947). Hence, in his 1924 *Manifeste*, Breton first defined the surrealist quest as “the future resolution of these two states of dream and reality, seemingly contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality,” drawing on the work of Freud to affirm the continuity and interaction between waking life and dreams. Underlining the scien-
tific nature of his text, he gave a dictionary-like definition of surrealism grounded in psychiatry: “Surrealism, noun, masc.: pure psychic automatism by which it is proposed to express, either verbally or by writing, or by any other means, the real functioning of thought. Thought dictated outside any control by reason or any moral or aesthetic consideration.” As medical students during the 1914–18 war, Aragon and Breton had received psychiatric training and were influenced by Janet’s concept of psychic automatism, Myer’s “subliminal self,” and Freud’s theories of the unconscious and its relation to dreams. However, although the surrealists and Freud shared an interest in the unconscious, their aims differed radically. Freudian psychoanalysis, considering the manifest content of dreams as symptoms that allow the analyst to recover their latent content and hence the source of the neurosis, has a therapeutic aim, the reintegration of the individual into society. The surrealists, on the other hand, were interested in dreams and free association as a means of freeing the individual’s creative powers, and they exploited the manifest dream material for poetic and artistic ends. Breton also presented automatism as a praxis, even providing instructions on how to write an automatic text, a method designed to free the mind from all rational or pragmatic considerations and liberate the voice of the unconscious and the language of desire through free associations. Surrealist automatic texts include Breton and Soupault’s *Les Champs magnétiques* (1920; The Magnetic Fields), Breton’s *Poison soluble* (1924; Soluble Fish) (to which the Manifeste was originally published as an introduction), and Breton and Eluard’s *L’Immaculée conception* (1930; The Immaculate Conception). Although Breton later admitted to the relative failure of automatism (“Le Message automatique” [1933; “The Automatic Message”]), poetry and prose texts were written using part-automatic processes, by Breton himself (*Clair de terre*, 1923), Desnos (*Corps et biens*, 1930), Eluard (*Capitale de la douleur*, 1926), whereas artists such as Masson, Miró, and Ernst experimented in graphic automatism.

In his *Second Manifeste du surréalisme* (1929; Second Surrealist Manifesto), a polemical text in which he reassessed his earlier definition of surrealism, Breton elaborated on the concept of the surreal as the resolution of opposites, grounding his definition in Hegelian dialectical thought. Surrealism was defined as the search for “un certain point de l’esprit d’où la vie et la mort, le réel et l’imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l’incommunicable, le haut et le bas cessent d’être perçus contradictoirement” (a certain mental point where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the uncommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictory”). Breton’s “point de l’espèrit” is situated in the past or future, in the nostalgia for a lost pre-Oedipal unity (present in the myth of childhood and the androgyne myth) or the messianic myth of a future totality, identified for a while with the Marxist myth of reconciliation. The surreal is thus considered essentially as a project or possibility. Breton claimed that the dialectical method could be applied to resolve not only social questions, but also the problems of love, madness, and art. Bataille, leader of a dissident group of surrealists, which included Desnos and Leiris, and editor of the journal *Documents* (1929–30), attacked Breton’s concept of the dialectic, claiming it was premised on an idealized notion of (romantic) unity. He countered Breton by arguing in favor of an engagement with material or “base” reality and positing a dynamic dialectical process that maintains contradiction between elements. In *Les Vases communicants* (1932; Communicating Vessels), Breton brought together Marx and Freud in his elaboration of dialectical materialism, claiming to have resolved certain contradictions in surrealist doctrine. He also explored the notion of “hasard objectif” (objective chance), based on Hegelian thought and defined as the point of intersection between inner desires and external reality (*Position politique du surréalisme* [1935; Political Position of Surrealism]). During the 1940s and 1950s Breton developed an interest in analogical thought, based on the work of Fourier, alchemy, and the elaboration of a new myth (*Arcane 17*, 1945). Alchemy was the central theme of the 1947 surrealist Paris exhibition, conceived as an initiatory space, and articles linking surrealism with alchemical thought were published in the surrealist journal *Medium* (1952–55). This self-questioning and ferment of surrealist thought testify to its refusal to be retrieved by a single, globalizing definition and to its character as a quest rather than a doctrine.

The surrealists’ political position was grounded in their desire to reconcile individual revolt with the needs of the social revolution (“Nous sommes les spécialistes de la révolte” [1924; We are the specialists of revolt]). In their collective declarations and tracts, they denounced all forms of oppression—state, church, family, fatherland, colonialism. After their initial anarchist stance, inherited from Dada, the group adopted Marxist ideology and joined the French Communist Party in 1927. In 1930 their journal, *La Révolution surréaliste*, was superseded by *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (1930–33), marked by a shift toward a more visible political engagement, publishing more political articles and fewer automatic texts and poems and reaffirming positions that were antimilitarist (Char, “Les porcs en liberté” [1930; Pigs in freedom]), anticlerical (Ernst, “Danger de pollution” [1931; Danger of pollution]), and anticolonial (“Ne
visitez pas l’Exposition Coloniale” [1931; Don’t visit the Colonial Exhibition]). Bunuel and Dali’s film L’Age d’or mocked church, family, and state, provoking controversy and violent reactions from the Right when first shown in 1930. In spite of their radical positions, the surrealists’ relations with the Communist Party were uneasy because they refused to subordinate the surrealist concept of global revolt to the social revolution, which led to charges against them of counter-revolutionary activity. Aragon and Sadoul, however, adopted the party’s line on proletarian literature after the Congress of Kharkov (1930) and denounced surrealism as incompatible with dialectical materialism, thus breaking with Breton’s group. In Les Paris sont ouverts (1934; Place your Bets), Claude Cahun vehemently attacked Aragon’s position, advocating the freedom of art against the constraints of socialist realism. Breton’s “Limites non frontières du surréalisme” (1936; “Limits not frontiers of surrealism”) confirmed the group’s adherence to dialectical materialism and the necessity of social revolution, while defending the freedom of “la grande aventure mentale” (the great mental adventure) of poetry and art. In 1935–36 Breton and Bataille collaborated in the Contre-Attaque group of revolutionary antifascist intellectuals, which opposed the reformist policies of the Popular Front and, turning to eighteenth-century revolutionary models, as well as Hegel and Nietzsche, sought a position outside the discourse of Marxist revolutionary thought. In 1938 in Mexico Breton and Trotsky (whose biography of Lenin had first attracted Breton’s interest in communism in 1925) wrote a manifesto titled “Pour un art de la révolution; la révolution—pour la liberté de l’art—pour la révolution; la révolution—pour la libération définitive de l’art” (What we want: the independence of art—for the revolution; the revolution—for the definitive liberation of art). In 1938 the surrealists joined the F.I.A.R.I. (Fédération internationale de l’art révolutionnaire indépendant), founded by left-wing intellectuals who sought to steer a revolutionary path free of totalitarianisms of Right and Left. Although the group around Breton retreated from political action during the war years in New York, the surrealists who stayed in Paris were actively involved in Resistance activities (Aragon, Eluard, the Main à Plume group). On the group’s return from New York in 1946, Breton, criticized for his nonparticipation in Resistance activities (Tzara, “Le Surréalisme et l’après-guerre” [1947; Surrealism and the Postwar Period]), was politically marginalized. Surrealism as a major movement had been superseded by existentialism, and Sartre and Camus attacked Breton’s idealist position. However, the surrealist group, revitalized in the postwar period by the participation of younger artists and writers, collaborated with revolutionary syndicalist and anarchist groups and continued to support opposition movements against the war in Indochina (“Liberté est un mot vietnamien” [1947; Freedom is a Vietnamese word]), Soviet intervention in Hungary (“Hongrie, soleil levant” [1956; Hungary, rising sun]), and the Algerian War (“Déclaration sur le droit à l’insubordination dans la guerre d’Algérie” [1960; Declaration on the right to insubordination in the Algerian War]).}

Surrealism is generally considered primarily as an artistic movement, as testified by the large international surrealist art exhibitions (London, 1936; Paris, 1938, 1947, 1959, and 1965; Mexico, 1940; and New York 1942), its glossy art journal Minotaure (1933–39), and the art collections of its members (Breton, Eluard, and Péret had important collections of Oceanic, African, and North American Indian masks and objects). Although visual art was given one footnote in Breton’s first Manifeste, La Révolution surréaliste reproduced paintings, drawing and photographs. In its pages Max Morise and Pierre Naville initiated a debate questioning the existence of surrealist painting. Breton settled the argument with the publication of “Le Surréalisme et la peinture” (1925–27; Surrealism and Painting), where he rejected the imitation of external reality and favored the exploration of a “purely internal model,” that of dream, hallucinatory or fantastic images. Art was considered not as an end in itself—whence Breton’s disdain for pictorial techniques or his discussion of painting in terms of poetry (Baudelaire, Rimbaud), the search for a mode of expression “au-delà de la peinture” (beyond painting) (Ernst), or Miró’s desire to “assassiner la peinture” (assassinate painting)—but as a means of liberation, thereby seeking to annex the group’s artistic activities to surrealism’s global liberatory project, beyond purely artistic considerations. The surrealists rejected the pictorial conventions of realism (“l’art à l’école du perroquet” [art parrot-fashion]), turning to non-European art forms, art naïf, the art of the insane, mediumistic art that, they claimed, are free from the restrictions of established codes and express fundamental impulses.

Surrealist aesthetics—based on the nineteenth-century writer Lautréamont’s image “Beau comme la rencontre fortuite, sur une table de dissection, d’un parapluié et d’une machine à coudre” (Beautiful as the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella), and on Pierre Reverdy’s definition of the image as “une création pure de l’esprit” (1918; a pure creation of the mind)—was first defined in terms of the verbal or visual image as the bringing together of heterogeneous elements, creating a new reality through the collision or étincelle (spark)
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(Breton) of their encounter. This was later developed in the more radical theory of “la beauté convulsive” (convulsive beauty), a concept of aesthetic paradox rather than dialectical fulfillment, where the copresence of contradictory elements (becoming and being, movement and stasis) is foregrounded (Breton, _Anmour fou_, 1937 [Mad Love]).

Surrealist art is characterized by a diversity of forms of expression: painting, drawing, photography, collage, objects, sculpture, found objects; and of styles: automatism, the precise portrayal of dream(like) scenes, collage, and assemblage. In the 1920s artists such as Masson, Miró, and Ernst developed a form of graphic automatism that sought to eliminate any conscious control and a preconceived subject and develop the spontaneous generation of images, open pictorial signs often with erotic connotations, inviting the active participation of the spectator. In the mid-1930s automatism was explored further through techniques of _decalcomanie_ (Dominguez), _fumage_ (Paalen), or _grattage_ (Frances). During the surrealists’ exile in New York, artists such as Matta and Donati worked in the space between figuration and abstraction, influencing the young abstract expressionist painters. In Paris in the 1950s a younger generation of artists, including Hantaï, Loubchanski, and Reigl, practiced a form of automatism promoted by Breton, Pierre, and others as “abstraction lyrique” (lyrical abstraction), and exhibited in the Etoile Scellée Gallery, of which Breton was director. A second group of artists, “calqueurs de rêve” (dream copiers), used traditional pictorial techniques to reproduce hallucinatory, fantastic, or oniric images (Dali, Magritte, Tanguy). Dali claimed his paintings were “la photographie de l’esprit” (photography of the mind), the projection of precise obsessions or dream images (explicit sexual imagery, soft dissolving forms). By contrast, Magritte and others reproduced dreamlike images staging the dream mechanisms of condensation (in composite bodies) and displacement (in fragmented bodies). A third group of artists developed techniques of collage (Ernst, Hugnet, Breton), consisting of the cutting and pasting of disparate images, which produced monstrous configurations. Artists also experimented in three-dimensional assemblage as a conjunction of heterogeneous objects (Belmer, Miró, Oppenheim). Although Dali elaborated his paranoidac-critical method to interpret his paintings, defined as “un delire d’interprétation imaginatif” (a delirium of imaginative interpretation), inspired by the Freudian model, the majority of surrealist artists sought to create enigmatic, mysterious, or fantastic images: “I want to create a mystery, not to solve it,” claimed Magritte. The aim of surrealist art, based on the effect of _dépaysement_ (defamiliarization), was to counteract the automatization of the gaze and renew the viewer’s perception of the world, making her see images emerging from the unconscious, “de l’autre côté de l’œil” (the other side of the eye) (Dali).

In all their activities, whether philosophical, political, or artistic, the surrealists endeavored to reconcile artistic freedom and ideological commitment without compromising their ethical position in relation to the revolutionary transformation of society and the individual. Their influence can be seen, for example, in the revolutionary theory of the Situationist International group (1957–68), in the _Tel Quel_ group’s defense of poetic revolt (Rimbaud) and libertarianism (Sade), and in the anarchist declarations of the May 1968 student revolt in Paris, which reiterate the essential surrealist values of revolt, desire, and freedom. Their legacy among French intellectuals and artists is evident in continuing debates, on the dialogue between Marx and Freud, on transgression and desire, on the links between collective and individual freedom.

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See also Antonin Artaud; Andre Breton; Aimé Césaire

Further Reading


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