

SURREALISM, POLITICS AND CULTURE

By Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss (eds), *Studies in European Cultural Transition*, Volume 16, Ashgate, Aldershot and Burlington, 2003, 352pp., 67 b & w. illus., £57.50, ISBN 0-7546-0989-8 (hardback)

The celebrated photographs of André Breton, Diego Rivera and Léon Trotsky posing together in Mexico in 1938, at the time of their joint manifesto *Pour un Art révolutionnaire indépendant*, are usually seen as emblematic of a certain convergence of culture and revolutionary politics – and yet, paradoxically, most accounts of Surrealism's engagement with politics pose the tide of revolutionary fervour as already receding by 1935, while 1938 has also been viewed as the year that Surrealism made the *volte-face* 'from the street to the salon.' A re-appraisal of Surrealism's troubled relationship with political activism and organised politics has been long overdue, and therefore a collection which sets out not only to analyse in depth some of the key themes and crucial moments in that engagement, but also to rethink the condition of 'the political' itself in its relationship with culture, is to be welcomed.

In their introduction to this collection, Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss take issue with what they view as the prevailing wisdom on Surrealism's involvement in politics, an account which begins with the high jinks of the Surrealists' interruption of the Saint-Pol-Roux banquet in July 1925, at the time of the Riff War in Morocco, extending through the movement's troubled rapprochement with the Parti communiste français (PCF), and effectively ending in the summer of 1935 with the disruption of Breton's intervention in the International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture. This latter event prompted the suicide of René Crevel and concluded with the definitive rejection by Surrealism of Stalinist communism with the publication in August 1935 of the pamphlet *Du temps que les Surréalistes avaient raison*. Spiteri and LaCoss challenge this delimiting of Surrealist political activity to the decade 1925–35, instead tracing its genesis back to the Paris Dada period, while also extending it beyond the mid-1930s and on into the postwar period. To effect this extension of political engagement, however, requires that they radically re-configure the definition as to what actually constitutes the 'political,' and in this the editors draw upon the distinction made by Claude Lefort in his essay 'The Question of Democracy,' between 'politics' [*la politique*] as 'the particular institutional forms of political organization and activity in a society,' and 'the political' [*le politique*] as 'the movement that constitutes the social space of a particular society.'¹ On the one hand, then, we have overt Surrealist engagement in 'politics' in the form of tracts, statements and other direct interventions within politicised contexts, while on the other hand we have a far more wide-ranging commitment to 'the political' in what Spiteri and LaCoss characterise as 'an experience of freedom grounded in the imaginative possibilities revealed through creative endeavour.' It is this latter experience, the editors argue, 'that constituted the link between the artistic or literary plane and the social plane, between culture and politics in Surrealism.'² While this approach has the undoubted advantage of vastly expanding the scope of what might legitimately be considered political activity – and there are

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numerous examples within this excellent collection where such a re-interpretation pays enormous dividends – there are perhaps also occasions where one could reasonably

question whether the term 'political' is in fact being deployed in any meaningful sense. Nonetheless, this journey through a re-configured political landscape, together with the challenge that it poses to our pre-conceptions of 'the political,' is well worth making and we emerge from it with a fresh appreciation of Surrealism's politico-cultural engagement. Robert Short's classic account *The Politics of Surrealism, 1920-36*, written in 1966 and reprinted in this collection, plays a pivotal role within it. Short's crisply written and much-cited essay is posed as the orthodoxy which the rest of the collection seeks to challenge or expand upon, though in many ways it refuses to be confined to that role.³ While Short's account is one of the heroic 'failure' of the Surrealist political enterprise, it is a failure premised upon the movement's attempt 'to associate its intellectual, artistic and moral preoccupations with the aims of international Communism.' But as Short also makes clear, this failure and the breach with organised communism did not mean that Surrealism abandoned the political path. In fact, political participation continued throughout the history of the movement, as for example in Surrealist anti-fascist activity, involvement in the Spanish Republic as well as Surrealist participation in the short-lived revolutionary movements Contre-Attaque and the Fédération internationale de l'art révolutionnaire indépendant (FIARI). The Surrealists' failure was therefore quite specifically that of failing to attain their goal of bringing together 'spiritual revolution' with that of international communism, such that, after 1935, the 'group's artistic and political activities were definitively separated.' Short is also acutely aware of the slippery problem of defining Surrealist political activity and suggests that the term 'politics' might be a misnomer in this context, given the movement's broad restriction of its activity to the stage of *agitation* and that the Surrealists either 'rejected or were incapable of the sustained application which commitment demanded.'⁴ The timing of Short's essay is also interesting, coming as it does (September 1966) at precisely the time of Breton's death and at a time when post-Surrealist groups, and in particular the Situationist International, were already preparing for the events of May 1968, when the Situationists would participate in the building of barricades in the rue Gay-Lussac.⁵

The re-interrogation of proto-Surrealist political attitudes during the period of Paris Dada is undertaken by Theresa Papanikolas in her essay 'Towards a New Construction: Breton's Break with Dada and the Formation of Surrealism,' which explores the influence of Max Stirner's *The Ego and His Own* (1845) and in particular what Papanikolas designates as the group's 'anarchoindividualism.' The mock trial of Maurice Barrès conducted by Breton in May 1921 is often portrayed as a trial of the betrayal of the idealism of youth, but in fact assumes a far more political dimension when Barrès is acknowledged as having been admired by Breton's generation as an exponent of Stirner's anarchoindividualism. While Barrès's trilogy *Le Culte du moi* (1910) is permeated by Stirner's thought, the final volume saw a retreat from

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individualism and a shift towards recognising the self as part of a greater, national whole – hence Barrès's political journey to the right, eventually becoming emblematic of the reactionary nature of the Third Republic. The trial also provided the occasion for Breton to interrogate Tzara on his own anarchoindividualism and hence to move on from the destructive bias of Dada, to the far more creative project that was to become Surrealism. In his own contribution to this volume, 'Surrealism and the Political Physiognomy of the Marvellous,' Raymond Spiteri draws upon Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'image realm' in order to explore some of Surrealism's complex involvement in revolutionary politics and to analyse the tangled interrelationship of culture with politics. Spiteri juxtaposes two 'failed encounters' of Surrealism within social space – Breton's short-lived encounter with Nadja in October 1926, and the group's tortuous attempts between 1926 and 1927 to join the PCF – and treats Breton's writing of *Nadja* (1928) towards the end of 1927 as a kind of 'working through' of those two encounters. Spiteri's analysis of *Nadja* focuses upon Breton's deployment of photographs in that volume, which provides, he argues, a

concrete example of Benjamin's notion of the 'image-realm,' where the images 'seem to trace Surrealism's trajectory across the social space, suspended between the fields of culture and politics.'⁶ However, Breton's appeal to the concept of the 'marvellous' ultimately fails to bridge the gap between imagination and action, and fails to transform latent possibility into concrete revolutionary action. A close reading of *Nadja*, Spiteri concludes, reveals Surrealism's 'profound ambivalence' towards political action, but that the encounter can nonetheless be conceived as successful to the extent that it facilitates the manifestation of the 'political' within Surrealism. Surrealist political activism, Spiteri argues, 'rarely managed to escape the orbit of culture' and its engagement with revolutionary politics consequently 'assumed the form of a series of missed or failed encounters.'

Cultural politics again provides the central theme of Elena Filipovic's essay, 'Surrealism in 1938: The Exhibition at War,' which finds its focus in Duchamp's staging of the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* at Georges Wildenstein's Paris gallery in 1938. Whereas this show is widely perceived as a sign of Surrealism's withdrawal from political activism, Filipovic takes issue with the argument that it marks, in Susan Rubin Suleiman's phrase, a shift 'from the street to the salon.' Her contention is that the assumption of Surrealism's withdrawal from politics rests upon 'stable notions of aesthetics and politics' and a notion of 'political' activity as constrained to overtly political actions. Instead, Filipovic contends that: 'it is precisely in this newly privileged Surrealist arena for expression – the exhibition space itself – that I would argue that the *Exposition* sought to redefine the movement's relationship to the ideological.'⁷ Filipovic sets up an intriguing opposition between, on the one hand, the two highly political exhibitions held in Munich in the summer of 1937 – the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung* and the notorious *Entartete Kunst* shows – and on the other, the dark and dank show created by Duchamp in Paris, with its '1200' coal sacks suspended from the ceiling and a floor strewn

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with dirt and dead leaves, while the opening night crowd picked their way through the darkness with the aid of torches. Filipovic's point is that the exhibition space itself was already highly politicised by the late 1930s and that we must therefore read Duchamp's gesture, not as a *retreat* from, but rather as a shift *towards* politics: 'the Surrealists' idiosyncratic installation defined a form of ideological critique that concentrated on the disruptive potential of process, ephemerality, instability and visual frustration ... '⁸ While the point is well made, it nonetheless leaves valid questions – given that the protagonists themselves made no overt political claims for the show (particularly given Duchamp's own celebrated attitude of detachment), and that, as Filipovic herself points out, it was 'the overwhelming opinion of the press and critics in 1938' that the show marked a retreat from politics – as to the extent to which an event so lacking in political intent or consequences could still be considered in any meaningful sense to be 'political.' The dancer Hélène Vanel performed a convulsive-hysterical dance within the exhibition space, suggesting to Filipovic an opposition between the hysterical female body of Surrealism and the rational, disciplined and ordered bodies of the Nazi parades and spectacles – though in terms of *sexual* politics, if Breton and Aragon could still celebrate 'Le Cinquantenaire de l'hystérie' in 1928, the joke, a decade later, was surely wearing thin. Certainly more ominous, even premonitory, was 'the inclusion of loudspeakers blaring the German army's "pas de parade" at the opening night of the exhibition,' and Filipovic's broader point about the increasing politicisation of the exhibition space during the late 1930s is well made.

Gender and body politics is surely an outstanding exception to the general neglect of the political within Surrealism and figures within a number of contributions to this volume, considered variously from the standpoints of such themes as masculinity, misogyny and pornography. In her essay 'Advertising Surrealist Masculinities: André Kertész in Paris,' Amy Lyford explores the depiction of masculinity in the work of Kertész – a figure

somewhat outside the mainstream of Surrealist activity – in a portrayal at odds with the postwar rhetoric of regeneration and which instead presents ‘the traumatised male body as a sign of modern French culture.’⁹ Lyford’s contention that Surrealism borrowed from contemporary publicity techniques in ‘producing and disseminating images permeated by a language that emphasized dismemberment instead of a seamless process of reconstruction’ is certainly fascinating, though perhaps not fully borne out by the example of Kertész. This is in part a problem of Kertész’s still ambivalent status within the Surrealist movement, though the work of Ian Walker has required a rethinking of the role of documentary photography within Surrealism, which, in shifting attention towards material reality and the everyday, has potentially far-reaching implications for our understanding of Surrealist politics.¹⁰

Alyce Mahon provides a sophisticated analysis of the photographic work of Hans Bellmer, drawing on the writings of Barthes (in particular his *The Pleasure of the Text*) and on Lyotard’s deployment of the term ‘libidinal politics’ in his book *Libidinal Economy* (1974). For

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Lyotard, Mahon observes, libidinal economy is ‘connected to political economy as representation (ideological, artistic, fantasmatic) and production (economic and material production),’ where both representation and production are ‘part of a general process of libido-circulation,’ such that both the economic and the bodily systems are founded upon *desire*.¹¹ In Lyotard’s terms, Bellmer’s ‘displacement’ and ‘substitution’ of the various body parts of his *Poupée* becomes conceived as an act of transgression – ‘as transgressing the unified body’ – and thus assumes a far broader socio-political dimension. Sited within this broader context, Mahon is able to argue of Bellmer’s project that its deployment of the female body ‘must be understood within the historical context of its production and reception as a subversion of gender and national politics in the pre- and wartime Germany.’¹² Mahon thus provides further support for the re-reading of Bellmer effected by Hal Foster (*Compulsive Beauty*) and Rosalind Krauss (*Bachelors*), though framed within a psychoanalytic reading of the work, wherein his violent assaults upon the female body are to be construed in terms of an affront to the fascist father, and more broadly as a transgression against the totalitarian body of the Nazi state that Bellmer abandoned in 1938. But as Foster himself observes, there are ‘problems with this work that cannot be resolved away’ and the *poupées* ‘produce misogynistic effects that may overwhelm any liberatory intentions,’ such that the work, notwithstanding its political inflection, nonetheless remains both deeply disturbing as well as highly problematic in terms of its sexual politics.¹³

Jonathan P. Eburne’s ‘Surrealism Noir’ takes as its focus the case of the Papin sisters, whose sensational trial in 1933 following their bloody murder of their employers, provides the occasion for an analysis of Surrealist attitudes towards terrorist violence, paranoia and desire. Eburne argues a shift in the character of the Surrealist movement, from the ‘red’ period of political activism under the banner of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (1930–33), to what he designates the movement’s ‘noir’ period, characterised by ‘a renewed interest in formal innovation, mental aberration and automatism,’ and as exemplified in the shift in 1933 to Surrealism’s new and far more visually seductive vehicle, *Minotaure*. Eburne’s contention is not that this shift signals an end to Surrealism’s political ambitions, but rather that ‘Surrealism’s noir period is nonetheless driven by serious political concerns insofar as this dystopian theme actually performs analytical work in the service of the group’s political philosophy.’¹⁴ Drawing upon the clichés of what Slavoj Žižek has called the ‘noir universe,’ Surrealism is thus able to map out in symbolic form the lived reality of a ‘world gone wrong’ of the 1930s.

Robin Adèle Greeley, in her analysis of the relationship established between Breton and Trotsky in Cárdenas’s Mexico in 1938, points to the neglect by scholars of the historical and ideological impact of Trotsky’s thinking upon Surrealism. Greeley’s essay takes as its

focus the manifesto 'For An Independent Revolutionary Art' (1938), drafted by Breton and Trotsky (though signed, for reasons of political expediency, by Breton and Rivera), in order to tease

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out the very different attitudes towards the role of culture held by the two men, with Breton according to culture a far more autonomous status in relation to the economic order than did Trotsky. For Greeley it is 'Surrealism's dedication to cultural theory' that marks its 'fundamental opposition to Trotsky's more orthodox Marxism,' and we could add that it is surely Breton's unbending insistence upon individual liberty and cultural autonomy – 'Aucune autorité, aucune contrainte, pas la moindre trace de commandement!'¹⁵ – that pre-determined the failure of the movement's rapprochement with organized politics.

Postcolonialism is now well established as a specific academic discourse and in relation to Surrealism, important work has already been carried out in areas like the Surrealist critique of France's colonial heritage. The theme of anti-colonialism is directly addressed in Amanda Stansell's essay 'Surrealist Racial Politics at the Borders of "Reason": Whiteness, Primitivism and Négritude.' Like Filipovic, Stansell extends our conception of the political to the exhibition space itself, this time in the context of the Surrealists' response to the International Colonial Exposition held in Paris in 1931, in the form of their exhibition 'La Vérité sur les Colonies' with its promiscuous juxtaposition of Western and colonial artefacts alongside one another. Stansell also touches upon Breton's relationship with the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire and the limits of the Négritude movement, topics developed in greater depth in E. San Juan, Jr.'s essay 'Aimé Césaire's Insurrectionary Poetics.' In a subtle and demanding reading of Césaire's poetics, San Juan analyses the *dialectical* nature of the poet's insurrectionary thought in its engagement with Surrealist concepts such as 'objective chance' and the 'marvellous,' through which contradictions (between dream and reality, reason and sensibility) are resolved.

With regard to Surrealism's postwar political record, Donald LaCoss in his essay 'Attacks of the Fantastic,' challenges the arguments of the movement's opponents in 1945, that Surrealism had abandoned political activism and had instead immersed itself in escapist utopianism, mythological themes and an obsession with the occult. LaCoss views Breton's turn to utopianism as integral to Surrealism's postwar radical politics and focuses in particular upon the role of Fourier's thought in that project, considered not in terms of any practical 'manual' of social subversion, but rather for the work's 'potentially liberating effect upon the imagination.' What also appealed to Surrealism in Fourier's thought, LaCoss argues, is Fourier's concern with the psychosocial – his concern with behavioural motivation and with creativity. In the context of the increasing paralysis of thought with the intensifying polarization between East and West culminating in the Cold War, and with growing conservatism in the United States, utopian speculation thus assumes a new importance as one aspect of the exercise of liberty of thought. LaCoss also points to the significance of Fourier for post-Surrealist movements such as the Situationist International, and while outside the scope of this particular essay, it might have been interesting to reconsider within this expanded notion

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of 'the political,' how Surrealist politico-cultural thought fed into the political activism of such groups and its relationship with, for example, the events of May 1968.

We should also mention two significant analyses of political interventions by painters not normally associated with overt political activism – Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró. Robert S. Lubar provides an extensive analysis of Miró's *Still Life with Old Shoe* (1937) in terms of the artist's political mediation of the tragic events experienced in Spain during 1936–37, where politics is inscribed through the very *form* of the artwork itself. Jordana Mendelson argues that Dalí's explorations of paranoia and of Millet's *The Angelus* in both his

painting and writings, emerge crucially from Dalí's engagement with mass culture and 'have a political dimension which Dalí negotiates like a cultural critic.' Mendelson also makes some interesting parallels between Bataille's analysis of the structure of fascism, using concepts such as the 'heterogeneous' and 'unproductive expenditure,' and similar concepts in Dalí's paranoiac-critical writings, though the two men clearly differed radically in terms of political engagement.

In the concluding essay of this collection, 'Failure and Community: Preliminary Questions on the Political in the Culture of Surrealism,' Michael Stone-Richards returns to the key question of the way in which the political is to be framed in relation to Surrealism. For Stone-Richards, considering the failure of Breton and Bataille in 1935 to present in *Contre-Attaque* a valid alternative to organised communism, Surrealism's 'failure' needs to be viewed within the context of 'the larger failure of European political culture' during the 1930s (totalitarianism, Stalinism, Nazism), and the political thought of Breton and Bataille must also be seen as part of 'the re-thinking of the conditions of the political' of the time (for example in the work of Heidegger) in an effort to get beyond the present impasse. Drawing upon Jules Monnerot's *La Poésie moderne et le sacré* (1945), a text admired by Breton, Stone-Richards also points to the centrality of the *collective* experience to the Surrealist movement, 'an association,' says Stone-Richards, 'based upon *solidarity*, and election,' where such solidarity serves to create an 'ethical space' enabling movement towards 'a possible political realm.' Stone-Richards further contends that, following the debacle with the PCF, 'Surrealism gradually defined for itself a more ethically-based notion of protest ... which opposed itself to institutionalized forms of politics,' as for example in the assumption of an attitude of 'refusal.'¹⁶ Thus, while this enables the customary accounts of the failure of Surrealist politics in this period (Short, Lewis) to be criticised as 'too simple,' such a judgement demands a re-configuration of our conception as to what constitutes 'the political,' more particularly a shift from political activism into the territory of what is more usually considered the realm of *ethics*. Quite apart from its considerable enhancement of our understanding of a number of specific cultural contexts, one of the central achievements of this collection is the challenge it poses to our preconceptions surrounding the meaning and functioning of the political in its engagement with culture, such that the scope for further research within this expanded field is greatly

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increased. Surrealism's engagement with politics emerges from this interrogation as no less troubled, though as a field of study it emerges greatly invigorated – as such, this collection is to be commended.

Neil Matheson

University of Westminster

¹ Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss (eds), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, Studies in European Cultural Transition: Volume 16, Ashgate, Aldershot and Burlington, 2003, 9.

² Spiteri and LaCoss, *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*.

³ The editors trace the source of this account to Maurice Nadeau's *Histoire du surréalisme*, Paris, 1944, and see it reiterated in Helena Lewis's *The Politics of Surrealism*, New York, 1988.

⁴ Robert Short, 'The Politics of Surrealism, 1920-36,' in Spiteri and LaCoss (eds), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 35.

⁵ For an analysis of Surrealism's involvement with Marxism and the relationship between surrealism and the Situationist International, see Peter Wollen, 'Bitter Victory: The Art and Politics of the Situationist International,' in *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957-1972*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston Mass., 1991.

⁶ Spiteri, in Spiteri and LaCoss (eds), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 65.

⁷ Elena Filipovic, 'Surrealism in 1938: The Exhibition at War,' in Spiteri and LaCoss (eds),

- Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 180 note 2.
- ⁸ Filipovic, 'Surrealism in 1938' in Spiteri and LaCoss (eds), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 181.
- ⁹ Amy Lyford, in Spiteri and LaCoss (eds), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 74.
- ¹⁰ See Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*, Manchester and New York, 2002.
- ¹¹ Alyce Mahon, 'Hans Bellmer's Libidinal Politics,' in Spiteri and LaCoss (eds), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 247.
- ¹² Mahon, 'Han Bellmer', in Spiteri and LaCoss (eds), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 249.
- ¹³ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1993, 122.
- ¹⁴ Eburne, in Spiteri and LaCoss (eds), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 95.
- ¹⁵ André Breton and Diego Rivera, 'Pour un Art révolutionnaire,' in Eric Losfeld (ed.), *Tracts surréalistes*, Paris, 1980, 337.
- ¹⁶ Stone-Richards, 'Failure and Community: Preliminary Questions on the Political in the Culture of Surrealism,' in Spiteri and LaCoss (eds), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 318.
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