

## ***Trajectoires du rêve: du romantisme au surréalisme***

**Pavillon des arts, Paris, 7 March - 7 June 2003**

**Trajectoires du rêve: du romantisme au surréalisme**, Vincent Gille (ed.), Paris Musées 2003, 240pp., 159 ills, 34 euros, ISBN 2 87900 767 4 (paper binding)

One suspects, in the wake of the Centre Pompidou's recent exhibition *La Révolution surréaliste* and the auctioning of the contents of André Breton's studio, that Parisian audiences have had their fill for the time being of monumental - and monolithic - spectacles around the historical placement of surrealism. But in overlooking the more modestly sized *Trajectoires du rêve: du romantisme au surréalisme*, at the rather less than spectacular Pavillon des arts on a semi-abandoned upper deck of the Forum des Halles, its display spaces all but empty of visitors on the Saturday of my visit, they will have missed a chance to consider an engaging set of ideas that may have produced one of the most interesting and speculative exhibitions around surrealism of recent years.

As Annie Le Brun writes in the introductory essay to the elegant accompanying catalogue, if we have always been fascinated by dream, the modern world has perhaps begun to stop interrogating its colours. This exhibition's central task was to consider the conception and exploration of dreams by artists, writers and scientists in Northern and Central Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a particular emphasis on surrealism and its environs. But rather than attempt an encyclopaedic overview of a rich but potentially vast subject, the show's curator Vincent Gille adopted an altogether more subjective and ambitious approach which succeeded in placing surrealism in a set of intellectual instead of purely artistic contexts, in order to question rather than define its place in the wider currents of European thought. If this produced some surprising omissions - Victor Hugo is present as a writer but not as an artist, for example, and Gille himself points to the absence of any German romantic painting - it has also allowed the curator to encourage a more sustained attention to some specific figures (Czech surrealists Jindřich Štyrský and Jindřich Heisler take a spotlight where they were entirely absent at the Beaubourg), and to encourage some pleasing revelations (paintings by Josef Šíma, whose work can often look rather wan in comparison to his surrealist contemporaries, here appeared as resonant and complex as the Max Ernst frottages they hung alongside).

The method of approach - albeit one that emerged explicitly in the exhibition's catalogue but less clearly in the exhibition itself - was constructed through a focus on the four poets Novalis, Gérard de Nerval, Victor Hugo and André Breton, chosen as four distinct but communicating moments crystallising a particular conception of dream and the mind. Around these poets - represented in the exhibition by rare manuscripts and discreet recitals from suspended speakers - Gille grouped a number of artists and photographers with the intention of mapping the exhibition's 'trajectories'; numbers of documentary items, objects and specimens from scientific contexts added a further layer



of complexity around this structure. The result was an evocative constellation in which precious polished stones (many formerly from the collection of Roger Caillois) might usher in the paintings by Šíma, early attempts to map the surface of the moon could wink across the room at a Brassai photograph, or an arcane item of early electrical apparatus could speak suggestively of the electrical metaphors in Breton's writings. The exhibition's openly subjective and associative strategies, moreover, as well as its articulation around poetry, all represented ways in which (as the catalogue argues) the project intended to adopt a sympathetic relationship to its participants, in particular to surrealism. We have some cause to be sceptical about such claims, given the trend in which it is often the installation design rather than intellectual conception of institutional exhibitions which attempts to mimic surrealism's spirit, generally with mixed results. But Gille's knowledge of and commitment to his chosen poets, his desire to reposition them at the confluence of poetic and scientific intellectual currents, and the adoption of some deliberately open curatorial approaches using free association and analogy rather than conventional art history (curators at the Musée nationale d'histoire naturelle were invited to suggest mineral specimens as though specific artists had chosen them) all augured well for some very different results from the institutional, art historical or commercial exhibitions audiences are more accustomed to.

While the catalogue lays out the structure and argument of the exhibition in a series of concise but informative essays by Gille and others, the installation itself tended, perhaps due to spaces that discouraged linear development, to combine or blur its component structures. What unfolds in both, however, is that the initial emphasis on the dream is in fact to be explored in a complex and potentially rather effusive manner. This might well have disappointed anyone expecting a clearer and more rigorous explanation of the specific theme of dreams, or indeed someone seeking a detailed discussion of the use of dreams within surrealism (the book which does just that, Sarane Alexandrian's *Le Surréalisme et le rêve*, is significantly never cited in the catalogue other than in its bibliography). It also might have made one wonder whether a more tightly-focused show could have produced some more explicit if no less intricate ideas. The visitor, first greeted by a spotlight vitrine of remarkable crystal specimens, began with the theme of the creation of visionary landscapes through automatic techniques, centred on the paintings of Alexander Cozens, as outlined by his *New Method* of 1785, in which random blots and stains generate landscape paintings in ways that are extraordinarily prescient of the Ernst and Šíma paintings hung nearby and the decalcomanias in the following room. A section devoted to spiritualist and mediumistic drawings and paintings by Lesage, Crépin, Hélène Smith and others, accompanied by photographic documentation of seances and drawings by Nadja, next to another proposing 'Paris, territoire du rêve' as explored by Brassai and the mid-nineteenth century engravings of Charles Meyron, invited in turn another, further, perception of imaginative space in the mythological and visionary art of John Martin's illustrations for *Paradise Lost*.

The emphasis of this first set of approaches to mental and imaginative states was then shifted with the smaller second room in which scientific ideas predominated. The choice of images, however,



implied ways in which, during the second half of the nineteenth century, an apparently rationalising apprehension of the mind and of mental spaces - and indeed the idealistic thrust of early scientific endeavour in general - might be seen as suffused with inherently poetic currents. August Strindberg's 'celestography' and crystallogrammes, early x-rays, Étienne-Léopold Trouvelot's extraordinary pastel studies of the moon and the planets, documentation of mesmerism or electrical auras, images purporting to photograph dreams by exposing plates on the patient's forehead, all suggested a context in which surrealism might be seen as emerging from, as much as reacting against, specific if sometimes highly speculative developments of nineteenth-century science and medicine. As Gille writes in the catalogue, both the scientist and the poet-dreamer might find tangible evidence in these developments of 'a new world larger than the world, more *real* than the real.'

The catalogue entries on these sections repeatedly argue that the prospecting by poets and scientists alike into the interior should in fact be read as an interrogation of the external world (and thus images of space, too, lie on what Gille terms the 'vector of communication' represented by dream). But they also help to build up a picture of how the impact of the discovery of magnetism and electricity may be traced through early neurological theories of the brain and its disturbances that provide a context for surrealism's interest in the unconscious, as well as for the popular interest in hypnotism that informed surrealism's experiments of the early 1920s and the persistent traces of electrical metaphors in Breton's writing. Works from Ernst and Iliasz's *Maximiliana*, 'photographisms' by Heisler, Štyrský's dream-diary drawings, and photographs by Uzac and Brassai in the final room introduced a display of early scientific instruments to produce and demonstrate electrical phenomena. In particular a gold-leaf electroscope, whose charged status for Breton in *Les Vases communicants* held more 'astonishing powers of suggestion' than any surrealist object, could be tested by the visitor who was invited to activate its peculiar eroticism by rubbing the wand with a piece of velvet.

For once, the exhibition's adoption of the customary dramatic low-lit installation punctuated with carefully positioned pools of light felt appropriate, not simply because of the requirements of delicate paper-based artefacts or because the theme of dreams points sternly towards the night. Anyone who has ever printed their own photographs in an old-fashioned darkroom will recognise the delicious coming together of science and poetry in a space that is secret and crepuscular but also logical and reasoned, and beyond its initial engagement with dreams, this exhibition also worked as an attempt to chart a history of light and darkness, and of the paths of enlightenment and clarity that are the central concerns of its four guiding poets. By placing works by romantic, surrealist and *art brut* writers, artists and photographers next to mineral specimens, experimental scientific documents and scientific apparatus, an argument emerged suggestive of ways in which it is more useful to see surrealism not as a simple rejection of rationalist hegemonies but as a point in a dialectic between the reasoned and speculative-scientific on the one hand, and the imaginary, dream and the unconscious on the other. While dreams, as Breton's 1938 anthology *Trajectoire du rêve* implied in the wake of psychoanalytic discovery, could be a far more direct and quantifiable path to knowledge than had once commonly



been thought, nineteenth-century science could also be more tenebrous, poetic and inspired than some of its logic-obsessed inheritors might like to admit.

Krzysztof Fijałkowski

Norwich School of Art and Design / University of East Anglia

