

Surrealist Black Humour: Masculine/Feminine

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Abstract

This article treats a subject that has not received much critical attention from feminists: that of Surrealist black humour. What was it? How, if at all, did women participate in it? And what can that tell us about the larger questions of the role of women's work in Surrealism and the role of Surrealism in women's work? Three specific strategies by women Surrealists are considered: assimilation to "mainstream" Surrealism; hostile parody of it; and mimicry, an in-between position expressing ambivalence. These are examined in works by Leonora Carrington, Gisèle Prassinos, and Nelly Kaplan.

As we have known for over two decades now, one way to renew our view of the historical avant-gardes is to reinscribe the work of women into their history. In the case of Surrealism, which will concern me here, feminist critics and historians since the 1980s have not only done an impressive amount of excavation of forgotten or overlooked women writers and artists and their work; they have also sought to theorize how taking proper account of women's work can help us rethink the achievements as well as the shortcomings or blindspots of Surrealism as an avant-garde movement.¹ It is not a matter of distributing praise or blame, and even less a matter of 'bashing' male Surrealists for their misogyny (as feminists are often accused of doing). Rather, it is a matter of understanding the historical situation and the set of cultural presuppositions that contributed to Surrealist mythologizing about women and the feminine; and understanding, as well, how women artists and writers may have shared those presuppositions or else responded to them critically in various ways.

I propose to consider here a subject that has not received much critical attention from feminists: that of Surrealist black humour. What was it? How, if at all, did women participate in it? And what can that tell us about the larger questions of the role of women's work in Surrealism and the role of Surrealism in women's work?

Is Black Humour Male?

The term 'black humour' has become such a part of the language (in both English and French) that it is difficult to think of it as having a specific origin. The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as 'the humour of the morbid and the absurd, especially in its development as a literary genre,' without citing any source or etymology. The Petit Robert dictionary of the French language does likewise ('a form of humour which exploits dramatic subjects and draws its comic effects from coldness and cynicism,' my translation). In fact, André Breton appears to have been the originator of the term. In the brief 1966 foreword to his *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, Breton lays claim to his paternity. When the book first appeared, he writes, "the words "black humour" had no meaning... It is only since then that the term has entered the dictionary: we know how popular the notion of black humour has become."² The *Anthologie* came off the press in June 1940, just before the Germans



entered Paris - a coincidence that is itself not devoid of a certain terrible black humour. Because of the German invasion, the book was not actually distributed until 1945; it had subsequent editions, with some modifications, in 1950 and 1966.

Breton does not give a precise definition of black humour in his anthology, but this does not prevent him from making a very strong claim for its importance and for its necessary link to modernity: for a modern sensibility, he writes in his introduction (titled 'Paratonnerre,' 'Lightning Rod'), contemporary works that lack '*this kind of humour*' are unlikely to endure, whether in the realm of science, art, poetry, or philosophy (OC II, 868, Breton's emphasis). He then evokes Hegel's concept of 'objective humour' as an antecedent, but it is Freud that he quotes as his major authority in this domain.

Freud wrote about humour both in his book *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) and in his brief essay, 'Humour' (1927). In the latter, he cites as a typical example the 'criminal being led to the gallows on a Monday' who remarks: 'Well, this is a good beginning to the week.' As this example shows, Freud conceives of humour as a way of overcoming pain or humiliation by asserting one's superiority to the situation. He writes: 'Humour is not resigned, it is rebellious....The humorous attitude...refuses to undergo suffering, asseverates the invincibility of one's ego against the real world and victoriously upholds the pleasure principle.'³ These words could not but appeal to the leader of an avant-garde movement known for its rebelliousness, who was also the author of a youthful 'discourse on the paucity of reality' ('Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité,' 1925, in OC II). Indeed, Breton quotes the above passage from Freud's essay at length in his introduction to the *Anthologie*, including the example of the criminal; and later, in his headnotes for the text by Salvador Dalí, he paraphrases it in his own words: 'humour, a denial of reality, the grandiose affirmation of the pleasure principle' (OC II, 871-72, 1149).

It is in his choice of authors and texts as much as in any explicit statement that Breton clarifies what he means by black humour. The *Anthologie* begins with texts by Swift and Sade, moves through Poe, Baudelaire, Lewis Carroll and Lautréamont to Jarry, Kafka, Duchamp and many others. Mireille Rosello, in her book devoted to the *Anthologie*, notes that Breton's choice of texts is at once absolute (having invented the category, he decides what texts best illustrate it) and arbitrary (no explicit criteria dictate the choices). Appropriating a metaphor that Breton himself uses in his introduction ('To take part in the black tournament of humour, one has to have overcome many trials'), Rosello calls him 'the sovereign arbiter of the black tournament.'⁴ She then makes a point of noting that among the forty-five authors who figure in the final version of the anthology, only two are women (the original edition had only woman, Gisèle Prassinos; the second one, Leonora Carrington, was added in the 1950 edition). Whence Rosello's question, which has been asked variously by feminist critics about Surrealism in general: 'Is black humour a man's business?' (106).

Although Rosello asks this question rhetorically, the answer to it is by no means unambiguous. The writer Annie Le Brun, who was among the young women who joined the Surrealist group in the 1960s, is an ardent advocate of Breton's conception of black humour (as well as an acerbic critic of feminist work). As Le Brun sees it, black humour- like Surrealism itself - is as much a



woman's business as a man's. Black humour, she stated in a speech at a conference on Surrealism in 1966, is 'the mark of the greatest insubordination, capable of affirming itself among the most varied minds,' endowed with 'subversive and liberating values...that place it quite naturally at the extreme point of the human adventure.'⁵ Black humour, she concluded, is 'a total revolt of the ego which refuses to let itself be affected by its own sensibility,' opposing 'all repressive notions... with a mood of affective and intellectual subversion that threatens the wellbeing of everything that considers itself stable' (104).

The fact that Le Brun's celebration of the revolutionary force of black humour took place less than two years before the social and political explosion of May 1968 in France adds a special flavour, retrospectively, to her words. Many years later, the American scholar John D. Erickson argued in a similar way that Surrealist black humour was an 'oppositional discourse,' an 'attempt to discover and articulate a new discourse offering an alternative to that representation of the world imposed by the dominant discourse of Western middle-class society.'⁶

Breton, as we saw, was drawn to the revolutionary aspect of black humour, but he also emphasized the ego's superior self-affirmation against 'the traumatism of reality.' Did he consider women capable of this kind of superior self-affirmation? Significantly, the French translation of Freud that Breton quotes uses the phrase 'sublime et élevé' ('sublime and elevated') to qualify humour, where Freud had written 'splendid and elevating' (*grossartiges und erhebendes*). Can women attain the sublime? What does Breton think?

Judging by the texts included in his *Anthologie*, I would answer that Breton thinks some women are indeed capable of attaining the sublime heights of black humour, but he does not think that that capability is a 'feminine' trait - indeed, he is quite sure that it is not. The metaphor of 'the black tournament' ('le tournoi noir') suggests that this kind of humour is virile: chivalric and warlike. This view is confirmed by another, much more extended metaphor which concludes Breton's introduction to the anthology. Although it has escaped commentary so far, this concluding metaphor is worth pondering:

[L'humour noir] est par excellence l'ennemi mortel de la sentimentalité à l'air perpétuellement aux abois - la sentimentalité toujours sur fond bleu - et d'une certaine fantaisie à court terme, qui se donne trop souvent pour la poésie, persiste bien vainement à vouloir soumettre l'esprit à ses artifices caducs, et n'en a sans doute plus pour longtemps à dresser sur le soleil, parmi les autres graines de pavot, sa tête de grue couronnée. (OC II, 873)

[Black humour is par excellence the mortal enemy of sentimentality, which always has an anxious air - sentimentality, always on a blue background - and of a certain short-term fantasy that too often passes itself off as poetry, persists vainly in wanting to submit the spirit to its outdated ploys, and doubtless will not much longer raise to the sun, among the other seeds of poppy, its head of a crowned crane.]



Black humour is opposed here to sentimentality 'on a blue background' - and doubtless also to women's romances, which in French are called 'romans à l'eau de rose,' novels with essence of rose. Max Ernst, in an essay written around the same time as Breton's introduction to the *Anthologie*, had also opposed 'black humour' to 'rosy humour' - but his reasoning was that since the times were not rosy (especially true in 1937), neither could humour be. 'Chance is the master of humour,' writes Ernst, 'and consequently, in a period that is not rosy, the period we are living in, when a heroic act consists in having your two arms cut off in combat, [chance is] the master of humour-that-is-not-rosy, of *black humour*' (quoted in Breton, *OC II*, 1768). Breton's metaphor, by contrast, points not to history but to poetry, not to war but to nature - and to the eternal battle of the sexes. Black humour, in Breton's tortuous sentence, is called the enemy of sentimentality and of 'short-term fantasy,' which plies its 'outdated ploys' against the spirit like an old whore plying her seductions. Breton's image here becomes truly baroque, for the word 'grue' means both 'whore' and the long-legged bird, crane. A 'grue couronnée' is a species of crane, the crowned crane, but the way Breton has set up the image one inevitably reads the phrase doubly: we see a crane raising its head to the sun with 'other seeds of poppy' (which doesn't make much sense in this context), and we also see a coquettish old tart whose days are numbered. Although Breton does not actually use the adjective 'vieille,' 'old,' to qualify the noun, the reference to 'outdated ploys' and the idea of numbered days imply old age. However one glosses this odd image, one thing seems clear: black humour is not 'feminine' but is the enemy of the feminine, whether the latter is figured as sentimental ('blue') or as an aging 'grue couronnée.' Nevertheless, Breton includes two women in his *Anthologie*, without forgetting to emphasize that they are young. Leonora Carrington, whom he compares to a young and beautiful sorceress (*OC II*, 1162), and Gisèle Prassinos, 'who was not yet fourteen when we had the privilege of hearing her for the first time' (1166), are women capable of black humour.

Indeed, the texts Breton chose by Carrington and Prassinos are easily assimilated to the other texts of the *Anthologie*. Carrington's 'La débutante,' a cruel comic tale, recounts the stratagems of a young girl who is so averse to debutante balls and dinner parties that she sends a talking hyena in her place (*OC II*, 1163-66). The only problem is, the hyena must wear a human face: she therefore proposes that the young girl kill her maid and use her face as a mask. When the girl voices doubts ('someone will surely find the corpse and we'll go to jail'), the hyena reassures her: being quite hungry, she will eat the corpse, including the bones. The plan is put into execution - the young girl won't have to go to the ball, what a relief!

This is black humour, no doubt about it, pitiless even toward the underprivileged class (reminiscent, in that regard, of Baudelaire's prose poem 'Le mauvais vitrier,' which occupies pride of place in the *Anthologie*). But although it is the maid who gets eaten, the tale's major aggression is directed against 'high society,' represented here by one of the favourite targets of Surrealist attacks: the bourgeois mother. It is the young girl's mother who hosts the dinner and ball the girl refuses to attend, and it is the mother who, 'pale with fury,' erupts into the girl's room after discovering the substitution trick. To insult (and enrage) the bourgeois mother was a favourite pleasure of Surrealist humour (see, for example, the sequence in Buñuel and Dalí's film *L'Age d'or*, where the hero slaps



his beloved's mother in her own *salon*). Carrington's story conforms perfectly to this programme, as Breton clearly saw.

As for Prassinós, the adolescent poet discovered by Paul Eluard and Breton, who published her first volume of poetry in 1935 when she was fifteen years old, Breton chose two texts by her: a short piece of nonsensical dialogue in the manner of Lewis Carroll (who is also included in the *Anthologie*), between a man and his horse ('Une conversation'), and another cruel tale whose aggression is directed against the family and bourgeois domesticity, titled 'Suite de membres'. The father in the story, helped by the mother, gives a 'huge kick to the little crate' that contains their child, whereupon the crate 'descended the staircase, lively' (*OC II*, 1170). In *L'Age d'or*, the hero kicks a blind man in one sequence, while in another a father shoots and kills his child when the latter playfully knocks a cigarette out of his hand. The 'civilized' codes of Western society, like the protectiveness of the bourgeois family, turn out to be only a veneer. Prassinós's text, like Carrington's, confirms and conforms to the Surrealist view, as well as to the particular Surrealist practice of black humour.

In my books *Subversive Intent* and *Risking Who One Is*, I have discussed the relation of women artists and writers to Surrealism by asking how, given the overwhelmingly male perspective of the movement, women associated with it managed to produce works of originality and power. The question of the relation of individual invention to collective doctrines applies, of course, to every artist associated with a movement that thinks of itself as a group (publishing collective manifestoes, using the collective 'we' in speaking of their work). But in the case of women artists and Surrealism, the question is complicated by the fact that male Surrealist artists and poets based so much of their work on erotic fantasies of the female body. How could a woman situate her work as an artist in a universe where images of the female form (as dreamed almost exclusively by men) predominated, and where flesh-and-blood women were 'naturally' (that is, based on unquestioned cultural assumptions) relegated to secondary or minor status?

This question, I have suggested, can only be answered by looking at a large number of individual cases and works. But in a general way, one can define certain strategies used by women artists to situate their work in relation to the work of the dominant males. Among these strategies, I have suggested, is mimicry: an exaggerated, implicitly parodic self-representation, corresponding to male stereotypes about femininity. Explicitly hostile parody or critique of Surrealist males and their views, what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'internal polemic,' is another kind of critical response by women. Both of these imply what I call a 'double allegiance' on the part of the woman artist: on the one hand, allegiance to the formal experimentation and playful innovations of Surrealism and other male-dominated avant-gardes; on the other hand, allegiance to the feminist critique of sexual ideologies, including those of the very same avant-gardes.⁷ Another way to define double allegiance is as ambivalence, simultaneous positive and negative feelings directed toward the same object.

A third strategy, which I did not discuss in detail in my earlier work, is precisely the one evident in the two texts by Carrington and Prassinós that Breton chose for his *Anthologie*: I call it assimilation, in which the woman's work is not really distinguishable, either formally or in terms of values, from the work of male colleagues. This does not mean that the woman's work lacks originality



or a personal stamp; rather, it means that the question of gender relations is not foregrounded and there is no internal polemic in the work, as in the case of mimicry or explicit parody. Carrington's and Prassinos's tales are wonderful examples of Surrealist black humour, like any number of texts by Robert Desnos, Benjamin Péret, Louis Aragon, or René Crevel. In their playfulness and verbal inventions, as in the targets they attack (bourgeois conventions, the family, the mother), Carrington's and Prassinos's texts are easily assimilable into the Surrealist canon - which is doubtless why Breton included them in his anthology.⁸ (He included Péret too, of course, and would doubtless have included Desnos and Aragon if they had not broken with Surrealism - and personally with Breton - years earlier).

Another way to put this is to say that these particular texts by Carrington and Prassinos manifest no ambivalence toward Surrealism: their aggressivity and parodic energy are directed 'with' Surrealism against common targets, not against Surrealism itself. But these two women writers (among others) produced quite different works of black humour as well, which might have made Breton and other male Surrealists squirm. It is to a few of those works that I now turn.

Women on Top: Surrealist Black Humour in the Feminist Mode

Freud, in his book on jokes, divides jokes into two main types, the 'innocent' and the 'tendentious,' and notes that 'innocent' jokes rarely provoke the explosion of laughter - or the degree of pleasure - that characterizes tendentious ones. The latter fall into two main subtypes, the obscene and the hostile: such jokes, Freud explains, 'liberat[e] pleasure by lifting inhibitions.'⁹ Obscene jokes lift the inhibition against talking about sex ('smut'), while hostile jokes lift the inhibition against the open expression of aggressive feelings. Presumably, the stronger the inhibition that is lifted by the joke, the greater the pleasure and the more explosive the laughter that greets the joke.

Black humour is obviously related to tendentious jokes, and more often to the hostile type than to the smutty type. Indeed, one could argue that the taboo against open expression of hostility is even stronger, in Western culture (and no doubt in some others as well), than the taboo against 'smut.'

In what I am calling black humour in the feminist mode, aggressive feelings are expressed against the Surrealist group itself, dominated by males; the ambivalence that accompanies such expressions is, I think, all the stronger when the writer is closely involved, in friendship or love, with members of the group.

Consider, for example, two stories by Leonora Carrington written between 1937 and 1940, the years during which she was most strongly involved with the Surrealist group and was living with one of its most dominant members, the artist and writer Max Ernst. Ernst was more than twenty-five years older than Carrington - she was twenty and unknown as an artist when they met, he already famous and forty-six.¹⁰ Like several other of Carrington's stories, these two - 'Pigeon, Fly' and 'Monsieur Cyril de Guindre' - remained unpublished for a long time.¹¹ 'Pigeon, Fly' is a macabre but also quite humorous tale of doubling and repetition, themes often found in Surrealist prose. It is



narrated by a woman, a painter by profession, who is called to the home of an aristocratic gentleman named Célestin des Airlines-Drues. This nobleman has the peculiarity of looking like a sheep, and is accompanied by a group of men who 'bleat like sheep.' More to the point, he has just lost his beloved wife, and has summoned our heroine to paint the portrait of the dead lady in her coffin.

When the portrait is finished, the narrator notes with a shock that the face on the canvas is her own. After that, informed that the dead woman was also a painter, she asks to be shown her studio - there, she finds her diary, in which Madame des Airlines-Drues confides her growing fear and disappointment. It emerges from these pages that Célestin is at once old and childlike, flighty and narcissistic, comic and sinister. He refuses his wife's company (when he does visit her, all he can do is talk about himself: 'Am I beautiful? They say I am.' 'Look at me. I am terribly young, aren't I?') and spends most of his time with his band of men dressed as sheep, playing the game 'pigeon, fly.' Meanwhile, in his wife's studio the furniture begins to sprout leaves (an allusion, perhaps, to Surrealist objects like Wolfgang Paalen's *Leafy Furniture Cover*, a chair covered in leaves) while she herself fades away into nonexistence. At the end of the story, the narrator-heroine discovers that the wife's place has been reserved for her: she is part of a series of young women at once cherished and neglected, who all look alike. As a final touch, the wife's portrait fades from the canvas and the narrator herself is afraid to look into the mirror: she has become faceless.

Two tell-tale signs indicate that Célestin des Airlines-Drue is a caricature of Max Ernst: he wears striped socks, and he takes himself for a bird. Ernst, in the famous portrait of him painted by Carrington around this time, wears striped socks; and he often portrayed himself as a bird. He even had a winged alter ego: Loplop, the Superior of the Birds. 'Pigeon, Fly' can thus be read as a tendentiously hostile but also cruelly humorous putdown of Ernst and his Surrealist friends, by a woman who loved Ernst, who shared his life and his passions, but who no doubt felt at times like the women in the tale: stifled, deprived of her face and her personhood.

The second story, 'Monsieur Cyril de Guindre,' is equally savage in its treatment of the main character. Although he is a father (of a girl he has never consented to see), Monsieur de Guindre detests everything related to women's bodies and to procreation; he cares only for his friend Thibaut Lastre, who dreams of having a suit made of 'rosy beige fur' with a shirt of feathers: 'It will hardly be a suit for going out in,' Thibaut says, 'but rather for the privacy of the boudoir.' As for Cyril, his taste in clothing runs to striped socks and angora robes - Ernst, in Carrington's portrait of him, wears, with his striped socks, a fluffy red robe that could be angora. Here, as in 'Pigeon, Fly' but even more explicitly, we find the suggestion that the Surrealist 'men's club' (or, in Luce Irigaray's word, the 'phratric') left little or no place for women, and that it prized female attributes only when they were possessed by men. We're rather far from *l'amour fou*, the passionate heterosexual love celebrated in so much Surrealist writing. Breton, as is well known, was quite homophobic - this makes Carrington's depiction of Cyril and his friend Thibaut (who could be a parody of Breton), with its homoerotic resonance, all the more hostile.

It should be noted, however, that at the same time that she was writing these hostile humorous tales, Carrington was also writing other stories in which the accent is on the complicity



between lovers, the man and woman as twin souls united against the world ('The Seventh Horse,' 'The Bird Superior, Max Ernst'). This kind of splitting can also be found in the work of other women associated with Surrealism, sometimes co-existing in a single work (as we shall see).

Turning now to Prassinos: 'La naissance' ('Birth'), a prose poem first published in 1935, begins with a sentence of pure black humour: 'He wanted a great dead doll to hold in his arms and smother' ('Il voulait une grande poupée morte pour la tenir dans ses bras et l'étouffer'). To anyone familiar with the dolls of Hans Bellmer (his first photos of the doll appeared in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1934), the allusion seems obvious: 'With blond hair, he said, and big open eyes...I will hug her very hard, to kill her blue eyes, to give them a life that's mine.' In the end, he gets what he desires: 'a nervous package landed heavily on his chest. Then, he took hold of it with his eager hands and began to destroy it.'¹²

Unlike Carrington, Prassinos did not have a personal relationship with the artist who is evoked in this poem (she did know Bellmer's work, however, as shown by a 1937 poem titled 'Hans Bellmer'). But just as in Carrington's two tales, one can read this poem as a hostile piece of black humour directed against an artist, or better still an artistic practice, that desires the female body - preferably dead or inanimate - only in order to destroy it. If Breton is right and black humour is both 'superior' and critical of reality, then in these works we seem to have a case of black humour raised to the power of two: Prassinos and Carrington are putting down the Surrealist black humorists themselves.

Assimilation on the one hand, hostile parody on the other: is there an intermediate position between these two extremes? I think that mimicry occupies that place. Like all intermediate positions, mimicry often produces ambiguous effects so that interpretation wavers. In that sense, it is the clearest expression of ambivalence.

Take, for example, Prassinos's 1961 story titled 'La mante' ('The mantis' - a play on words with 'l'amante,' the female lover). The punning title is humoristic, but also alludes to Surrealism, for the praying mantis ('la mante religieuse') was an object of considerable fascination to the Surrealists; the particularity of this insect is that the female of the species devours the male after copulation. The mantis/lover of Prassinos's story is a woman who has killed several husbands, a fact she does not hide but does not explicitly state either: 'I am of a loving nature. I love children and animals...but I have a flaw: I cannot abide physical weakness, it makes me dizzy. I cannot rest until I have helped the creature afflicted with it to get rid of it. One way or the other.' This 'loving' woman and man-killer may be a caricatural embodiment not only of the praying mantis, but also of the *femme fatale* dear to the Surrealist imagination. Is Prassinos mocking this powerful myth and those who promote it, or is she promoting it herself? One cannot say for sure.

Another example is the story by Carrington titled 'The Sisters,' written around the same time as 'Pigeon, Fly' and 'Monsieur Cyril de Guindre' (and also included in *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales*). The title characters of this exaggeratedly gothic tale are Juniper, who is half-bird and half-human, a vampire in love with the moon, and Drusille, a woman in love with an old king named Jumart. But by the end, Drusille strangely resembles her monstrous sister: 'Drusille, naked to her



breast, had her arms around Jumart's neck. The heat of the wine warmed her skin like a flame, she gleamed with sweat. Her hair moved like black vipers, the juice of a pomegranate dropped from her half-open mouth' (*Seventh Horse*, p. 49). Drusille, a combination of vampire, Medusa, and sorceress who transforms men into beasts ('The carcass of a peacock decorated Jumart's head. His beard was full of sauces, fish heads, crushed fruit. His gown was torn and stained with all sorts of food'), can be seen as an excessive figuration of the *femme fatale*. But it is not clear whether this is a parody of Surrealist mythology (Juniper and Drusille as caricatures of the 'wild woman') or on the contrary its assimilation - Drusille as the child-woman close to nature, *l'amour fou* as mutual feast and seduction.

Of all the women artists associated with Surrealism, perhaps the one who has made the most extended use of the ambivalence of mimicry is the filmmaker and writer Nelly Kaplan. Kaplan is a mistress of raunchy black humour, and most of her works have a feminist slant. She is probably best known for her 1969 film *La Fiancée du pirate (A Very Curious Girl)*, and has made several other films as well; but she is also the author of a collection of stories, *Le Réservoir des sens (The Reservoir of the Senses)* and a novel, *Mémoires d'une liseuse de draps (Memoirs of a Sheet Reader)*. (Both of these were first published under the pen-name Belen). Among Kaplan's many 'mimicking' versions of the *femme fatale* is the heroine of a story titled, punningly, 'Un fait d'hiver' ('A Winter Event,' playing on 'fait divers,' a small news item, often concerning crimes of passion). This woman recounts how she has just killed the love of her life, her partner in *amour fou*: 'Oh! my love, how could I strangle you with my stockings, those stockings of black silk which fit my legs so tightly? Do you remember my legs? They always excited you terribly. Do they still excite you? (No, I don't think so.)'¹³ And why did she kill him with those sexy black stockings loved by the Surrealists? (Recall Breton's celebration of black stockings in *Nadja*, where he describes a play about two *femmes fatales* who excited him terribly, *Les Détraquées*). 'I had told you a thousand times: you irritated me with your habit of never taking off your socks while making love to me.' (*Réservoir*, p. 127). Here is one woman, at any rate, who (like the 'superior' humorist according to Breton and Freud) will not allow reality to get the better of her!

In Kaplan's stories, the ambiguity is often indistinguishable from hostile parody, as for example in the story titled 'La circonstance exténuante' ('The extenuating circumstance,' playing on the other meaning of 'exténuante' as 'exhausting'). Here it is the woman who kills the vampire by her excessive sexual appetite: the male vampire dies exhausted! 'You too..., like all the others who were mere humans?' the heroine asks, disappointed. She is sure people will again accuse her of being a nymphomaniac (*Réservoir*, p. 113). One can read this as a parody of the male vision (and fear?) of women's sexual appetite, but it also has some of the ambiguity of mimicry: yet another *femme fatale* revelling in her mythic role.

To conclude this discussion, I offer an episode from *Mémoires d'une liseuse de draps*, in which the heroine, a beautiful young girl who is a pirate's daughter and lives on an all-male ship, must choose the man on board who will initiate her into love. She chooses, with no hesitation, her father:

Car ma décision avait été longuement méditée, puis raffermie par mes lectures scientifiques. L'amour que je vouais à mon père étant ce qu'il était, je devais agir de la sorte pour éviter les risques d'une fixation affective telle qu'elle aurait perturbée par la suite toute ma vie physique



et sentimentale. Papa, il me le dit plus tard, approuva entièrement ma sagesse. Je pense en outre que *lui aussi* en avait très envie.¹⁴

[For I had arrived at my decision after careful thought, and found confirmation for it in my scientific research. The love I bore my father being what it was, I had to act that way in order to avoid the risks of an affective fixation that would subsequently have perturbed my whole physical and emotional life. Daddy, as he told me later, completely approved my wise choice. Besides, I think that *he too* wanted it very badly.]

Killing two birds (at least) with one stone, Kaplan takes pleasure here in lampooning both the discourse of psychoanalysis (justifying incest in order to 'avoid the risks of affective fixation') and the Surrealist myth of the *femme-enfant*, the 'child-woman.' Her heroine becomes, literally, the 'woman' as well as the child of the handsome pirate, who initiates her into the secrets of love in a cosy little apartment in the shape of a vagina, with the circular bed/clitoris in the middle. The narrating heroine even draws us a picture of this apartment, in the manner of Salvador Dalí drawing a living room in the shape of Mae West's face.

Alas, this great love cannot last, for shortly after their first night together the father is killed by rival pirates. That is the beginning of the daughter's career as a reader of sheets (she foretells men's future by the traces on the sheets on which they have made love to her), among many other adventures. In the course of her travels she spends time in Paris, where she encounters 'the race of VAMPIRES,' including 'Norteb, the hunter of fire' and 'Ultapuso, a madman of genius.' That is, Breton, Soupault, and the others: 'They came toward me one by one, from diverse, often hostile sects. Charmed, I paid no attention. Until one fine morning I awoke to find myself caught in their claws, nailed by their teeth, the more or less consenting victim of their magic. For it is seductive, the race of vampires...' (*Mémoires*, p. 196).¹⁵

I think we can see in this statement a *mise en abyme*, a self-reflexive commentary on the ambivalences and ambiguities of being a woman artist among the Surrealists.

To return to the question with which I began: How does taking account of *women's* black humour inflect our understanding of Surrealist black humour or of Surrealism generally? Insofar as the women's work comments, aggressively or ambivalently, on Surrealism, and insofar as it does this with Surrealism's own black humour, it allows us to adopt a stance that is at once critical and appreciative. These works by women, in other words, place the reader in their own position of double allegiance toward Surrealism, or in what I have called elsewhere the 'Yes, but.'¹⁶ We can also call it the position 'between' -between appreciation and critique, between repetition and renewal. It is not a bad place to be, if one wants to think (or rethink) through the early twentieth-century avant-gardes in the year 2003.



¹See, among others, Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, Little, Brown & Co., Boston, 1985, and Chadwick, ed., *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1998; Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997; Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, and *Risking Who One Is*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1994.

²Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, II, ed. Marguerite Bonnet et al., Gallimard, édition de la Pléiade, Paris, 1992, p. 865. See the informative 'Notice' by Etienne-Alain Hubert, in this same volume, for details about Breton's and Max Ernst's first uses of the term (pp. 1767-68). Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the text; all translations from the French are my own.

³Sigmund Freud, 'Humour' (1927), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et al, vol. 21, Hogarth Press, London, 1971, p. 161.

⁴Mireille Rosello, *L'Humour noir selon André Breton*, José Corti, Paris, 1987, p. 57. Further references to this book will be given in parentheses.

⁵Annie Le Brun, 'L'humour noir,' in *Le Surréalisme*, ed. Ferdinand Alquié, Mouton, The Hague, 1968, p. 100. Further references will be given in parentheses.

⁶John D. Erickson, 'Surrealist Black Humour as Oppositional Discourse,' *Symposium*, Fall 1988, p. 198.

⁷Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, pp. 27, 162-63; and 'Dialogue and Double Allegiance: Some Contemporary Women Artists and the Historical Avant-Garde,' in *Mirror Images*, ed. W. Chadwick, pp. 128-55. For the concept of mimicry, see Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1985, p. 76.

⁸My reading of these texts differs from Mireille Rosello's, for I am struck above all by the resemblance (assimilation) between Carrington's and Prassinos's texts and the others in the anthology, while Rosello emphasizes their difference. Thus, in Carrington's 'La débutante,' she sees a feminine sensibility that dwells on communication and dialogue (*L'Humour noir selon André Breton*, p. 129). This reading does not take account of the violent, and violently anti-'bourgeois family' aspects of Carrington's text- which were precisely, I surmise, what appealed to Breton.

⁹Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey, W.W. Norton, New York, 1963, p. 134.

¹⁰I discuss their relation in detail in *Risking Who One Is*, pp. 89-121; the discussion of the two stories that follows is drawn from that chapter.

¹¹Although written in English, they were first published in French translation in 1986, and in English in 1988: Leonora Carrington, *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales*, E.P. Dutton, New York.

¹²Gisèle Prassinos, *Les Mots endormis*, Flammarion, Paris, 1967, pp. 17-18.

¹³Nelly Kaplan, *Le Réservoir des sens*, nouvelle édition augmentée, J.-J. Pauvert, Paris, 1988, p. 126. Further references to this book of stories will be given in parentheses.

¹⁴Belen, *Mémoires d'une liseuse de draps*, J.-J. Pauvert, Paris, 1974, p. 95; italics in the text.

¹⁵For a detailed reading of *Mémoires d'une liseuse de draps* which I discovered belatedly and which confirms my own reading, see Stella Béhar, 'Belen: Gourme et gourmandises,' *Symposium*, Spring 1996, pp. 3-14.

¹⁶Suleiman, 'Dialogue and Double Allegiance,' in *Mirror Images*, ed. Chadwick.

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