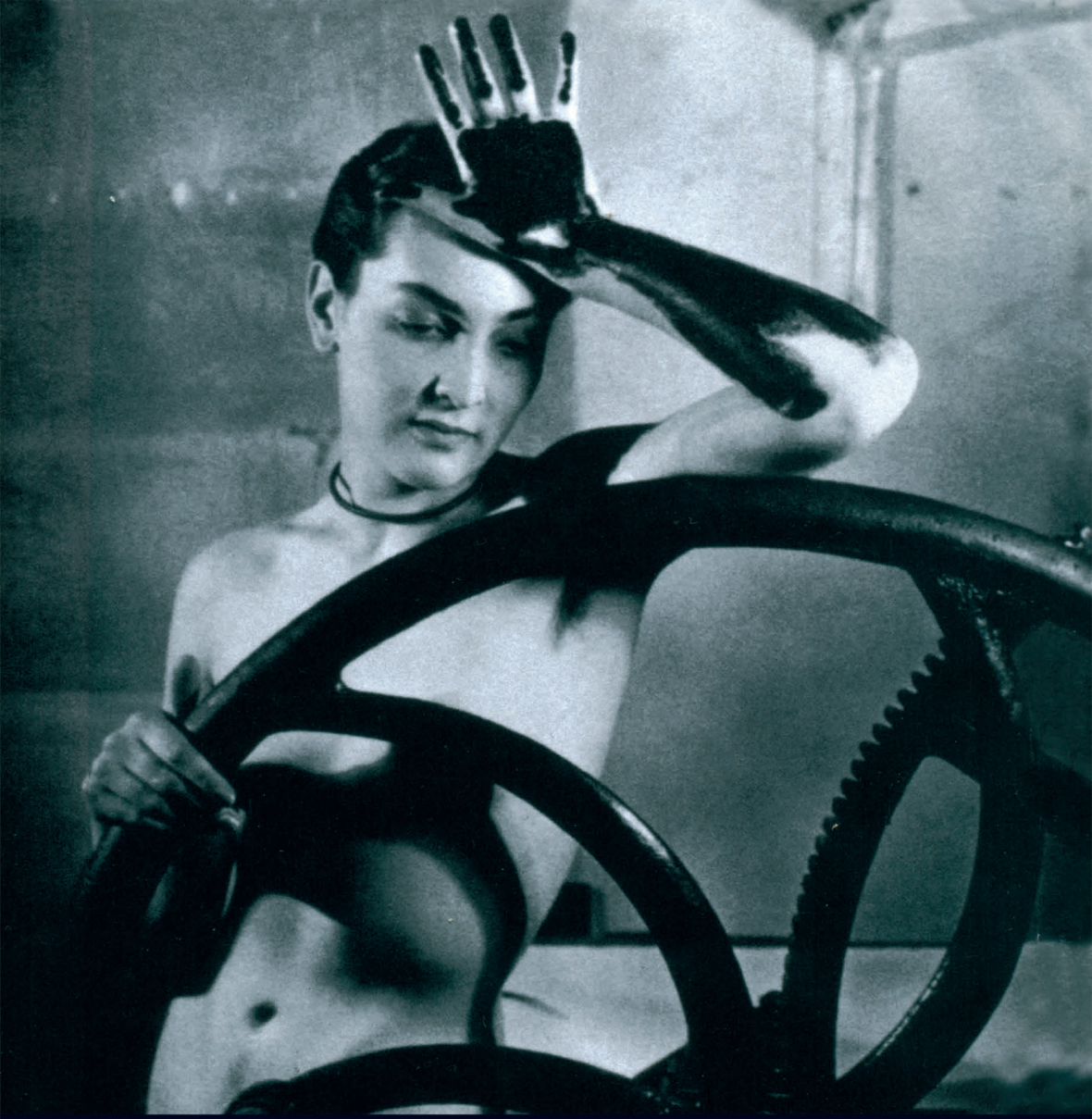


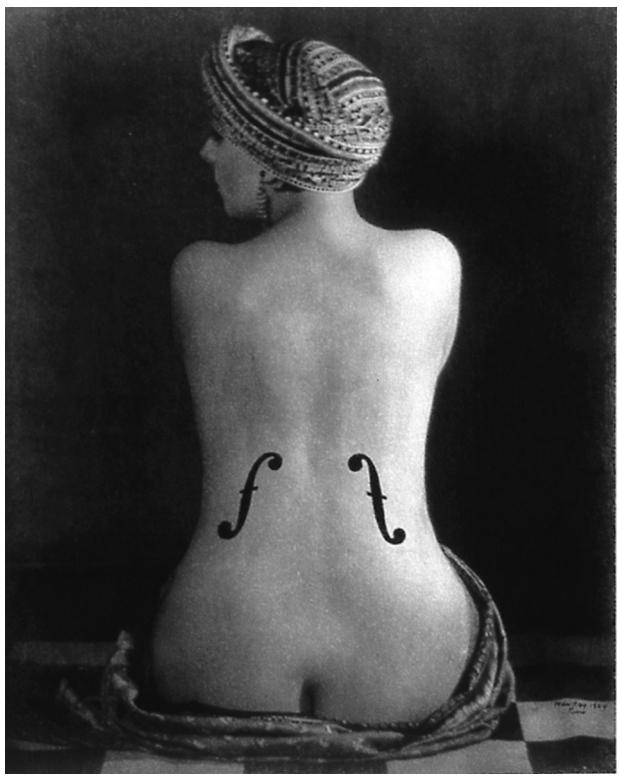
PHOTOGRAPHY & SURREALISM

SEXUALITY, COLONIALISM AND SOCIAL DISSENT

DAVID BATE

ROUTLEDGE

Photography and Surrealism



David Bate

Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent

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Preface

Why a book on photography and surrealism? Writing about photography and surrealism first began as the response to a practical issue. As a teacher of undergraduate photography students, 1920s and 1930s European photography was on the curriculum because it was a defining moment for twentieth-century photography. The radical experiments in photography by various avant-garde artist groups across Europe (in particular Germany, France and Russia) and the fluidity between them offered a world of different uses of photography and debates for students committed to a critical visual practice. Surrealism was obviously part of this.

From my own point of view, surrealism also offered a field of inquiry charged with my own interests: avant-garde culture, photography, Marxism and psychoanalytic theory. Of all the avant-gardes that used photography, none other was so clearly involved in attempting to reconceptualize what a cultural practice could be in relation to concepts of subjectivity and the social. (Although in early Soviet photography the debates were exciting, questions of subjectivity and the consequences of psychoanalytic theory were more or less suppressed, even before Stalin had finally implemented a state-governed 'socialist realism'.)

The materials then available to give students on photography and surrealism seemed inappropriate. They were either too difficult, too simple, ahistorical or actually missed the whole point of surrealism. Some were chronological descriptions, almost biographical and without any critical analysis, others were positivist without any politics or, elsewhere, were dominated by anecdotes about surrealists which, although interesting, had little relation to surrealist images. All these are still endlessly recycled. For me, such approaches were lacking in any theory of surrealism. On the other hand texts which discuss surrealism critically tended to do so in the terms of an existing discourse on art, literature, or film etc., rather than in the terms of surrealism's own disregard for disciplinary boundaries. In art history, for

example, surrealism is often collapsed as simply another artist movement solely described by its paintings and located in a chronological continuum – rarely is surrealism recognized as an interdisciplinary movement using different forms and modes of articulation that were resistant to such definitions. Surrealism tried to maintain its own discursive space, independent from other discourses upon which it nevertheless had to encounter and negotiate for its activities, literary culture, visual arts (publications, gallery spaces for exhibitions, cinema etc.), politics and so on. Yet surrealism is constantly studied as though it existed only within the terms of one (or other) of those discourses so that the study of surrealism as a whole is overly abstract, partial and fragmented. As a consequence, the aims, functions and purpose of surrealism remain obscure and hard to grasp. This is by no means simply a fault of writers, as these problems are the result of difficulties in surrealism as a topic, where even its very definition seems to become elusive and slippery as soon as it has been stated. Needless to say, the intention of this book, although framed by 'photography and surrealism', is to situate those terms within the larger culture of surrealist practice.

Understanding of surrealism is further compromised by the fact that a common-sense notion of surrealism as 'surreal', meaning something strange, bizarre or incomprehensible, is already a familiar term in everyday language. That notion of the *surreal* is doubly a problem in that it is itself an obstacle to understanding *historical* surrealism as a movement because that popular sense of 'surreal' itself is a non-explanation of an experience.

Such are the issues a teacher has to confront. How, then, to give an understanding of surrealism and an account of the ways in which photography was used within it? One solution was to research it more for myself. Sitting next to the historical problems in the curriculum were theoretical tools for tackling photography, a virtual tool kit: 'photography theory'. Derived from semiotics, sociology, a theory of ideology, discourse and psychoanalysis, photography theory offered a way to discuss the production and consumption of meanings in any photographic image. Yet these had never really been tested on surrealism. So it seemed useful to

try. Of course, now, thinking about this the other way around, it can be seen how far surrealism was marginal or had been marginalized in any theory of photography. The aim of this book, then, is to re-examine surrealism through the framework of its uses of photography.

What is the relevance of a study of photography and surrealism at the beginning of the twenty-first century? As digital imaging processes transform the industrial mode of production of photographic images today, the idea of 'photography' as a 'new technology' in the 1920s and 1930s in surrealism is a view that for us recedes like an object in a rear-view mirror. It is almost completely out of sight of our current condition. With the advent of a so-called 'digital' culture, the greater ease with which any image can be materially reshaped to suit the wishes of an individual is now all too obvious to see. Does this sound like surrealism? Yes. Is it surrealist? No. When the aim of an image is to fulfil a fantasy of the producer in a reality-representation (even as a sur-reality), this does not sum up the aims of surrealism. That is to say, even if the pervasiveness of photographic images where the rules of realism are broken (advertising, art, fashion, cinema, television, web culture etc.) and appear to be 'surreal', this is not the same as *historical* surrealism. I doubt that the surrealists would be much pleased with today's so-called surreal images to be found across modern culture. In the 1920s and 1930s, surrealism always had an ambition for desire that was also a form of social criticism, drawing out social and psychical conflict. Surrealism did not subscribe to an anarchy of desire and still less a rampant egoism, even if it is often depicted as such. Thus, the subtitle of this book, 'sexuality, colonialism and social dissent', offers a triangle of terms to indicate its agenda and that of surrealism itself. It is a triangle of terms from which the oedipal triangle of father, mother and child is never far away either. The surrealists offered a critique of bourgeois sexual relations, masculinity and femininity, institutional treatment of the ill, social prejudices, religious bigotry, Eurocentrism and colonialist politics. Their anti-paternalism ran deep and – I only mean this as a positive analogy – was that of the child (male or female) who questions the rules and values of an adult

culture whose only reply is that as a parent they 'know best'. This familial framework is also one of the things a criticism of surrealism can teach us: how difficult it is to escape the models we are given by our families and culture in any response against those very things.

Yet the brilliant flame of surrealism, like that of psychoanalysis, for which the surrealists were a very important avenue in France, is something that tends to remain hidden in Anglo-American criticism. Of all the avant-gardes, surrealism has been the most and least successful, a victim of its own success: appropriated, hegemonized and assimilated. The whole legacy of historical surrealism is dismissed in the same way that the concept of the unconscious is rejected. Both surrealism and psychoanalysis suffer from a tyranny of the ego, as 'common-sense' values impose a defensive criticism against them. In this sense, amnesia takes the place of history and criticism, and their functions lose any useful purpose. Against this, it seems to me important to remember the project of surrealism as an *avant-garde*.

The avant-garde offered an approach to culture that resisted and fought the pessimistic inevitability of certain modes of thinking, living and acting in a society. Offering a critique of established attitudes, the avant-garde laid down a challenge to rethink how we live and how to oppose the passivity of accepting what is given as our historical fate. This was the virtue of the avant-garde. Of course, any avant-garde has blind spots, but we should not conclude that the avant-garde simply 'failed', as sociological critics in particular have claimed and even seem wilfully to misunderstand. Indeed, we should be suspicious of those who rush to dismiss attempts to question the status quo, no matter how small the project or ineffective in the end. After all, what is failure? Can someone know in advance whether something will fail? Is the fact that surrealism has been reduced in popular discourse to a simple aesthetic device, 'the *surreal*', as a 'non-meaning' due to a failure of surrealism itself? Or is this the failure of those who simply repeat the failure to read surrealism, forgetting that it did this or that? And what is success? Perhaps a more mature history will ask the more important historical questions: what did surrealism do, how and *why*? Lest we forget …

Introduction

'Photography is unclassifiable,' says Roland Barthes at the beginning of *Camera Lucida*.[1] Barthes goes on to declare his dissatisfaction with the modes of its analysis (technical, historical, sociological) and its classifications (empirical, rhetorical and aesthetic). We might express a similar frustration with the field of visual surrealism. But the solution to difficulties of classification and analysis is not to give up on them, as Barthes's assertion might be taken to suggest, but to find another way, as Barthes himself does in *Camera Lucida* (he resorts to phenomenology). Why use one classification or mode of analysis rather than another? The answer depends upon the object and what the actual aim of the inquiry is.

This book is a study of surrealism through the particularity of its uses of photography. But rather than take the connection between photography and surrealism as self-evident, it asks why and how photography was useful to surrealism and what the surrealists did with it. The approach is not an exhaustive accumulation of evidence, but rather a symptomatic reading of key images already known in surrealism. The scope is, broadly speaking, defined by the surrealist corpus itself. Each chapter takes an aspect of the historical project of surrealism in relation to photography, with the chapters more or less chronological in sequence, but governed by the image of a kaleidoscope rather than a straight line. This is not a joke. I mean it in the sense that Walter Benjamin invoked a kaleidoscope as a model for history. Each chapter offers a particular take on photography and surrealism with one fragment, central in one chapter, reappearing in another in a different part of the picture. The book follows a trajectory of issues developed within surrealism itself. This is important. Although surrealism did in fact 'evolve' and respond reflexively to the circumstances in which it found itself, this development in surrealism is rarely acknowledged or addressed within existing literature. Thus the subtitled topics of this book, 'sexuality, colonialism and social dissent', find their place in and across the chapters. The book moves from the question

1 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*; *Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Fontana, 1984), p. 4.

of relations of photography to surrealism, twisted on its axis to discuss Orientalism, sexuality, anti-colonialism and the surrealists' own exile.

Of course, all such concepts as photography, surrealism, history, theory and so on, demand some sort of qualification, but the introduction to them here must be short, otherwise those arguments would themselves become the book. In part, these issues are taken up in the book where relevant, so the task here, rather than to repeat them, is to point to the general arguments which frame this book.

Surrealism

On 1 June 1934 André Breton addressed the question 'What is Surrealism?' to a public audience in Brussels, an event organized by Belgian surrealists.[2] Looking back over the fifteen years of surrealist activity, Breton defined surrealism up to that point as composed of two 'epochs'. The first, 1919–24, he characterized as 'a purely *intuitive* epoch' and the second, 1925–34, as 'a *reasoning* epoch'.[3] What marked and made the change from an 'intuitive' to a 'reasoning' surrealism, Breton claimed, was the French colonial war against Morocco:

> No coherent political or social attitude, however, made its appearance till 1925; that is to say (and it is important to stress this) till the outbreak of the Moroccan war, which, re-arousing our particular hostility to the way armed conflicts affect man, placed suddenly before us the necessity of making a public protest … [and] created a precedent that was to determine the whole future direction of the movement. Surrealist activity, faced with a brutal, revolting, *unthinkable* fact, was forced to ask itself what were its proper resources and to determine their *limits*; it was forced to adopt a precise attitude, exterior to itself, in order to continue to face whatever exceeded these limits.[4]

Surrealism was confronted with the reality of the social and political world through a colonialist war. Because of this, he says, surrealism began to shift its activity from an idealist one, 'the view that *thought is supreme over matter*', to a dialectical materialist one, 'the *supremacy of matter over mind*'.[5] Breton, the self-appointed leader of

2 André Breton, 'What is Surrealism?' trans. and published in English in 1936 (Faber and Faber) by David Gascoyne and reprinted in Franklin Rosemont (ed.), *What is Surrealism?* (London: Pluto, 1989).

3 Ibid., p. 116.

4 Ibid., p. 117.

5 Ibid.

surrealism, was clear about what this meant: 'Surrealist activity had to cease being content with the results (automatic texts, recital of dreams, improvised speeches, spontaneous poems, drawings and actions) which it had originally planned; and how it came to consider these first results as being simply so much *material*, starting from which the problem of knowledge inevitably arose again under quite a new form.'[6]

Noting that surrealism is 'fashioned by events', Breton praised the hard-core stalwarts who stayed in surrealism during that time, 'the perfect teamwork of René Crevel, Paul Eluard, Max Ernst, Benjamin Péret, Man Ray, Tristan Tzara' and Breton himself.[7] Some of these, like Ernst the German artist and Tzara the literary artist, had come from the non-sense activities of Dada. Others, like Eluard and Péret, had come from poetry. Man Ray, already a friend of Marcel Duchamp, had of course been in New York and was the key figure in bringing photography to surrealism in the mid-1920s. But there are many others Breton fails to mention here who were crucial to the development of the surrealist movement who fell by the wayside across those two epochs, like the writers Pierre Naville, Louis Aragon and Philippe Soupault, excluded no doubt because they had fallen out with Breton and the path that surrealism was taking. The important point here is that surrealism developed and changed with the events in its time, it was a *move*ment, so any framing of surrealism must recognize these shifts.

Hence, for example, the common assumption in Anglo-American criticism that the 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism* marks the *beginning* of surrealism – as though surrealism appeared out of nothing – neglects the years of surrealism before that. As Breton's 1934 essay notes, the 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism* marks the *end* of the first period and the beginning of a second 'reasoning' phase. While it is not until the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* in mid-1924 that the techniques of automatic writing and the marvellous are formally defined as surrealist 'psychic automatism', those ideas were already clearly articulated in Breton's 'Enter the Mediums' in *Littérature* (no. 6, second series) in November 1922, initiated as 'a new method of poetic writing',[8] as a way out of the poverty of 'poetry'.[9] Through automatism, dream recital

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 119.

8 Ibid., p. 120.

9 The 'Poverty of Poetry' is the title of an essay published by Breton in 1932 in which he reviewed the question of poetry in the light of Louis Aragon's 'Red Front' poem. See Rosemont (ed.), *What is Surrealism?*, pp. 76–82.

and hypnosis, the surrealists had already attempted to produce texts which bypassed conscious censorship before the *Manifesto*.

Breton's conception of early surrealism as 'intuitive' is no doubt derived from the work of Henri Bergson on 'mental images' with which he was familiar: 'Pure intuition, external or internal, is that of an undivided continuity.'[10] As Breton argued, 'we have attempted to present interior reality and exterior reality as two elements in process of unification, of finally becoming *one*'.[11] The synthesis was to be achieved in the marvellous. In the second 'reasoning' period, automatism and the marvellous were developed to go beyond the poetic productions of the surrealists themselves to passionate acts of social, political and individual revolution. But the notion of 'reasoning' here is to be understood in specifically surrealist terms as a concept where psychical matter, an 'interior reality', must be taken into account, not simply as part of an individual's make-up, but as contributing factors in any collective picture of the social totality. It was in this sense that for the surrealists a transformation in knowledge through psychical reality was to be seen as a constituent part of a whole social and political revolution, not separate from it. A politics of the personal and the public were inseparable as issues of desire. Breton is insistent: 'I repeat, we hold the liberation of man to be the *sine qua non* of the liberation of the mind, and we can expect this liberation of man to result only from the proletarian revolution.'[12]

Which of these liberations should or would come first, a revolution of man [*sic*] or the mind, became a matter of critical debate as the surrealists negotiated and veered away from the increasingly militant and rigid Communist Party politics at the end of the 1920s.

Yet a combined commitment to personal and political surrealist 'reasoning' is already apparent in a nascent state before the Moroccan war crisis of 1925. The first issue of the journal *La Révolution surréaliste* in December 1924 marked a shift, not only with the inclusion of 'revolution' in its title, but also its changed contents. It was also here in *La Révolution surréaliste* that photography became a really significant means of representation in the surrealist project.

10 See Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 183.

11 Breton, 'What is Surrealism?', p. 116.

12 Ibid., p. 128.

Accepting for the moment Breton's distinction of two epochs, 1919–24 and 1925–34, a provisional difference in the use of photography can be identified across the three periodicals produced by the surrealists during these times, *Littérature*, *La Révolution surréaliste* and *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*. These are the three journals which provide the backbone of surrealist 'statements', of their published activities during the fifteen-year period 1919–34. Considered as a whole across Breton's two epochs in this period, what is clear is that in the first 'intuitive' years from 1919 to 1924, the forms of representation in surrealism are emphatically 'literary' and linguistic based, with very few visual images. In the five-year span of the 'intuitive' period only seven photographic images were published throughout the entire series of thirty-three issues of *Littérature* from 1919 to 1924. In the second 'reasoning' period that number of photographs is outstripped in each issue of the later magazines. It is in the second 'reasoning' period journals, *La Révolution surréaliste* and *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, that visual images (paintings, drawings) and photographs in particular appear as significant contributing forms of representation within surrealism. (While *Littérature* did have drawings on its cover, the later journals turned to photography both inside and out.) With *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924 to 1929), photographs are immediately more abundant than in *Littérature* and continue to be so in every issue, a pattern followed by and accelerated in the revised *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (July 1930 to May 1933). These differences in the quantity and type of visual images across the two epochs might be taken to suggest that the earlier intuitive epoch was predominantly linguistic and literary in emphasis, while the reasoning epoch was characterized by a more 'scripto-visual' form, as in newspapers and illustrated magazines.

This sudden turn to photography by surrealism from 1924 cannot be attributed to any simple technological or economic determinism, i.e. the cost of reproduction. Relatively cheap photographically illustrated magazines had been produced for mass circulation in Europe since the late nineteenth century. In France, *Le Monde illustré* and *Le Journal illustré* had used photographic illustra-

tions since the 1880s. On the other hand, serious literary periodicals of the day which had better finances than the surrealists like *Mercure de France* did not use visual images as a matter of choice. On the book stands of the day, *La Révolution surréaliste*, with its bright orange-coloured cover and captioned photographs, must have stood out among the mostly dull cream and grey monotone covers of the other 'high' literary journals. In fact, these 'visually' aware surrealist journals were associated more with the mass-circulated popular illustrated magazines (despite the differences in content) rather than the austere iconophobic literary periodicals. Of course, these various high/low cultural values were also negotiated within surrealism and at one point became an issue as to what forms were legitimate as 'surrealist' – could painting be surrealist? (See Chapter 2, 'The automatic image'.)

Indeed, if the predominant use of visual images in surrealism is most associated with the later post-1924 epoch of 'reasoning' rather than the more literary pre-1924 'intuitive' period, this appears as an apparently strange inversion of the common view, since Sigmund Freud, that visual images are closer to the workings of the unconscious. Surrealist 'reason' thus needs some qualification.

Theory

The theme of 'reason' in surrealism is a crucial one. Surrealism is frequently taken up and studied within the dichotomy of reality and fantasy. Rationalism and irrationalism stand as a philosophical equivalent, with a string of antinomies lined up behind them as: objective/subjective, science/magic, common-sense/occult, West/East and so on. Within the walls of such binary oppositions surrealism can be reduced (safely) to a wish to *escape* from 'reality' into fantasy and the irrational. Such a generalization can include many things, from simple coincidences to mysticism, religious, spiritual or drug-inspired experiences to all manner of genres of fantasy in which surrealism had little or no interest. If surrealism has become a catch-all term for an invocation of the anti-rational, its historical definition collapses. Such has been the fate of surrealism. In an early symptomatic reduction, Alfred Barr Jr, curator at

the Museum of Modern Art in New York, showed no hesitation in seeing surrealist works in a direct aesthetic (teleological) continuum, if not identity with 'fantastic' art in his 1936 exhibition: *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*. He describes surrealism as 'the contemporary movement toward an art of the marvellous and irrational'.[13] This is a conception of early 'intuitive' surrealism which confuses means and ends, and fails to situate surrealist images within the aims of the movement at that time.

First, quite literally, surrealism as a discursive formation was far from 'anti-rational'. The surrealists organized meetings, conferences, exhibitions, published texts, books, manifestos, initiated petitions, pamphlets and established relations with other intellectual and political groups. Second, if surrealism did disrupt rationalism it was not in order to invoke irrationality and non-sense (as in *Dada*) even in the early years, but rather as a means to contest and reformulate what could be included within a 'rational' conception of the world.

Surrealism was founded in a dual assault, against the military/psychiatric barbarism of the 1914–18 First World War and a rejection of the values of the art and literature tradition to which its members were being recruited. The experience of that war, first-hand trench warfare for some of the surrealist group and the medical and psychiatric treatment of soldiers by others, had all been deeply traumatic, disrupting notions of sanity and normality. These experiences, like the hysteric for Freud, were what marked the surrealists' entry into a concept of 'psychical reality', where what we call the reality of the human subject is not only driven by material reality. 'Psychical reality' means acknowledging the presence of 'everything in the psyche that takes on the force of reality for the subject'.[14] Unconscious wishes in the individual that may have little regard for the material facts of 'reality' and are often in complete conflict with it are crucial here. Thus, whether a belief or thought has its origins in material reality or not is, in this respect, irrelevant if it has an effectivity at the level of the subject as a belief. In common language, surrealism wished to combine reality and fantasy as a political project. Surrealism advanced a theory which defined psychical reality as a necessary part of any theory of material reality and advocated its prac-

13 Alfred Barr, 'A Brief Guide to the Exhibition of Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism' (January, 1937), reprinted in his *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1937), p. 13. The exhibition took place between December 1936 and January 1937, and was a key moment in the introduction of surrealism to the USA prior to the migration of surrealists there.

14 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, trans. D. Nicolson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1988), p. 363.

tice – surrealism – as the *marvellous*. Through this practice the surrealists anticipated a psychoanalytic conception of 'phantasy' (now spelt fantasy) as theorized by Jacques Lacan (visualized via a René Magritte painting), as like a picture fitted into the opening of a window.

More specifically, surrealism had two attitudes to the structures of psychical reality and material reality. In one aspect, it denounced those who hypocritically expressed a desire (political or otherwise) that masked another thought. Here surrealism was close to a conventional notion of 'consciousness raising' as in Marxist practice, the attempt to make people materially aware of their unconscious values, beliefs and ideology. That critical project ran parallel to a second, the ambition of the surrealists actively to produce representatives of unconscious wishes and thoughts through writing, pictures, objects and so on. Needless to say, the contradictions between these two relations, of criticism and production, were inevitably for the surrealists something to be overcome or brought together, not waved away or repressed. (It is perhaps this messy conflation of politics, ideology and the unconscious that has made a theory of surrealism so difficult to unravel or reconstruct.) Some might read into this a theoretical position being advanced on individual and cultural struggle that is close to the concept of ideology produced by Louis Althusser between 1968 and 1970 (see Chapter 7). Althusser argued that the production of the human subject *as a subject* should not be taken for granted in the maintenance and reproduction of the status quo. In fact, the *reality* of ideology (the individual's imagined relation to reality), he argued, has a crucial role and function in the reproduction of the subject for the maintenance of a ruling politic.[15] The surrealists indeed anticipate this theory of the production of the subject in ideology; their task was to undo it and restructure it. The critical objective of their work and their own attempts at revelation of the productivity of the unconscious, once it was freed from a psychological repression, was never far away from a critique of ideology. The confluence of these ambitions is a common factor in surrealism.

Thus, surrealism was not something which fled reality, rationalism or what is called the social world, but

15 See the classic essay by Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in his *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987). It is worth remembering in readings of Foucault's work that he was a student of Louis Althusser.

rather a discourse which entered into a critique and contestation over what was excluded as 'irrational' within it. In these terms, the surrealists were far from Romantic in orientation, they had little interest in mythical, dark or mysterious forces of nature, even in the conception of the unconscious. Nor did they have a simple revolutionary fantasy to liberate the insane from their chains (as had actually occurred in the French Revolution of 1789). Surrealism was hostile to the real forms of psychiatric 'care' and theory being practised at that time. In this respect, the surrealist interest in the contents of the unconscious can be read as belonging to that Enlightenment tradition of reason and rationality in which so-called irrational phenomena could be the object of a rational investigation. Like Freud, the surrealists took human desire and the apparently quirky functioning and vicissitudes of the unconscious as represented in its conscious manifestations as a domain for their own inquiry and research. But whereas Freud developed a theory and clinical practice of psychoanalysis to help those who could no longer live with their psychical problems, the surrealists proposed a social praxis – surrealism – which drew on theories of the unconscious in a non-clinical use. In the 'reasoning' phase of surrealism they recognized that psychical representations could not be dissociated from the social and political environment around them. In this respect, the usage of photographs to invoke a psychical realism within surrealism became clear: photography already had a social and political function in representing the world; it could thus be a vital tool in undoing that function.

The surrealist use of photography ranged from conventional film stills, news, documentary and press portraits, to postcards, police, ethnographic and scientific photographs. They also made their own montages from these various sources and other various experiments with objects, people and darkroom techniques. The wide range of imagery used is not reducible to any modernist categories of 'art photography'. This is a fact often overlooked by earlier art historians and critics whose own obsessions with styles and aesthetics help them to ignore not only the variety of social types of photography used in surrealism, but the psychical

meanings attached to them within surrealism almost completely.

Reading Photographs

The spectator's 'will to fantasize' is a component problem for the discussion of any image or text. The virtue of surrealism is that it took this as a central issue impinging on notions of reality. One problem for the semiotic definition of photography in historical analysis has been not just the categorizing of a corpus, but the structuralist model of the sign employed to discuss it. Indeed, it was this problem that generally beset structuralist analysis, precipitating the so-called 'crisis of the sign' and what Anglo-American theorists called 'poststructuralism'.[16]

The fixed one-to-one relationship of signifier/signified in Saussurean linguistics could not be maintained, since the signified kept sliding into another signifier/signified – down a chain whose only limits were defined by the full stop. The inability of the structuralist model to accommodate the transience of social meanings, the process that Peirce called 'unlimited semiosis', led to an interest in larger signifying units, of utterances within a context as discourse analysis.[17] It was no doubt for this reason that theorists turned to a rhetorical analysis of photographs and Hjelmslev's distinctions (as used by Barthes) to distinguish denotation (the 'bare facts' of the picture) and connotation (as the cultural interpretations of it), to consider photographs as constituting more of a discursive event than simply an utterance of 'parole'. Jacques Durand argued: 'The rhetoricized image, in its immediate reading is heir to the fantastic, the dream, hallucinations: Metaphor becomes metamorphosis, repetition, seeing double, hyperbole, gigantism, ellipsis, levitation, etc.'[18]

The consequence of this theory for historians of images was that those who continued to situate the historical meanings of pictures only at a literal, descriptive level ran the risk of completely missing (repressing) the connotative structure of rhetorically figurative meanings of images and their often 'transgressive' sense. A rhetorical analysis of photographs treated images as singular but complex semiotic units and makes the analysis on

16 As Slavoj Zizek notes in *Looking Awry*, 'Poststructuralism' is not something that 'exists' as such in France.

17 In linguistics, a discourse analysis 'allows both the construction of regularities that go beyond the sentence and, at the same time, the possibility of studying the relations between these regularities and the conditions of the production of the text' (Colin McCabe, *The Talking Cure* [Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981], p. 200).

18 Jacques Durand, quoted from *Communications* (Vol. 15 [1970], pp. 70–95), in Victor Burgin (ed.), *Thinking Photography*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), p. 71.

that basis. This was quickly overlapped by the use of psychoanalysis, borrowed most often via film theory. The type of rhetorical structure, oxymoron, antithesis, metaphor, metonymy, etc. constitute classes of images and can be given as signifying types of image operation. However, these would not constitute a specifically surrealist set of analytic classes or meanings, rather a general set of operations between image and discourse, or as in a Lacanian view, between image and language, because 'language' structures even the unconscious.[19] It is these signifying structures that surrealists in both its theory and practice engaged in, in advance of any subsequent theorization by psychoanalysis. (Jacques Lacan was an avid reader and participant in surrealism in the 1930s.)[20] But the surrealists' enthusiasm for the production of images did not show much equivalent interest in how audiences might then 'consume' them. Indeed, the images they produced are often quite resistant to any easy or simple reading.

More than with any other avant-garde movement, surrealism cannot be understood simply by looking at the images. Although, in semiotic terms, we can easily read the basic denotations of old photographs, without any historical knowledge we are deprived of their historical 'connotations', those preconscious cultural values and knowledge that circulated at the time of the image and were 'read' by audiences. This situation is true of all photographs, whether we know a little or a lot about their specific cultural context. Connotative structures always interfere with any simple 'innocent' denotative readings of pictures (indeed any denotative 'pure' reading is already a type of connotation).[21]

How to read photographs produced within surrealism? Most accounts of photography and surrealism simply do not. Beyond any local anecdotes provided by the surrealists, the connotative field of meaning (the knowledge, values and beliefs – in short the ideology) of the specific culture in which the surrealist images were produced are more or less kept separate from discussions of pictures. For example, contemporary criticism of surrealist images tends towards a hermeneutics of pictorial signifiers rather than addressing specific historical signifieds, in effect, distorting the surrealist

19 See Jacques Lacan, 'Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious', in *Ecrits; A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1982).

20 Jacques Lacan published parts of his theory on psychotics in *Minotaure*; see David Macey, 'Baltimore in the Early Morning', *Lacan in Contexts* (London: Verso, 1988).

21 '[D]enotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the *last* of the connotations' (Roland Barthes, *S/Z* [Toronto: Collins, 1988], p. 9).

corpus into an aesthetics of modernity. Situating images in historical surrealism with a marginal knowledge of the connotative structures available to readers at the time is obviously highly problematic for any history, theory and criticism of photography and is something this book tries to address.

But returning to the social-historical context of surrealism in the 1920s and 1930s is not intended as a new, or even to revise a now old, 'new social history of art'. This is not a revisiting of 'historicism', where meanings are only ever understood as fixed in the past. It *is*, however, a matter of rereading the past in the present. History and what we know about it are part of the present, but that also means maintaining a sense of the difference between the past and the present.

The work of this book has been to research beyond those anecdotes handed down from the surrealists themselves – so interminably repeated by critics – to reconsider the historical context in which the events and activities of surrealism took place. But this also raises a theoretical problem: how to define this context and how to use a historical context for the discussion of pictures? We have learnt from Jacques Derrida that a context is never fixed, but however mutable, that does not mean that a context does not exist, or that a context should be rejected as part of a structure of meaning. My contention is this: that we can only go so far by *looking* at the images of surrealism, and the fact that many of them appear to fail to signify can be attributed to: (a) that the meaning is itself opaque 'surrealist' (a distinct possibility given the project to invoke the unconscious of surrealism) or/and (b) that we simply do not have the contexutal or connotative structures in which surrealist images derived their contemporary meanings. That is to say, surrealist images are, for one or other if not both of these reasons, historically specific and local in terms of meaning even if some of the images transcend that period in terms of an audience's interest in them. Indeed, the fact that some surrealist images endure as a site of fascination with audiences unfamiliar with the debates and issues of the time points to another possibility about their meanings. These possibilities are taken up in this book.

When habitual anecdotes on surrealism are told in

the literature there is a constant failure to work them up or think them through to the discussion of images and texts produced by the surrealists. There seems to be a lack of curiosity about history among critics as *investigation*. I can only regard this lack of curiosity as a kind of historical 'repression'. Thus a purpose of this book is to begin to lift some of that historical repression and to examine the material which begins to emerge from it.

The method used for this is adopted from that of Freud in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The fundamental proposition there by Freud is that the meaning of any dream-image is not to be found by the doctor, but by the patient who had the dream. In tracing their own lines of thought back to the previous days before the dream, one or more of the conflictual sources for the dream-image can be found there. Within this network of signifiers can be gleaned the original – unconscious – scene, drama or fantasy that has been 'translated' into the dream-image.

In parallel to this technique, as a 'history-work' the arguments in this book draw on the immediate and distant historical context and circumstances in which the surrealists were working to find the connotative structures which informed the production of surrealist images. Obviously the surrealists cannot be interviewed here, but that would be beside the point anyway. The author is a nodal point in a network of signifiers that constitute the discourse in which they existed. The meanings of surrealist images are to be found not in the biographies of the individuals involved in their production, but in the network of signifiers which constituted the discourses in which these images circulated and could have meanings. If this displaces authors (photographers, writers, painters) from the centre of attention, it is not to ignore them completely, since it must be recognized that they are collectively the producers of that discourse on surrealism.

There are images within surrealism whose values have certainly continued beyond their original context and still resonate with audiences today, even those totally unfamiliar with surrealism historically. What is interesting about those images in their ability to transcend

their original context is this capture of the viewing subject by certain surrealist pictures. This itself demands an explanation. Again, I would argue that the historical connotations can help to understand and construct the cause of the modern fascination with them and the original fantasies as their source (see especially Chapter 4).

To this end, employed here is the concept of the 'enigmatic signifier' from psychoanalysis (see Chapter 1) used to explain the structures of signification implicit in many surrealist images. My argument, following Jean Laplanche, suggests that the enigma is linked to primal scenes and original fantasies which structure the unconscious of the subject. Since such an argument is a means rather than an end for this book, the theory is articulated through reading images, rather than an independent articulation. Although not dealt with explicitly, the surrealists did seem aware of the enigmatic structures, as frequently appears in titles of their work, especially Man Ray and Giorgio de Chirico.[22]

Chapter 1, 'What is a surrealist photograph?', considers the issue of classification and analysis of surrealist imagery. The basic argument is simple, although its consequences are not: what is commonly recognized as 'surreal', a non-realist image, is not the only type of picture used or produced within surrealism. Although sometimes acknowledged, studies tend to focus almost entirely on those images which conform to a notion of a *surreal* image, conveniently ignoring the whole issue of how other images can be surrealist. The second chapter takes up 'psychic automatism' to explore its origins and the formulation of the surrealist project. Subsequent chapters explore particular uses of photography around the axis of sexuality, colonialism and dissent, and are drawn from the corpus of journals, *Littérature*, *La Révolution surréaliste* and *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*. Chapter 6 looks at the consequences of colonialism in Western culture and on the object in surrealism. Chapter 7 considers the anti-colonial exhibition co-organized by the surrealists, communists and anti-imperialist league.

Surrealism was an important avenue of anti-colonialism in French culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. Such a proposition goes against

22 Hal Foster draws on the psychoanalytic concept of enigmatic signifier, but almost implies it is derived from de Chirico, 'In a recent text Laplanche uses this de Chirican term … '. See Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (London: MIT Press, 1993), p. 61.

common assumptions of how surrealism is understood today. A typical view of surrealism regards it as the antics of a bunch of sexist young men totally preoccupied with their own chaotic internal thoughts; it is reduced to an 'art movement' concerned with selfish instincts remote from politics and 'serious' issues like colonialism. Against such clichéd preconceptions I want to consider the relations between surrealism and *anti*-colonialism as evident in historical documents of the period. Consequently, the contribution of surrealism as a discourse to the field of anti-colonialist politics and thinking in early twentieth-century French culture needs to be recognized, included within post-colonial history and criticism.

But just as I want to argue that surrealism was part of colonial resistance and needs to be considered in terms of its contribution to anti-colonialism, so the reverse is true too. That is to say, colonialism and anti-colonial struggle were formative of surrealism itself. As already noted, for Breton, the defining moment of surrealist's maturity was the Moroccan colonial war in 1925.[23] But the surrealists continued to be publicly active in opposing colonialism from the Moroccan (Abd-el-Krim) 'Riff War' onwards, through to Haiti where Breton's speech reputedly sparked a rebellion there, to opposition of the French in Vietnam, to support for the 1950s uprising in Hungary and the FLN in Algeria in the 1960s. Surrealism's impact on anti-colonialism is manifest in several overlapping senses. First, surrealism was engaged in direct active support for anti-colonial struggles through their own images and texts (individual and collective works across exhibitions, published periodicals and manifesto statements) and by participating in anti-colonial activities organized with others. Second, surrealism opened a new discursive space itself as a vital forum in which others, colonial subjects, were able to enunciate anti-colonial issues. Third, surrealist thinking had an effect on other contemporary disciplines, for example, ethnography and documentary.

It might, of course, be argued that surrealism was 'inevitably' part of the 'colonizing culture' since it is a product of 'the West'. However, such an argument is to homogenize relations of colonizer/colonized into a binary opposition polarity that is far from constructive

23 Breton, in Rosemont (ed.), *What is Surrealism?*, p. 117.

for historical analysis. To refuse to consider how the hierarchy of colonizer/colonized power relations were internally opposed and resisted within European culture is to perpetuate precisely the dynamics of a colonialist culture. It condemns histories of culture eternally to repeat the same power relations, unwittingly re-inscribing an oppression as a history of the powerful and powerless. Within accounts of 'what happened?' in colonialism, it is important to address the resistances to the historical processes of colonialism.

It would be possible, perhaps desirable, to include several other journals within a study of surrealism as constituting the main corpus of their periodicals. However, there are other reasons for limiting my analysis to the three above, beyond the obvious problem of having to limit vast amounts of material. First, it is not the purpose here to make an exhaustive description and analysis of all photographic utterances made under the aegis of surrealist activity. Second, these key journals are already sufficiently abundant for the arguments I want to make and, third, the journals which are most notably omitted here, namely *Documents* and partly *Minotaure*, are not strictly speaking 'surrealist'. *Documents*, which consisted of only eight issues across 1929–30 was, as has so often been argued, a 'dissident' surrealist journal. Its main contributors were those who either had defected, never were or were only loosely connected with surrealism. (To then treat this as a key surrealist journal would be like doing a history of a government by its opposition – viable but not my intention.) What can be said is that those other journals like *Documents* took surrealism into other disciplines, like ethnography, reportage, documentary and literary fiction, and for that reason are not part of my project here. *Minotaure*, which lasted a period of six years, was not explicitly controlled by the surrealists and was more an art and literature journal, even if the surrealists dominantly published in it, although, perhaps as a concession, *Minotaure* is discussed in the last chapter (8) on 'Fascism and exile'.

Criticisms

Any book is a document of its research and this one is no exception. It could have been longer and

it could have been shorter. It could have included far more images and fewer. There could have been more time spent on more images, or it could have referred more often to questions and issues raised along the way. It could have drawn on a wider set of disciplines for analysis or given more details of the ones it does use and so on. No doubt this book could also be criticized for what it has left out, but it should not be criticized for what it has included. If Man Ray appears as a dominant photographer in it, it is because he was dominant during these times. Not only was his own work usually present in the main journals, he was also involved in selecting work by others to be included in them. His close partnership and friendship with Marcel Duchamp during this period – also a friend to surrealism – should not be overlooked either. It is also perhaps interesting to note at this point that, in contrast to the writers, many (if not most) of the visual artists involved in surrealism were not French in origin and were more often émigrés to Paris from other parts of Europe or further afield – itself a topic worthy of a separate study on diaspora, migration and the arts.

If surrealism has raised uncomfortable questions about male sexuality and its attitudes, there is a sense that such issues have either been swept under the carpet (ignored) or dealt with in a politics of denunciation (dismissed), rather than argued through and recognized as part of the critical project of surrealism. As with Freud's work on sexuality, it is perhaps not surprising if what is revealed about the unconscious, particularly in surrealist use of 'Woman' as a sign, is problematic. In this respect this book is not 'revisionist', it does not specifically try to dislocate the existing canon (by replacing it with a more acceptable one), but rather re-examines the canon from a different axis. Instead of denunciation or rejection, a historical and theoretical critical analysis is needed. In this spirit Chapter 5, 'The Sadean eye', explores the murky work of surrealist sadism and the apposite overvaluation of a love object in courtly love. Sadism turns out as a revenge of the ego on the love object which has robbed it of its self-love, as manifested in the ambivalent idealization and dissatisfaction enacted upon the *image* of the female body

in surrealism. The fact that surrealists dared to broach these topics of sexuality and love in public discourse as issues demanding serious social intellectual thought at all should not be ignored or taken for granted. The surrealists were certainly avant-garde in this respect, addressing the issue of desire and courting controversy by breaking moral codes, social taboos and risking arrest for some of their political acts.

'Shock' has been offered as a simple explanation for this 'aesthetics' of the avant-garde. This primarily sociological conception of the avant-garde is premised upon the idea that a minority social group (an 'avant-garde') gains influence by making an impact on or in other larger social groups through 'shock' in the public sphere. Peter Bürger, in his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, makes precisely this point, arguing that the avant-gardes set out to shock a bourgeois culture with the intention of changing their outlook, conduct or life.[24] Needless to say, this failed – shock is a temporary state. However, this whole conception of the avant-garde is an ideological inversion. Bürger mistakes effect (shock) for the cause. Shock was not the *aim* of the surrealist group's research, even if it was sometimes the outcome of their activities. In any case, the effect of surrealism in 'shocking the public' was at the time relatively minor, slight even.[25] Newspaper reports of its 'scandals' were few and far between, and given the context of post-First World War France, where social violence was commonplace, with street fights, political 'gangs' working out the politics of the day on one another with fists and sticks, or worse (guns were still commonly used and in circulation, left over from the First World War), the idea of shock in avant-garde practice is a much exaggerated phenomenon. In comparison with the turmoil of the social and political world in which they lived, the scandals of the surrealist world were very small.

Another sociological complaint that surrealists were only or all men is simply wrong, even as a description of the early years. As Penelope Rosemont has pointed out, 'the first women of surrealism have been almost entirely overlooked in the historical and critical literature'.[26] Thus it is writers and anthologists who have colluded with the exclusion of women by simply ignoring those

24 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 80.

25 See Elyette Guiol-Benassaya, *La presse face au surréalisme de 1925 à 1938* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1982).

26 Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (London: Athlone, 1998), p. xxix.