Just Some of the Paradoxes of Surrealism.

The Early Surrealism Movement.

At the outset of the movement created and dominated by André Breton, photography, and especially work by Man Ray, served a useful purpose to Surrealism, and was the medium of choice to illustrate the early surrealist literature. It is surprising that any of the other visual arts came into Surrealism. The Surrealists had a great deal of contempt for painting. Pierre Naville wrote in an early edition of *La Révolution Surréaliste* (of which he was co-editor): “Everyone knows there is no surrealist painting”. Breton himself referred to “that lamentable expedient which is painting”. When the visual arts entered Surrealism it was on the pretext of producing work beyond painting, or in defiance of painting, with the ambition of destroying the parochial and habitual vision of everyday life. Once in the movement, painting adopted a less revolutionary agenda, became Surrealism’s major force, and remains so.

Breton was intent on providing the intellectual basis for a revolution of the mind, culture, and society. In doing this the Surrealists had the aim of changing human nature and existence. Clearly this was a movement not lacking in ambition but it was deficient in application of ideas and realistic praxis. Ideas to transform society are of little consequence without the means to implement change, and in this regard Surrealism was and has so far been inconsequential. Or as Martin Jay puts it: “as a tool of radical social enlightenment it had little direct success”. Nevertheless, surrealist photographs produced in the early period of the movement occupy a precious place in avant-garde art, photography, culture, and society. Unfortunately, Surrealism is now often equated with meaningless fantasy in contemporary culture (especially in
advertising) without any acknowledgement to earlier philosophies. Fantasy imagery existed long before Breton’s Surrealists, for example, in the work of Breugel. And surrealism was not invented by the early twentieth century Surrealists, although they may have been among the first to idealise an artistic medium as a means of social and political revolution.

Twentieth century Surrealism grew from Dada, and many Dadaists, Man Ray and Max Ernst included, became Surrealists when Dada dissipated. Others, Marcel Duchamp included, were closely associated with the Surrealists, but remained outside the formal movement. Dada grew from an intense disdain for many things: nationalism, the carnage of the 1914-18 war, bourgeois society, and the inherited conditions of art itself. Despite these antipathies Dada was manifestly irreverent and humorous, qualities which were to pass into Surrealism. This is one of its great strengths, while at the same time laying it open to criticism from a conservative establishment. The work of many Surrealists was not well-received by the traditional art establishment or the public. Consequently, the Surrealists were often considered frivolous, trivial and worse still, bourgeois. In contrast, Breton’s Manifestos for Surrealism, the first of which was published in 1924, were radical political documents intent on providing the intellectual fundamentals for the movement, and for implementing societal change.
Breton’s Manifestos.

Krauss has this to say about Breton: “as the most central spokesman for Surrealism, [Breton] is an obstacle one must surmount; one cannot avoid him, if the issue is to deal with the movement comprehensively”. 9 Breton’s desire of transforming the individual and society was to be realised by revealing the normally covert component of the mind - the unconscious. Breton believed what was in the unconscious had the power to transform the individual and society. This cache of ideas, desires, and knowledge was to be found naturally through dreaming, and by techniques called automatic writing and the waking séance. 10

Surrealism was to be allied to communism, and revolution implemented by the proletariat for the common good. Breton’s Manifestos (the second published in 1930) are political keystones of Surrealism, and the surrealist artistic genre also depends on them. Despite the intellectual rigour of the Manifestos, the Surrealist movement was factious, fractious, chaotic, and unrealistic in its ideology. Allied to its popular reputation for frivolity these are not traits which bode well for sustaining a viable socio-political movement.

Despite the initial antipathy of the Surrealists to visual arts, as it developed Surrealism came to depend on photography for its publicity and dissemination, and on painting and sculpture for its artistic expression. The parentage of Surrealism lies in the romantic novel and in poetry, and the intervention of visual arts into Surrealism is one of its many contradictions. 11 Even more surprising is the initial attachment of Breton to photography. As the absolute realist medium focussed on the everyday, Breton might have been expected to reject photography entirely. When insisting on “a total revision of real values” he determined that “the plastic work of art will either refer to a purely internal model or
will cease to exist”. The internal model for Breton is the unconscious mind. Given that the functions of lens-based media are overwhelmingly outward-looking and pragmatic, Breton is surprisingly full of praise for photography and asks “when will all books that are worth anything stop being illustrated with drawings and appear only with photographs?” He was as good as his word - Breton’s books, including Nadja, are illustrated with photographs.

**Freud, Psychoanalysis and Surrealism.**

Breton’s Surrealism relied on Freud’s psychoanalytical theories. Breton believed that uniting the apparent disparities of the mind - the conscious and the unconscious - would create a state where reality is enhanced. This was called a “sur-reality”, something over and above that perceived as everyday existence. Dreams, and automatic expressions of sequestered thought, are fundamental characteristics exploited by Surrealists. Bringing the unconscious to the forefront of the mind, Breton thought, would create a social revolution and massively change perceptions of society, conflict, reality, and the self.

Still unanswered questions concern the nature of the conscious and unconscious and where they are located in the brain/mind. Freud in proposing the concept of the unconscious could not have identified it with any specific location in the brain/mind, and others have cautioned against reifying the unconscious as a place. The idea that the unconscious is some kind of spectral homunculus or psychic entity was prevalent in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and vestiges of this thought persist to the present. Freud and other psychoanalysts such as Jung formed their theories of the mind largely from the study of psychosis, and not from the functioning of the normal mind. In this way the mentality of the Surrealists could be said to be flawed from the outset. Milne has also said
that “Breugel’s art is the ancestor of Freud’s theories”, and so it is necessary to look much further back than early twentieth century psychoanalysis for an understanding of the unconscious.20

Re-expressing his earlier statements on Surrealism, Breton in 1936 distinguished between representing the overt and the covert in society: “Above all we expressly oppose the view that it is possible to create a work of art or even, properly considered, any useful work by expressing only the manifest content of an age. On the contrary, Surrealism proposes to express its latent content”.21 Manifest and latent are the same expressions Freud used in his seminal studies on the interpretation of dreams. Freud coined the term “manifest content” to describe the events of dreams recalled by dreamers. “Latent content” he defined as the hidden true meaning of dreams which requires psychoanalytical interpretation before it can be understood.22 This latent surrogacy arises from the dreamer’s need to modify the content and make the dream less disturbing, a necessary process if, as Freud proposed, all dreams are manifestations of repressed and inappropriate sexual desires or traumas persisting from infancy. Freud called the mental processing necessary to diminish the impact of inappropriate sexual ideas “dream-work”.23 Freud’s studies on hysteria and neurosis would have provided Breton with the bipartite concept of the conscious and unconscious mind. And it could be said, also gifted Surrealism with the liability of sexual angst.

Freud associated the unconscious with repression, whereas Breton regarded it as a reservoir of ideas which would have a greatly beneficial effect on the individual and society. Freud’s hypothesis was that an individual’s behaviour can be dominated by the unconscious, and he or she can be made to engage in non-volitional and obsessional behaviours. This seems to be the exact opposite of what Breton hoped to achieve. Automatic writing, one of the favourite tools of the Surrealists, has an
analogy in psychoanalysis with what Freud called “free association” – the way in which patients during analytical sessions would connect a chain of ideas which came to mind seemingly without conscious thought. It could be that Breton’s concept of the unconscious mind was simplistic and did not take into account the potentially damaging effect of the unconscious on cognitive and reasoning abilities in given individuals who might be overwhelmed by a change in mental state.

Relying on Freud’s psychoanalytical interpretations of the unconscious implies that surrealist art can be a product of sexual anxieties and repression. Dali’s “The Great Masturbator” is an example of this, but it is an article of faith that it was conceived with unconscious thought or through automatism rather than with conscious knowledge of Freudian theory. This is the problem for all surrealist art, both for the audience and the artist. As far as photography is concerned, dreams might be deliberately reconstructed in a photograph, but it is difficult to imagine that there is any aspect of photography that could equate to automatic writing in any technical sense.

There are very many surrealist images of women, e.g., those involving distortions or fragmentation in the work of Ubac and Kertész, that could easily be attributed to sexual anxiety and repression on the part of a male photographer (vi). The Freudian idea that dreams hold the key to understanding the unconscious is an important determinant in the development of surrealist art. It gave painting a mandate to depict dream-like imagery to the exclusion of photography in the genre, and the art establishment a reason to prefer the wholly imaginary over images with an apparent connection to reality.
Misogyny in the Surrealist Movement.

Surrealism was from the outset, a highly ambitious movement dedicated to overthrow of the establishment and liberation of people by revolution. One interpretation of surrealist photographs of female nudes from the 1920s and 1930s could suggest that these freedoms did not fully extend to women, who seemed to be exploited in the service of the male Surrealist. The Surrealists may have appropriated the misogyny inherent in Freudian theory, although Freud seemed to dislike both woman and men when he said: “I have found little that is good about human beings on the whole. In my experience, most of them are trash”.¹⁶ Reliant as the Surrealists were on Freud’s theories, central to which was the psychological spectre of castration, it seems inevitable that misogyny would be a feature of surrealist thought and art. If Surrealism relies on the unconscious as its reservoir of thought, and this is where repressed desire and crude male fantasies of women are likely to be found, it would not be surprising if they surfaced in photographs. The apparent exploitation of women as muses, models, and lovers, needs to be examined in the social climate of the times in which women had only recently been enfranchised. But this would not make it any less disappointing, given the ambitions of the movement. While some women photographers of the period produced surrealist images (e.g., Lee Miller, Eileen Agar, and Claude Cahun), there are few indications of any artistic response to misogyny, with one exception: Lee Miller’s photograph of a severed breast (a mastectomy) in a domestic setting.²⁷ There are many surrealist photographs that can easily be read as misogynistic: Kertesz’s Distortion series, Raoul Ubac’s solarized collages (e.g., Battle of the Amazons), Hans Bellmer’s Poupée series, Boiffard’s nudes, and Man Ray’s decapitated female torsos.²⁸-³² Breton’s photomontage L’Ecriture
Automatique, has an admiring woman caged in the background while Breton fiddles with a microscope.\(^{33}\)

Krauss has attempted to redress what she sees as misinterpretation of these images. She argues that surrealist photographs of women result from defamiliarizing techniques which produce dissolution of gender distinctions. This suggests that surrealism is proto-feminist and not anti-feminist.\(^{34}\) This is disputed by Kuenzli, who suggests that Krauss colludes with the male gaze, and because of this is incapable of seeing misogyny.\(^{35}\) If surrealist photographs amount to misogyny, what the Surrealists were doing throughout this period was reinforcing the patriarchal power systems of society, precisely those structures which had already resulted in one great war, and were about to precipitate a second. If this interpretation is valid, this would have been an amazing volte-face for a movement that grew out of Dada. Like Krauss, Lyford argues for surrealist images exploiting male emasculation, sexual difference, and anxieties about gender identity to undermine reconstruction of the patriarchal French society after the 1914-18 War.\(^{36}\)

Breton (and Louis Aragon who collaborated closely with Breton in the early days of the Surrealist movement) had some experience of psychiatry and would have been familiar with the work of Jean-Martin Charcot. It was Charcot who established the psychoanalytical basis for hysteria and wrongly identified it exclusively with women.\(^{37}\) Hysteria also occurred in men during the 1914-18 War, although it was classified as a distinct disorder (shell shock), to avoid suggestions of feminization. Photography played a central role in documenting the female hysteric in Charcot’s studies at the Salpêtrière Hospital. These are unintentionally surreal images, as a consequence of the clearly artificial poses of the women in “attitudes passionnelles”.\(^{38}\) It is likely that live ecstatic movements, even if they were not faked, could not be captured because of
long exposures necessary for photography at that time, meaning that they would need to be reenacted.

Placing the Charcot images alongside say, Man Ray’s photographs or those of André Kertesz, the misogyny directed against the hospitalized women becomes evident. Charcot’s subjects were controlled, dominated, and made to perform for the camera. In images of Surrealist photographers the manipulations producing effects regarded as detrimental to the female body were often made by technical means, whereas in the Charcot images it is the women who are manipulated. Surrealist photographers may well have coerced their female subjects in other ways but their images contain none of the brutality evident in the Salpêtrière Hospital studies.

Krauss suggests that the stigma left by the misogynistic depiction of women by the early Surrealists puts the genre in jeopardy as an authentic art form. What Krauss is seeking in reinterpreting surrealist photographs of women as proto-feminist is recognition for surrealist photography as mainstream art. Perhaps these arguments are not needed if there is no misogyny in Surrealist photographs. If Surrealist photographs are detrimental to women, missing from the arguments is why misogyny in surrealist or cubist painting is not as damaging to those media as it is to photography. Vogel describes Picasso’s Number 314 (of his suite of drawings Suite 347) as “art as creative rape of the model”, and describes the sexual brutality inherent in the image. If Surrealist photographs are not misogynistic, and this seems to be a reasonable conclusion, we have to look elsewhere if they are not as highly valued as surrealist painting of female nudes. The inherent properties of indexicality of photographs, their apparent representation of the real, and an over-simplistic interpretation of content need then to be considered.
But most likely the problem is the ease with which photographs can be reproduced, diminishing their value as unique commodities.

**The Paradox of Aestheticism in Surrealism.**

Breton’s Surrealist movement claimed to be anti-aesthetic and anti-religious. Denial of religion was an imperative for the philosophical basis of Surrealism when Descartes and Voltaire had historically attributed all ideas in the human mind to God. Denying aesthetics in the work of surrealist photographers was more difficult. This is evident in the work of the photographer whose name is synonymous with surrealist photography - Man Ray. The pages of the first issue of the surrealist publication “La Révolution Surréaliste” had a number of images by Man Ray, but as soon as the second issue appeared he showed his willingness to photograph what is immediately visible rather than disguise, alter or subvert. Neither do these early Man Ray images make any attempt to depict the ordinary and everyday as surreal, in the way sometimes achieved by Atget. By the late 1920s Man Ray had established a reputation for portrait and commercial photography in Paris, and many of his images, such as his female nude or semi-nude photographs show a profound sense of aesthetics.

This is what Simon Watney said about Man Ray’s photographs: “Photography proved to be largely resistant to the surrealist imagination and Man Ray’s photographs have far more to do with a Modernist aesthetic derived from cubist painting than with Surrealism”. In identifying Man Ray as a surrealist photographer, it is evident that he works in a variety of styles, only some of which are intended to result in surrealist images. With some of Man Ray’s images, such as the female torso with four breasts, Watney’s assertion is difficult to dispute. Difficult that is, if one disregards the medium of photography. Discussing
this image, Matthews says that: “Ray’s photo is of documentary value. Photography has become an instrument for documenting the impossible, with all the force that it is acknowledged to have as a medium of scientific documentation”.

This force is a consequence of the indexical properties of the photograph and its relation to the real. Matthews also suggests that Man Ray’s images are carefully chosen to represent a fundamental tenet of Surrealism: that dreaming was not meant to segregate the surreal from the real. Man Ray’s photographs “forestalled misinterpretation of the relationship that the surreal bears to the real”. That is, the Surrealists’ intention was to amalgamate the surreal and the real, and not to keep the surreal safely isolated from observed reality. This was a dangerous strategy, difficult to achieve both for the individual and society, and may be one of the reasons for the eventual failure of the Surrealist movement.

Opposition to Breton and Surrealism.

Reality is experienced in a waking state and dreams are a consequence of sleep and the two are irreconcilable: this is a view in keeping with the ideas of the French existential philosopher Satre. For Satre there is no unconscious reality. Satre was highly critical of the philosophical basis of Surrealism and of its potential for instigating revolution. In trying to reconcile the conscious and unconscious Satre argued that the Surrealists destroy subjectivity and reality and create “a never-never land of magical objectivity”. This infiltration of the conscious by the unconscious where imagination is the thing that becomes real is strikingly similar to the characteristics of mental illness and delusion. This implies that the ideal mind of the Surrealist, where subjectivity and reality are lost, might be incapable of rational thought and action, if that were the persistent and everyday state of the mind. Satre
contends that “Surrealism — attempts to achieve nothingness through an excess of being”. 51

Henri Lefebvre too attacked the philosophical basis of Surrealism, and his idea that Surrealists were dismissing reality in favour of the magical, was a commonly held view of the left in the 1940s and 1950s. 52 Surrealism was seen as concerned with the trivial, bizarre, and metaphysical. It was unthinkingly against everything that was bourgeois, without evaluation of what it was condemning. It was incomprehensible to those it was seeking to liberate - the working classes. Louis Aragon (along with Breton, one of the founders of the surrealist movement), underwent a conversion to Soviet realism in 1932 after a visit to the USSR. He then denounced Surrealism for the French Communist Party with the words: “Let us have done with hallucinations, the unconscious, sex, dreams. Enough of fantasy! I hereby proclaim the return to reality”. 53 Within the Surrealist movement, Breton also faced revolt from Bataille, who quit the group in 1929 to pursue his alternative philosophical ideal of the “informe”. Bataille, along with Boiffard, Ubac, and Tabard, pursued this ideal of dissolution and/or distortion of the body as a concept of base materialism from which revolution and the reordering of society would erupt. 54 While opposition and criticism on this scale would seem to denigrate both Breton and Surrealism, these controversies, which are as relevant as ever, are a mark of the tremendous value of the Surrealist movement in creating discourse.

However flawed surrealist theory may seem to have been, Breton never became an apologist for Surrealism as revolutionary politics. By the mid-1930s it was evident that allying Surrealism with communism was an unattainable and undesirable goal when power in the USSR was in the hands of Stalin. Communism was relinquished as the vehicle for surrealist revolutionary politics at that time. This is also several years
after Soviet Realism was endorsed as the preferred form of artistic expression in Russia. Nevertheless, writing at the time of the International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936, Breton restates the aims of Surrealism and looks forward to the end of European bourgeoisie with the words: “there is no doubt that the French revolution has just begun”.

Breton’s Surrealism is a mass of contradictions; he is wholly unreasonable in his assessment of the influence and state of the movement at all times, and in the face of all opposition. Walter Benjamin, writing on Surrealism, suggests that Breton, intoxicated by revolution, sets aside disciplined preparations for its outcome in favour of a praxis involving “rehearsal and celebration before the event”. Although Breton is ambitious for Surrealism he is also surprisingly ambivalent about its outcomes, perhaps realising the difficulties of any change involving states of the mind. In his 1924 Manifesto he wrote: “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, if one may speak. It is in quest of this surreality that I am going, certain not to find it but too unmindful of my death not to calculate to some slight degree the joys of its possession”. Breton was right in his uncertainty: Surrealism provided a platform for art including photography, but never amounted to a realistic mandate for revolution. Despite the apparent failure, and the personal and political chaos of the movement, Breton leaves a fantastic legacy. Debates on art, reality, the unconscious, photography, signification, and most importantly the human condition, interpreted through surrealist imagery, continue unabated.
Notes.


3. Ibid. p.99.


5. Ibid. p.250.


13.Ibid. p. 98.


18. Ibid. p. 19.


20. Milne, pp. 36-37.
   “The most important connection between Breugel’s imagery and Freudian dream theory is...located...precisely in visual practice: in processes of representation which render the representation of things dream-like”.


22. Storr, p. 45.

23. Ibid. p45.

24. Ibid p40


26. Storr p13


30. Ibid. pp.87-90

31. Ibid. pp.62-63

32. Ibid p.61

33. Ibid p8


38. Ibid.pp. 142-147


41. Martin Jay, p.84.


44. Rosalind E. Krauss, L’Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism, pp 142-144. Figures 88 and 127 in L’Amour Fou should be compared. They are unmistakably from the same negative; the first image is cropped to show just the torso of Lee Miller, and the second is a three quarter length portrait. The first is dated 1931 and the second 1929.

45. Martin Jay, p.250.


48. Ibid.


50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.


53. Ibid. p. 100.


55. Breton, Read ed., p. 97


57. André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism (Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1972), pp. 1-29.