

City Gorged With Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris by *Ian Walker*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 2002, 228 pp., 72 b & w ills, £17.99, ISBN: 0 7190 6215 2 (paperback)

As early as 1921 André Breton wrote: 'The invention of photography has dealt a mortal blow to the old modes of expression, in painting as well as in poetry.'¹ However, Breton's defence of surrealist visual art, 'Surrealism and Painting,' paid little attention to photography, noting only that photography was 'endowed with a special power of suggestion' but that it could not be trusted to produce the 'faithful image that we aim to retain of something that will soon be gone forever.'² Fascination with its effects, awareness of its potential to revolutionise the visual arts and distrust of its mimetic nature - this summarises surrealist attitudes towards photography as expressed in a few early texts.

The subsequent written history of surrealist art also focused on painting and drawing, ignoring the important presence of a wide range of photographic material to be found in surrealist journals. In recent years, though, photography has come to occupy a significant place in discussions of surrealist visual art, largely thanks to the 1985 exhibition *L'Amour fou*, which argued convincingly for the centrality of photography to surrealist art and thought. The exhibition (co-curated by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston) was polemical and selective, establishing the parameters of a debate which continues to define discussions of surrealist photography and a 'canon' of surrealist photography which has acted as a point of reference within subsequent scholarship. In her catalogue essays, Krauss chose to resurrect the 'constructed' photography of Jacques-André Boiffard, Brassai and Man Ray, over the so-called 'straight photography' of Eugène Atget and Henri Cartier-Bresson (and in fact the 'straight' work of Boiffard and Brassai). *L'Amour fou* made a strong statement, wresting attention away from painting (and Breton) and towards photography (and Bataille). However, as Ian Walker maintains in his new study of surrealist photography, *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*, the polemical cast of Krauss's project is to some extent the expression of a particularly American reaction to its own tradition of documentary photography as it was institutionalised by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The European perspective, Walker suggests, is a different one, able to offer a less polarised view in which various avant-gardisms are understood to inflect documentary photography from its inception.

This ruminative book, rich with original observation and wide-ranging in its treatment of interpretative material, is in part just such a European response to *L'Amour fou* and its concern with constructed photography. Walker attempts to give a more balanced view - or to balance the view - by offering a defence of so-called 'straight' photography as perhaps even more 'surrealist' than constructed photography (in this respect, Walker takes up a point made by Steve Edwards in his energetic 1987 review of *L'Amour fou*³). Whereas Krauss focused on the ways in which constructed photography manipulated its indexical nature in order to produce surreal effects, Walker reads the 'surrealist use of



straight photography as a simultaneous exploitation and subversion of the standard realist frame within which the medium was then primarily situated' [p.5].

Walker's discussion takes up a number of themes (The City, The Street, *Terrain Vague*, The *Démodé*, The Ethnographic Other) and individual oeuvres (Atget, Boiffard, Brassai, Cartier-Bresson, Lotar). This structure has the advantage of lending thematic coherence to a fragmented and chronologically disparate body of work. It means that the surrealist aspects of Brassai's 'Paris Graffiti' series can be considered even though it was produced after Brassai had disassociated himself from the movement. Likewise, Henri Cartier-Bresson can be identified as a paradigmatic surrealist photographer despite his work not having appeared in any surrealist periodicals. The thematic structure also allows for theoretical issues to be re-visited and developed in relation to different material over the course of the book.

Walker is aware of the ways in which changes in the conditions of reception have altered or occluded 'originary' surrealist meanings. He takes it as given that the legacies of surrealism survive not only in works themselves but in a number of more recent critical frameworks (e.g. Barthes, Debord) for which the original work acts as a kind of palimpsest. Nonetheless, the attempt to excavate this surrealist moment remains a central occupation for the author. This effort is rewarded, as in Walker's valuable and long overdue reading of the four photographs by Eugène Atget which appeared anonymously in *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1926. Here, Walker proves a sensitive reader of the subtle ironies and possible meanings that are produced by the juxtaposition of photograph and text, rediscovering the strange, oneiric qualities of some of Atget's photographs - qualities that have often been side-lined or explained away in the subsequent construction of Atget as the father of documentary photography. This chapter also considers a less well known but perhaps even more fascinating surrealist 'use' of Atget by E.L.T. Mesens in the December 1928 issues of *Variétés*. Mesens forcefully juxtaposed a series of Atget's photographs, drawing out and making explicit a hidden political agenda. In this chapter Walker glosses his readings through references to essays by Walter Benjamin, although there is perhaps a more specific connection in evidence. In his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility' Benjamin was also drawn to the political significance of Atget's photographs.⁴ For Benjamin the way the viewer is challenged to take up a position *vis-à-vis* the material presented in the photograph indicated a new era for photography in which a contemplative attitude to the work of art was replaced by a vigilant attitude to the prescription of meaning in the photograph. Benjamin likened the process to 'reading', and thought that the introduction of captions would make the extraction of information from a photograph even more efficient. Although Mesens's photographic essay does not include captions, his editing - which creates short eloquent political statements - does, I think, make a visual case for Benjamin's argument.

While Walker's book offers thoughtful readings of such major photographic figures in their surrealist contexts, it is perhaps most valuable for considering those photographs which were and remain



anonymous - the series of found and appropriated images placed in surrealist periodicals - in *La Révolution surréaliste*, *Documents*, *Minotaure*, and *Variétés*. In a chapter entitled 'La Révolution surréaliste and the urban spectacle', Walker discusses, case by case, four photographs that appeared in *La Révolution surréaliste*, showing how meanings were generated by the siting of these photographs within surrealist texts and through their surrealist captioning. He shows how a 'straight' photograph with an apparently obvious content and meaning can take on a range of poetic, philosophical and political meanings in a surrealist context. But Walker insists on their ambivalence - on the way in which the surrealist context fails to provide a conclusive meaning. He suggests that this equivocation is structural - that the surrealist inclusion of such photographs worked both to 'affirm' and to 'attack' that which was represented. For instance, in his analysis of a photograph of what may be the Nice carnival (Walker makes his tentative identification based on a comparison with a film still from Jean Vigo's 'A Propos de Nice', 1929, also of the Nice carnival) reproduced in the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, he suggests that the celebratory nature of the carnival, occurring outside of the everyday, threatened the rational bourgeois order and was thus valued as surrealist. On the other hand, it could also be seen as a civil event aimed at managing and containing the eruption of excess energies.

One of the explicit claims Walker makes is that the 'stricter' the reality presented by the photograph, the more potentially subversive and surreal its effect. In the process of being represented photographically, the everyday world is transformed. The surreal appears in those photographs in which the logic of realism presented by the photograph is interrogated, undermined and transformed. A strictness of approach can, according to Walker, yield the surreal when it is applied to a highly diverse selection of photographs. So it appears in pictures that capture the banal surface of the city as an anguished *ennui* - for example Emiel van Moerkerken's *Octroi de Paris*, 1935 [p.121]. Or again in the lyrical indeterminacy of Lotar's *Somewhere in Paris*, 1929. [p.130]. Or even, apparently, in the extraordinary, as in Lotar's abattoir photographs, but also, Walker claims, in his camerawork for Buñuel's *Las Hurdes*, 1933. In comparing these two Lotar contributions, Walker detects 'a clinical gaze at a reality that is so far beyond the bounds of accustomed normality that it becomes surreal. It is in the very strictness of its documentary approach that its Surrealism lies' [p.131]. It is debatable whether or not this last move is entirely consistent with the overall tendency to prioritise the ordinary as the proper subject of surrealist photography - here Walker seems to extend his notion of documentary to include the bizarre or strange, and it is in the strangeness of the subject matter, rather than in the effect of photography, that the 'surreality' is supposed to lie.

To put it another way, does Walker's inclusion of such a wide range of effects and subject matter (the ultra-banal *and* the extraordinary) tacitly suggest that all photographic representation is inherently surrealist? It has been thirty years since Susan Sontag found surrealism 'at the heart of the photographic enterprise'.⁵ Sontag saw the duplication of reality itself, its exaggeration and distortion through reproduction as rendering all reality surreal. At the same time she detected in photography a



detached attitude to the world, which could easily become comfortable irony or moral equivocation in the face of social life.

So, is there something surreal about the precision with which the camera is able to record reality? Or is it rather the case that 'straight' photographs become surrealist only through their 'siting' in surrealist texts or through a surrealist editing process which juxtaposes images in a meaningful way? Is there a peculiarly surrealist 'content' - a type of photographic narrative that we can identify with surrealism? Is there a surrealist photographic style, the product of those photographers making photographic choices consonant with a surrealist aesthetic?

Walker's answers to these questions are for the most part suggestive, developed through close readings that demonstrate how 'surrealism' operates photographically. He does, however, look to some familiar theoretical literature (Barthes, Bazin), which has offered an ontological explanation of the photograph as both icon and index, and to more recent writers (Sekula, Tagg) who have insisted on the conventional nature of its meanings. Walker points to the many dichotomies associated with photography - only to come to the perhaps less than revealing conclusion that photographs are both 'actuality and artifice, both emanation and material product' [p.18].

It is possible that Walker wishes to connect these dualisms with a surrealist project of the reconciliation of opposites. There seems to me to be an attempt in the book to read photography in terms derived from the surrealist interest in intoxication and the dream, aimed at, in the words of the First Manifesto, 'finding and fixing the point' at which the 'real and the imagined [...] cease to be perceived as contradictions'.⁶ If surrealism sought to sublimate dream and reality, then photography would indeed appear to deliver a surreality wherein a 'hallucination [...] is also a fact'.⁷ Walker lays the ground for a connection between surrealist ideas and the peculiarly ambivalent nature of photography as a medium through his use of the terms 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity'. He points out, for example, that the surrealists 'well knew that subjective desire inevitably invades any attempt at objectivity [...] it was the unification of the two that was their aim' [pp. 11-12].

Now while it is indeed true that the medium of photography offered many opportunities for the surrealists to consider the ways in which subjective experience hampers or subverts photographic objectivity, a more precise and sustained examination of these terms is needed in order to understand how they might intersect with the surrealist notions of the dream state and reality. Walker's book moves between many good moments of theoretical clarity where he avoids reifying a static 'real' against which 'subjective' experience is pitted, and other passages, like the one quoted above, where a vague assertion of the unification or opposition of these terms is thought to suffice for the analysis. An example of the much more reflective approach is his chapter '*Nadja*: a "voluntary banality"?' Here Walker builds on Dawn Ades's 1985 catalogue essay for *L'Amour fou*, 'Photography and the Surrealist Text'⁸, by showing how Breton's use of Boiffard's 'straight' photographs, contrary to



assumptions about photographic objectivity, serve to problematise rather than support Breton's assertion that *Nadja* is a 'true story'. The photographs become indices not of the spaces of the (public) city but of the (private) lives of Breton and Nadja. Although they function as documents, what they 'document' is transformed by their presence in the text. This is not to say that these photographs become 'illustrations' of an inner, subjective life - an obverse of the attempt to 'illustrate' through description, the exterior, 'objective' *mise-en-scène* of nineteenth-century novels so vehemently criticised by Breton in the First Manifesto. Breton valorises 'facts' only insofar as they are shown to be fortified by subjective experience. Walker notes that Breton, on different occasions, described Boiffard's photographs for *Nadja* as 'inadequate' and 'beautiful'. In a passage that navigates the terms of the debate more reflectively, Walker argues that we need both of Breton's judgements to capture the unusual value of photography in the context of the project of *Nadja*, a value he situates in 'the space between' inadequacy and beauty, or between 'the plainness of the actual pictures and the meanings that they held for Breton himself.' [p.59] There is, then, no contradiction between Breton's desire to have Boiffard photograph sites in Paris for *Nadja* in the style of medical report *and* his request that Boiffard photograph those places 'taken at the special angle from which I had looked at them.'⁹

City Gorged with Dreams exposes its reader to a wide range of material and offers useful summaries of relevant important interpretations. It is written in an engaging and clear style, and will be of great benefit to those introducing surrealist photography to undergraduate audiences. The illustrations are of a reasonable standard, though not comparable with those to be found in more luxurious publications on photography. The bibliography serves to introduce readers with some background to a good range of further literature. Walker makes an important contribution to the field with a book that will no doubt continue to provoke further debates about the significance of photography for surrealist artists and writers.

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¹ André Breton, *Max Ernst, Beyond Painting* (New York: Wittenborn Schulz, 1948), p. 177.

² André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 32.

³ Steve Edwards, 'Gizmo Surrealism', *Art History*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1987, pp. 509-517.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility' in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935-1938 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2002), p. 108.

⁵ 'Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision.' Susan Sontag, 'Melancholy Objects' in *On Photography* (New York: Penguin, 1979), p. 52.



⁶ André Breton, 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism' (1930), in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1969), p. 123.

⁷ André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What is Cinema: Vol. I* (Berkeley: University of California, 1967), p. 13. Quoted in Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, p. 11.

⁸ Dawn Ades, 'Photography and the Surrealist Text' in *L'Amour fou* (New York: Abbeville, 1985), pp. 153-189.

⁹ André Breton, *Nadja* (New York: Grove, 1960), p. 151-52.

