

# SURREALISM & POLITICS

The classic avant-garde movement's melding of psychic and social revolution still resonates today.

*By Ara H. Merjian*



To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution: this is the project around which Surrealism circles in all its books and enterprises. This it may call its most particular task. —Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia”

**SURREALISM PERSISTS IN THE POPULAR**

Imagination as a predominantly visual phenomenon. Almost a century after its founding, the name remains virtually interchangeable with the work of its most prominent painterly exponents, Salvador Dalí and René Magritte chief among them. Nearly as familiar as their imagery is the movement’s fixation on Freudian psychology: used not as a therapeutic tool, but as a thread to plumb the untapped depths of the unconscious, its stifled drives and desires. Far less recognized today are Surrealism’s engagements with Marxist politics — as fraught, and ultimately abortive, as they were impassioned. The group’s most immediate origins were literary: the practice of “automatic writing” by Philippe Soupault and André Breton (the movement’s leader), aimed to liberate thought from the superintending effects of syntax and superego. Like other of the group’s collective experiments, these were means and not ends. Channeling the remnants of Parisian Dada into a more systematic enterprise,

Breton, Paul Éluard, Louis Aragon, Pierre Naville, and other founding luminaries aimed at wholesale social insurgency — an upending of sexual repressions, bourgeois mores, nationalist myths, and religious dogma, along with the linguistic strictures that promoted and preserved them. As attested in the titles of two of their journals — *La Révolution Surréaliste* and *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* — insurrection was no ancillary metaphor to this enterprise, but its driving force and ultimate purpose. To that end, the Surrealists came — gradually, fitfully, and often uneasily — to reconcile the movement’s metaphysical ambitions with Marxist materialism.

The latter, after all, had already contributed to at least one successful revolution against the prevailing order, the 1917 Bolshevik commandeering of the Russian state. Identified in Surrealism’s founding manifesto as a quintessential principle (along with the “omnipotence of the dream”), the “disinterested play of thought” thus became intermittently subordinated to the ministrations of party creed. Briefly joining the French Communist Party (PCF) himself in 1927, Breton sought to accommodate Surrealism’s “total subversion” to the totalizing program of revolutionary Marxism in practice. The experiment proved illusory. Rancor and recriminations abounded on all sides. Yet the

**Previous spread, Max Ernst: *The Triumph of Surrealism*, 1937, oil on canvas, 44 1/4 by 57 1/2 inches.**

**Below, Koga Harue: *Umi (The Sea)*, 1929, oil on canvas, 51 1/4 by 64 inches.**



very failure of the attempt merits attention as a vital chapter in the history of twentieth-century cultural politics — a far more complex phenomenon than the sanitized commodity version of Surrealism that most often reaches us nowadays. Routinely eclipsed by its museological canonization are the group’s anti-fascist and anti-colonialist activism, Breton’s collaborations with Trotsky and Diego Rivera, extensive Surrealist involvement in the Spanish Civil War, and less quantifiable contributions to existentialist philosophy and Situationist theory alike.

In a sense, Surrealism’s decline was commensurate with its influence, even ubiquity. Not only did its ostensibly scandalous objects come to feature in museum collections worldwide, its visual strategies were swiftly absorbed into the bloodstream of late capitalist culture. The waning of the movement after WWII appeared, according to Anselm Jappe in his study *Guy Debord* (1992/99), “brutally patent: for one thing Surrealism was now welcome in the temples of bourgeois art, just as it was in the world of advertising.” Even as its improvisational dimensions were siphoned into the supposedly apolitical ascendance of American Abstract Expressionism, Breton declared in 1952 a “final break with all the conformist elements of the time.” His pronouncements failed to sway a younger generation. In their journal, *Potlatch*, the Lettrist group — immediate forebears of the Situationist International — assailed “bourgeois inquisitors like André Breton or Joseph McCarthy.”

Situationism’s most incisive theorist, Guy Debord, described Surrealism in 1958 as “thoroughly boring and reactionary,” beholden to both “bourgeois impotence” and “artistic nostalgia.” Indeed, Breton never renounced his attachment to visual art as a means of psychic and social liberation, and helped stage exhibitions as late as 1960. Yet that same year he also added his name to the “Manifesto of the 121,” subtitled the “Declaration Regarding the Right of Insubordination in the Algerian War,” in which 121 intellectuals condoned civil disobedience for Algerian independence, presaging much of the French Left’s activism over the next decade.



Above, covers of the October 1927 (top) and December 1926 (bottom) issues of *La Révolution Surréaliste*.

Top, left to right: André Breton, Diego Rivera, Leon Trotsky, and Jacqueline Lamba in Mexico City, 1938.

That same activism would render Surrealism obsolete in the domain of radical politics, superseded by the student movements and the extra-parliamentary agitation of the New Left at large. The impact of direct action was immediate; its afterlife still transcends aesthetics.

In the Frankfurt School’s attempted fusions of Freud and Marx — as in Wilhelm Reich’s comparable efforts before them — we find echoes of Surrealist precedent, particularly in the drive to counter positivism on the one hand and fascist mysticism on the other. Communism could promise a social utopia free of class hostilities. But what of the individual’s nonmaterial longings and desires? What of the need for myths un beholden to rituals of collectivity, or the panacea of patriotism? When media theorist and activist Stephen Duncombe claims in his 2007 book, *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, that “fantasy and spectacle have become the property of fascism,” and calls upon the Left to “build a politic that embraces the dreams of people,” it is upon Surrealism that he draws, however intentionally or unwittingly. In current discourse on colonialism’s cultural histories — and the present tense of its racist legacies — we also find reverberations of the Surrealist past. As highlighted in the exhibition “Surrealism Beyond Borders,” currently on view at Tate Modern in London, the movement’s international and anti-imperialist orientation fomented offshoots from Cuba to Cairo to Japan. Perhaps uniquely among the early twentieth-century European avant-gardes, the group proved actively and consistently anti-colonialist from its inception.

The Surrealists’ foray into the political realm, which stemmed from their revulsion over Marshal Pétain’s military aggressions against the Moroccan Berbers in the Rif War of 1921–26, initially took the form of an essay copublished with the Communists in the journal *L’Humanité*. Having helped spearhead a boycott of France’s colonial exhibitions, a dozen Surrealists would affirm in “Murderous Humanitarianism” (1932):

In a France hideously inflated from having dismembered Europe, made mincemeat of Africa, polluted Oceania and ravaged whole tracts of Asia, we Surrealists pronounced ourselves in favor of changing the imperialist war, in its chronic and colonial form, into a civil war. Thus we placed our energies at the disposal of the revolution — of the proletariat and its struggles — and defined our attitude towards the colonial problem, and hence towards the color question.

Alongside stalwart signatories like Breton and Éluard, René Crevel and Yves Tanguy, appears Pierre Yoyotte (ca. 1900–1940), a Martinique-born writer and author who, along with his sister Simone, was among Surrealism’s first Black members. Likewise, their compatriot and cofounder of the Négritude movement in Francophone literature of the 1930s, Aimé Césaire, told poet René Depestre in a 1967 interview that he found in Surrealism “a weapon that exploded the French language. It shook up absolutely everything.” Surrealist concern not only for the “color question” but for the cultural and political struggle against



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From top: Photo Shank/ART Resource, New York; Courtesy Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale de France (2)

colonialism recommended its strategies to avant-garde communities of color. Linking the “colonial problem” to a wider class struggle echoed (and anticipated) discourses ranging from Antonio Gramsci’s theory of the “southern question” to decolonization campaigns across Africa and Asia.

At the same time, Surrealism’s mostly white members trafficked in “primitivist” objects both rhetorically and literally. Breton’s personal collection included myriad African and Oceanian masks and sculptures, whose “savage” significance he promoted in various texts and exhibitions. Prominent Surrealists like Max Ernst and Alberto Giacometti incorporated the expressive anatomies of various artifacts into their own work without regard for their ceremonial applications or origins. To be sure, the “dissident” Surrealist group around the journal *Documents* offered more nuanced approaches to far-flung cultures. Anchored by Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and others opposed to Breton’s preemptory leadership, they married anthropological and ethnographic study to irrational explorations of violence, sacrifice, and sacredness. Yet here, too, the emancipatory significance of such phenomena devolved not upon their original (unspecified) subjects, but rather a select coterie of French intellectuals. In championing anonymous, non-Western artisans, European Surrealists presumed to speak for them, thus assuming the role of self-appointed prophets of a non-bourgeois world.

No less problematic in this regard were the Surrealists’ sexual politics. While the members pursued liberation from the stifling institutions of family and monogamy, they did so in prescriptively masculine, heteronormative terms. Breton’s unreconstructed homophobia also meant that Surrealist challenges to erotic propriety excluded same-sex desire. The numerous female artists who gradually joined the movement’s ranks, meanwhile, could not undo its abidingly chauvinist bent. For, leaving aside the participation of *actual* women, the aesthetic category of “woman” served as a talismanic fetish: tantamount to the “primitive” in its supposed proximity to untamed nature, endowed with a primal, embodied intuition rather than a rationalist (and arid) intelligence. Although supposedly gifted with – and emblematic of – a higher psychic capability, female



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Surrealists never attained the social or professional power of their male counterparts. The “total subversion” of Breton’s sexual revolution proved, in short, less than total in its very premise.

The Surrealists nevertheless believed their crusade for individual liberation to entail a collective emancipation as well. In collapsing the distance between reality and dream, poets and artists would offer to all – no matter their gender or race – a means of psychic fulfillment. In however small a measure, they saw the re-enchantment of a spiritually impoverished modernity as a potentially political act. The earliest formulations of such acts evoked a life of the mind, rather than matter: “The immediate sense and purpose of the Surrealist revolution,” claimed scholar and writer Maurice Nadeau in his *Documents Surréalistes* (1948), “is not so much to change anything in the physical and manifest order of things as to create an agitation in men’s minds.” Yet Breton soon read – and was “transported” by – the French translation of Trotsky’s 1925 biography of Lenin. A vague notion of psychic agitation became gradually – if imperfectly – yoked to aspects of international Communism, particularly in its non-Stalinist guises. The Surrealists came in short order, according to Breton in his 1934 lecture “What Is Surrealism?,” to predicate “the liberation of man upon the proletarian Revolution.” Indeed, in his seminal 1966 essay “The Politics of Surrealism, 1920–36,” art historian Robert S. Short writes:

From fascism, bourgeois mores, capital punishment, the press, lunatic asylums, to professional sport: the objects of Surrealist polemics paralleled those in the Communist party but in range extended far beyond them, finding targets in every section of the superstructure.

**NOTWITHSTANDING ITS MARXIST BONA FIDES,** the group found a chilly reception among the ranks of orthodox Communists. This was not due simply to Breton’s blatant Trotskyist sympathies. Dedicated to harnessing personal eroticism to (an as yet undetermined) social utopia, Party apparatchiks saw Breton’s “inner model” as anathema to the very essence of Communism: namely, a subordination of individual desires to the collective good. By the Surrealists’ own admission, their revolution was to be a “subjective



Above, two Yup’ik masks, late 19th–early 20th century, formerly in the collection of André Breton.

Left, the Bureau for Surrealist Research, 1924, showing (left to right): Jacques Baron, Raymond Queneau, Pierre Naville, André Breton, Simone Breton, Jacques-André Boiffard, Max Morise, Giorgio de Chirico, Mick Soupault, Roger Vitrac, Paul Éluard, Philippe Soupault, Robert Desnos, and Louis Aragon.

Masks: Courtesy Di Donna Gallery, New York; Bureau for Surrealist Research: Photo Man Ray/CNAC/MNAM, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, New York

Leonora Carrington: *Chiki, Your Country*, 1944, oil, tempera, and ink on canvas, 35¼ by 35½ inches.



idealist” one. “What is Surrealism,” asked the painter André Masson, “if not the collective experience of individualism?” Breton, Aragon, and Éluard’s respective declarations that their preferred activity was “to sleep” – and hence to dream – hardly suggested the stuff of dialectical materialism. It conjured, in fact, a solipsistic, even counterrevolutionary betrayal of the injunction to *build* socialism, rather than simply to desire or imagine it. For all his flair for the latter, Breton failed miserably at the practical tasks assigned by his local PCF cell. Called upon to file a statistical report on the gas industry in Italy, he simply shirked his responsibility. By 1933 he and most other Surrealists had been shown the door.

They pursued their own collective imperatives, however. The Surrealists’ avowal of their preference for dreaming, for example, came by way of a group survey – one of countless such official inquests

published by the group. Particularly in its emergence out of the nihilist anarchism and radical individualism of Dada, Surrealism sought to discipline its energies into more productive – if not productivist – endeavors. These included the regular analysis of dreams, disseminated in a periodical reminiscent more of a scientific journal than an avant-garde magazine. They edited *La Révolution Surréaliste* at a centralized “Bureau of Research,” treated as a serious workplace rather than some bohemian hangout. Despite its rift with the Communist Party, the group ended up imitating the latter’s ideological intransigence; Breton commanded various expulsions and excommunications throughout the movement’s long history. As late as 1934, in his lecture “What Is Surrealism?,” he identified the group’s chief concerns as, one, exploring the rapport between conscious and unconscious life, and two, “the social action we should pursue.” For Aragon, that action eventually meant

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Above, John Heartfield: *The Sleeping Reichstag*, 1929, print, 6¼ by 10 inches.

Left, René Magritte: *The Paris Opera*, 1929, gelatin silver print, 9¼ by 11½ inches.

following Communist doctrine at the expense of Surrealist membership. Though he parted ways with his avant-garde confreres, Aragon continued to pursue some sort of accommodation between their aims. Addressing the menace of Nazism and the intransigence of Stalinist culture alike, Breton would coauthor a tract with Trotsky himself in 1938, “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art,” cosigned in Mexico by Diego Rivera:

We believe that the supreme task of art in this day and age is consciously to take an active part in preparing the revolution. However, the artist cannot serve the struggle for emancipation unless he has internalized its social and individual content, unless he feels its meaning and drama in his very nerves and unless he freely seeks to give his inner world an artistic incarnation.

Surrealism had for years to navigate the choppy waters between the aesthetic autonomy of modernism and the increasingly constrictive dictates of philo-Soviet realism – a treacherous passage that saw it assailed from the left and right alike.

Yet that dilemma proved in many ways propitious. In Short’s view, Surrealism proceeded “by contradiction and not by argument.” And a language of contradiction – or, more precisely, of paradox – could be made to serve the dialectical metaphors of Marxist revolution, if not its materialist operations. A case in point is the extent to which Surrealism assimilated the Cubist strategy of collage, expanding both its content and its applications to painting, cinema, photography, and photomontage. “The chronotope of revolution,” writes the Filipino activist and intellectual E. San Juan Jr. in “Antonio Gramsci on Surrealism and the Avantgarde” (2003), “is essentially a collage, more precisely a montage,

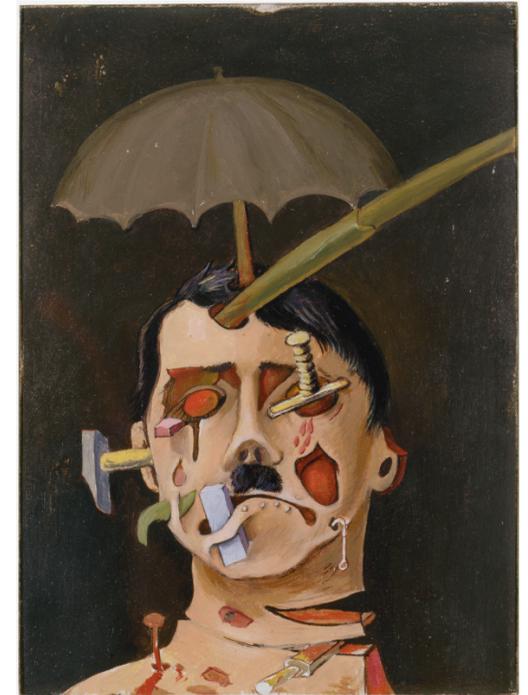


## Aragon eulogized the “revolutionary beauty” of anti-Nazi photomontages by the German Communist artist John Heartfield.

of transformations that amalgamates contraries, oppositions, disparities.” The Surrealists were drawn to the suggestive power of objects displaced from their original context and set into new, allusive frameworks, whether in the cityscapes of the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico or the “painted collages” of Max Ernst. Physical dislodgment, which the Surrealists sometimes called *dépaysement* (literally: uncountryping, displacement from home), bespoke a potential disruption of meaning, and hence also of social and political ramifications. If the impulses of automatic writing and painting eluded ideological pragmatism, the visual consequence of incongruity (of catachresis, paraproxia, and their various cognates) held some promise in the domain of a political aesthetics.

It is no coincidence, for instance, that, even as he distanced himself from Surrealism, Aragon eulogized what he called the “revolutionary beauty” of anti-Nazi photomontages by the German Communist artist John Heartfield. By the time of Heartfield’s 1935 exhibition in Paris, Communist leaders roundly opposed Surrealism on the grounds that its aesthetic could not speak to the masses – that its idiom was predicated, in fact, upon a willful refusal of communicability. While not a Surrealist, Heartfield had plainly adapted many of its strategies, along with the Dada he had practiced in Berlin immediately after WWI. In assailing the ironies and iniquities of Nazi propaganda, Heartfield cut out and reconfigured photographs from the mass media so as to subvert – by way of visual puns, superimpositions, and radical discrepancies of scale – their original intention and reception. Disavowing the expressivity of painterly modernism, Heartfield allied himself with the Communist commitment to rationalized collectivity; yet in his provocative transposition of familiar imagery into new contexts, he drew upon Surrealist *dépaysement*. Published in the Communist illustrated daily *AIZ* and titled “The Sleeping Reichstag,” his 1929 photomontage of a somnolent delegate seated atop the German parliament building – an image of negligent dozing rather than creative (and potentially revolutionary) dreaming – is not far in its basic conceit from Magritte’s contemporary image of the Paris Opera inexplicably given over to bucolic ruin. Surrealism’s poetry, Aragon writes in “John Heartfield and Revolutionary Beauty” (1935), constitutes “an end in itself”; Heartfield’s imagery, by contrast, suggests “what an art for the

Victor Brauner: *Hitler*, 1934, oil on cardboard, 8¼ by 6¼ inches.



masses, that magnificent and incomprehensibly decried thing, can be.”

No quarter remained for Surrealism within the ranks of the Communist International by the mid-1930s. Revolution never receded from the former’s purview, however. In 1934, the same year the Soviet Union decreed Socialist Realism the official aesthetic of the Comintern, Yoyotte brilliantly synthesized the potential synergy between Marxism and Freudianism in his essay “Antifascist Significance of Surrealism.” Any possible Communist liberation from economic misery, he writes, would need to address as well the widespread “psychological misery” to which fascism also appealed with a supplementary “essentially emotional and ideational revolution.” If an emancipatory, egalitarian, and non-nationalist movement for working people would not address these ideational needs, then a less liberatory program would – one substituting manufactured spectacle for collective dreams. Nearly a century on, we find ourselves in a political predicament not far from that of Yoyotte and his peers. As the specter of international fascism stalks democracy once again, more is at stake than simply the question of economic poverty or the purity of any ideology equipped to fix it. The larger problem is an abiding psychological malaise, exploited once again by forces as reactionary as they are irrational. ●

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