

Fantasy, the Uncanny and Surrealist Theories of Architecture

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex relationship between Surrealism and architectural theory and practice. While architecture did not apparently play an extensive role in Surrealist concerns, this paper argues that it could offer, nevertheless, a crucial arena for a Surrealist articulation of space as psychically charged. In the writings of Carrington, Matta, Tzara and Dalí, the irrational possibilities of architectural spaces are explored, particularly in relation to discussions of homes and dwellings. If Surrealism pitted itself explicitly against the modernism of Le Corbusier, this paper considers the points of overlap between them, using Benjamin's concept of fetishism to explore confusions of identity between the mental and the physical, the organic and the inorganic.

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Frederick Kiesler, *Endless House*, 1959
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I want to begin by rendering homage to my old friend and interlocutor Dalibor Vesely for the extraordinary perspicacity that enabled him to assemble the 1978 issue of *Architectural Design* on Surrealism and Architecture, writing what is still the most important survey of Surrealism and architecture in his introduction, as well as orchestrating the entirely prescient joining of Tschumi and Koolhaas in two of the most important preliminary manifestos of their individual careers – Tschumi's 'Architecture and its Double,' (with the delightful misprint that transformed André Breton into the society photographer, Andre Beeton) and Koolhaas's 'Dalí and Le Corbusier,' his confrontation of Dalí with Le Corbusier in a foretaste of delirious New York and his own personal application of the method of critical paranoia.¹

To speak of 'Architecture and Surrealism,' as you well know, is a tricky subject – not only from the point of view of a historical study, but also as a topic within the Surrealist movement itself. One way to approach the question, of course, is, like Freud on Surrealist art, to dismiss it entirely. After all, as Dalibor Vesely remarked, 'architecture never became an integral part of Surrealist thought in the same way as painting, sculpture, and the creation of Surrealist objects.' Indeed as he observes, 'the Surrealists were not particularly interested in architecture and then only in a very personal and rather indirect way.'² This comment was echoed by Kenneth Frampton, in the same issue: 'It may be argued,' he wrote, 'that the Surreal in architecture does not exist.'³

Or rather that, as the evidence of Dalí's paintings, and his Pavilion for the New York World's Fair attests, when it does exist, it exists as a kind of literalization of fantasy and dreamscape, that is dangerously close to kitsch, or at least, simply scenographic, as in the environments of the movie *Barbarella*. The most commonly cited 'object' – the *Endless House* project by Frederick Kiesler – is properly speaking not Surrealist at all, but 'Correalist' in Kiesler's own terms. What Vesely termed the 'bitter encounter' of Surrealism with the principle of reality,⁴ seems to have kept architecture, at least as physical object, at bay.

And if we look for a 'theory' of architecture in Surrealism, the evidence is equally scanty: a few remarks by Breton against modern architecture and an ironic survey of Parisian monuments; Dalí on the edible nature of Gaudí's art nouveau; a note by Tristan Tzara on intra-uterine space in *Minotaure*; an essay by Jean Arp.

If we then turn to look for the 'influence' of Surrealism on architecture, we are similarly blocked by the ubiquity of fantasy in utopian and outsider architecture, and its lack of specific reference to the Surrealist movement itself. Can we really say that the Palais Idéal of the 'Facteur Cheval' was Surrealist simply because it was a favourite of Breton's? Or that Simon Rodia was Surrealist simply because Watts Towers utilized found objects? After all, there *is* no architecture without dream, myth, and fantasy; and would we then wish to say that all architecture is thereby Surrealist?

In what follows I want to avoid such overgeneralizations, and even foreclose that more radical extension of Surrealism offered by Vesely, that Surrealism was to be found in the hermetic thought of the Renaissance and the mythic thought of Romanticism – that, in his words, 'Surrealism does not represent another artistic or political avant-garde, but a sub-stratum of the whole modern culture.'⁵



Rather, I will hold that Surrealism should properly be considered an avant-garde movement; that while its thought certainly partook of modern culture, it was not the 'modern' that began with the Renaissance but rather that specific culture of modernism in the interwar period in Europe; and that consequently any consideration of Surrealism's 'architectural' implications has to be rooted firmly in the architectural discourse of the 1920s, or at least a conscious replay of this discourse in more contemporary terms. Considered in this way, Surrealism is a much more definitive and interestingly complex contributor to modernism in general, and to certain post-modern responses, than any generalized appeal to the dream, myth, fantasy, or the like could supply.

What I would advance, however, is perhaps a more radical assertion: that, despite the apparent obliviousness of the Surrealists to architecture, architecture would seem to be the most fruitful of all media for a truly Surrealist practice. It affords all the physical and psychological structures of 'home' – a concept deeply embedded in Surrealist thought as akin to the womb. It construes a topology of symbolic forms, from the stair to the cellar, that, from Freud on, have become topoi of dream analysis. Further, and more importantly, it manifests itself in that most ambiguous of all elements – *space* – within which psychic projection and introjection move freely and without fixed boundaries. It is thereby a site for all the spatial terrors and phobias that have haunted the medicine of the mind since the late nineteenth century. In other words, as I have argued in a recent book, it is, as the site of the uncanny, a perfect machine for Surrealist work. It was in all these senses that the Surrealist house was, in the words of Leonora Carrington's novel of 1937, a 'maison de la peur,' or house of fear. In short, if there is an identifiable Surrealism in architecture it is not so much in the melting blobs of Dalí, or the wild fantasies of outsider art, but as a spatio-psychical machine: an instrument, so to speak, of the uncanny.

But the Surrealist uncanny was not, as is generally thought, the result of the uncanny effect of its chosen fetish objects – gloves, shoes, and the like. These, indeed, do not at all fit the Freudian definition of the uncanny when viewed within the Surrealist discourse – familiar objects, once repressed, suddenly returning in unlikely forms. After all, these objects had not been repressed by Surrealism. If any uncanny feelings attached to these objects, they were not, that is, an uncanny experienced by Surrealism out of its own repressions. Rather what Surrealism motivated was the uncanny of the Other, which for Surrealism was the 'real' – the uncanny sense that the *normal* was nothing more than a complex of repressed objects. In the aesthetic sense of Surrealism, this normal was modernism itself and the uncanny of Surrealism was no more than the repressed of modernism, an apparent normal that in fact was a mask for the 'real' pathological.

In architectural terms, this search for modernism's repressed underlife was concentrated in three domains – domains that the modernists had clearly and polemically identified as the basis of their attack on tradition: the solid, load-bearing wall that afforded traditional protection and privacy; the bourgeois house and its kitsch-like trappings of 'home' or 'Heimat'; and the objects of everyday life, which, while for the most part mass-produced, were still encumbered with ornament and encrusted with historical references. Against these three hold-outs of tradition in modernity, the modernists, led by Le Corbusier, asserted the technological and ideological virtues of the glass wall and its



transparency to light, air, and nature; the horizontal flat slab house that allowed for no more damp basements or cluttered, musty attics – the house raised on pilotis and with a garden on the roof; and the clean, functional, forms of typical objects – ‘objets-types,’ that would, like the ocean liner, the airplane and the motor car, be shaped by calculations of use and economy. With self-conscious irony, the Surrealists, led by André Breton took on each of these domains in turn. Transparency was first in line. For Breton the glass house did not represent that ‘machine for living in’ trumpeted by Le Corbusier, but rather might be envisaged, again ironically, as an oneiric machine, a machine for dreaming:

As for me I continue to inhabit my glass house (*ma maison de verre*), where one can see at every hour who is coming to visit me, where everything that is suspended from the ceilings and the walls holds on as if by enchantment, where I rest at night on a bed of glass with glass sheets, where *who I am* will appear to me, sooner or later, engraved on a diamond.⁶

Reading this passage, which does not entirely, as we might imagine, join Breton to his modernist contemporaries, Walter Benjamin was drawn to remark, ‘To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism that we badly need. Discretion concerning one’s own existence, once an aristocratic virtue, has become more and more an affair of petit-bourgeois parvenus.’⁷ In this way Breton poses the notion of a glass house of the soul, a psycho-geographic glass house one might say, against the ideology of the glass house of the body – the aerobic-glass house. Others were less convinced of the virtues of transparency. We remember Man Ray’s photograph of Duchamp’s *Large Glass* gathering dust, but also Georges Bataille’s ironic encomium of dust:

Storytellers have not imagined that Sleeping Beauty would have awoken covered by a thick layer of dust; neither have they thought of the sinister spiders’ webs torn by her red hair as soon as she stirred. Yet sad blankets of dust endlessly invade earthly dwellings and soil them uniformly: as if attics and old rooms were being arranged for the imminent entrance of obsessions, of ghosts, of larvae fed and inebriated by the worm-eaten smell of old dust. When the big servant girls arm themselves, each morning, with big feather dusters, or even with vacuum cleaners, they are perhaps not entirely unaware that they are contributing as much as the most positive scientists to keeping off the evil ghosts who are sickened by cleanliness and logic. One day or another, it is true, dust, if it persists, will probably begin to gain ground over the servants, overrunning with vast quantities of rubble abandoned buildings, deserted docks: and in this distant epoch there will be nothing more to save us from nocturnal terrors.⁸

Glass, once perfectly transparent, is now revealed in all its opacity.

In this sense, the well-advertised antipathy of Breton to Le Corbusier, reflected more than the general opposition of Surrealism to modernism. Certainly, for Breton, modernist functionalism was ‘the most unhappy dream of the collective unconscious,’ a ‘solidification of desire in a most violent and cruel automatism.’⁹ And we know how the counter modern argument was elaborated by other Surrealists: Dalí in his exaltation of the art nouveau, with its ‘terrifying and edible beauty;’ Jean Arp’s



championing of the 'elephant style' against the 'bidet style;' Tzara's indictment of modern architecture as 'the complete negation of the image of the dwelling.' All posed a volatile and elusive sensibility of mental-physical life against what was seen as a sterile and over-rationalized technological realism: the life of the interior psyche against the externalising ratio. And yet, we begin to discern, in Surrealism's quest to uncover the modernist repressed and to reveal an uncanny in the other, a sense of complicity, or at least a dialectical dance, that, I shall argue, made of Surrealism the most modernist of modernisms.

Le Corbusier himself summarized the apparently opposing positions succinctly in his only contribution to a quasi-Surrealist journal – a note on the work of the psychologically troubled artist Louis Soutter, a relative, in an article published in *Minotaure* in 1936. To Soutter's statement, 'The minimum house or future cell should be in translucent glass. No more windows, these useless eyes. Why look outside?,' Corbusier replied, 'This affirmation of Louis Soutter ... is the very antithesis of my own ideas, but it manifests the intense interior life of the thinker.'¹⁰ For Le Corbusier, looking always, as Beatriz Colomina has observed, towards a universally transparent exteriority, the attempt to re-envision the objects of daily life metaphorically was misguided, leading to a dangerous imbalance in the human 'technico-cerebral-emotional equation,' the creation of a 'sentiment-object' rather than an object of use.

Here we arrive at the second modernist repression experienced by Surrealism as uncanny. In the Corbusian 'home of man' technology took the form of more or less benign 'objet-types' and perfectly controlled environments that allowed for the full play of the natural body in nature. The line between nature and the machine, between the organic and the inorganic seemed crystal clear; organicism was a metaphor, not a reality. But for Surrealism, the boundaries between organic and inorganic were blurred; the body itself, invaded and re-shaped by technology, in turn invades and permeates the space outside, even as this space takes on dimensions that themselves confuse the inner and the outer, visually, mentally, and physically. As Walter Benjamin presciently observed, 'The work of Le Corbusier seems to arise when the "house" as mythological configuration approaches its end.'¹¹

Surrealist attempts to reincarnate this 'mythological configuration' repressed by modernism explain the collages of Max Ernst, and, more interestingly, the monstrous merging of animal and human so characteristic of Surrealist imagery. The gentle horse-headed women and boys that populate Leonora Carrington's *House of Fear* and its illustrations by Ernst seem deliberately to transpose the attributes of the centaur and the unicorn in gender and implication. As Carrington herself remarked, 'A horse gets mixed up with one's body...it gives energy and power. I used to think I could turn myself into a horse.'¹² From the figure of Fear, in the *Castle of Fear*, who 'looked slightly like a horse,' in Carrington's text and Ernst's collages, through the *Oval Lady*, who holds the secret of turning herself into a living version of her rocking-horse, to little Francis, a mask for Carrington herself, who grows a horse's head, these equine presences play on the register of sexual and mental ambiguities with evident autobiographical reference. It was, after all, Father who burned the rocking horse to punish the *Oval Lady* for even desiring to be a horse; and Francis whose horse's shape at



once displayed his shame at failing to be woman and his androgynous desire. Carrington's horse-people seem to prefigure Donna Haraway's separatist cyborgs.

Carrington's homes for androgynes are equally filled with a mixture of organic and inorganic objects: thus Uncle Ubriaco's workroom in 'Little Francis' was:

A spacious apartment on the ground floor filled with half-constructed constructions and wholly demolished bicycles. The walls were lined with bookshelves that held books, spare tyres, bottles of oil, chipped figureheads, spanners, hammers, and reels of thread.¹³

A series of books – *Man and Bicycle*, *Intricacies of Pedals*, *Tobson's Essays on Spokes and Bells*, *Free Wheels and Ball Bearings* – was piled beside a heterogeneous collection that included starved cockroaches in a small cage, a string of artificial onions, a spinning wheel, ladies' corsets of a complicated pattern, and a great many cogwheels.

For Carrington and the Surrealists in general, these semi-organic and dream-objects were arrayed to counter the implacable rationalism of purely technological modernism, epitomised in the shape of the Father, who in the 'Oval Lady' seemed 'more like a geometric figure than anything else,'¹⁴ and who achieved grotesque proportions in the character of Egres Lepereff, 'The Great Architect' in 'Little Francis.' Based on Serge Chermayeff, appointed a surrogate parent during Carrington's stay in London, this designer of guillotines for the execution of boys like Francis, espoused 'Good machinery and efficient planning,' which 'are always artistically moving.' 'My platform...was pleasing,' purred the Architect, 'though utterly devoid of anything save the merest mechanical necessities. It was a symphony of pure form.'¹⁵ Francis himself was less certain that 'architecture... in modern art is the nearest form to pure abstraction,'¹⁶ observing innocently, 'But if you build abstract houses, the more abstract you make them the less there'll be there, and if you get abstraction itself there won't be anything at all.'¹⁷

Such a new mythology of the counter abstract demanded a new form for the house as a whole; one defined by Tzara as an 'intra-uterine' space. 'The architecture of the future,' he wrote in *Minotaure* 'will be intra-uterine if it has resolved the problems of comfort and material and sentimental well-being, if it renounces its role of interpreter-servant of the bourgeoisie whose coercive will can only separate mankind from the ways of its destiny.'¹⁸

The Surrealists' call for what Tzara termed an 'intra-uterine architecture,' was thus conceived as a radical criticism of the house of Le Corbusian and Miesian rationalism. 'Modern architecture,' Tzara argued, 'as hygienic and stripped of ornaments as it wants to appear, has no chance of living...because it is the complete negation of the image of the dwelling.'¹⁹ Against the horizontal extensions and the dissolution of the barriers between public and private implied by the Domino model, Tzara posed the maternal and sheltering images of 'uterine' constructions which, from the cave to the grotto and the tent, comprised the fundamental forms of human habitation:

From the cave (for man inhabits the earth, 'the mother'), through the Eskimo yurt, the intermediary form between the grotto and the tent (remarkable example of uterine construction which one enters through cavities with vaginal forms), through to the conical or



half-spherical hut furnished at its entrance with a post of sacred character, the dwelling symbolises pre-natal comfort.²⁰

Entered through 'cavities of vaginal form,' these conical or half-spherical houses were dark, tactile and soft. They imitated the self-constructed shelters of childhood. Here Tzara was directly, if literally, following Freud. Freud's interpretation of the uncanny desire for intra-uterine existence was evolved from his analysis of the 'Wolf Man' written in winter 1914-15 and published in 1918 under the title 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis.'²¹ The Wolf Man's complaint, noted Freud, 'was that for him the world was hidden by a veil,' a veil that could only be torn through the action of the bowels. But this veil was also a kind of mysterious generator of the uncanny: 'Nor did he keep to the veil. It evaporated into a sense of twilight, into *ténèbres*, and into other impalpable things...' During the treatment it became clear that this veil was the response to the circumstances of his birth 'with a caul [*Glückshaube*, or "lucky hood"]' that, until the onset of castration fears, made him feel he 'was a child of fortune':

Thus the caul was the veil which hid him from the world and hid the world from him. The complaint that he made was in reality a fulfilled wish-fantasy: it exhibited him as back once more in the womb, and was, in fact, a wish-fantasy of flight from the world. It can be translated as follows: 'Life makes me so unhappy! I must get back into the womb!'²²

In this way Freud was able to explain the peculiar functions of intestinal movements, that, tearing the veil, precipitated a sort of 're-birth' that was in turn connected to the primal scene of his parents' coitus, imaged in the vision of the wolves in the tree. The tearing of the veil corresponded to the opening of his eyes, and thence the opening of the window; the womb-fantasy itself was linked to his attachment to his father, an indication of his desire to be inside the mother's womb in order to replace her during coitus, to take her place with regard to the father. Thus, concluded Freud triumphantly, 'two incestuous wishes were united.' In concert, Tzara wrote:

When one returns what was torn away during adolescence and childhood, man could possess those realms of 'luxe, calme et volupté' that he constructed for himself beneath the bed covers, under tables, crouching in cavities of earth, above all at the narrow entry; when it is seen that well-being resides in the *clair-obscur* of the tactile and soft depths of the only hygiene possible, that of pre-natal desires, it will be possible to reconstruct the circular, spherical and irregular houses that mankind has conserved from the time of the caves to the cradle and the grave, in his vision of intra-uterine life which knows nothing of that aesthetics of castration called modern. This will, in valorising these arrangements with the acquisitions of actual life, not be a return to the past, but a real progress, based on the potentiality of our most strong desires, strong because latent and eternal, the possibility of being liberated normally. The intensity of these desires has not changed much since the stage of man's savagery; only the forms and satisfactions have been broken up and dispersed over a larger mass, and, enfeebled to the point of being lost, with their acuity, the sense of true reality and



quietude, they have, by their very degeneration, prepared the way for that auto-punitive aggressivity that characterises modern times.²³

In Tzara's mingling of popular psychology and primitivism – his observations on architecture were published in *Minotaure* following Michel Leiris's illustrations of Dogon huts in 1933 – we can identify a double nostalgia. On the one hand, the return to archetypal forms marks an identification with the origins of civilization and an explicit critique of its technological results, human and material; on the other, the notion of womb as origin, displays a familiarity with Freudian explanations of desire and the repressed or displaced routes of homesickness: 'There is a joking saying that "Love is homesickness," Freud had written in his 1919 essay on the uncanny, 'and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: "This place is familiar to me, I've been there before," we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body.'²⁴

What might well be the most 'Surrealist' of architectural evocations of such a house was developed, interestingly enough, by an artist-architect who had worked for Le Corbusier – Matta Echaurren, who in response to a demand from Breton, sketched the outlines of an 'intra-uterine' design for an apartment dedicated to the senses. Published in *Minotaure* 11, in 1938, this project was a deliberate attack on the commonplaces of the bourgeois home. The perspective view shows materials and forms that merge nature and the inorganic, the mathematical and the tactile. It was, Matta noted, 'a space that will bring into consciousness human verticality.' A true vertigo-machine, composed of 'different levels, a stair without a hand rail to overcome the void,' it was also a space of psychological interaction. Its columns were 'psychological Ionic;' its furnishings 'supple, pneumatic.' Matta specified inflatable rubber, cork, paper and plaster for the soft areas, all for better contrast, framed in an 'armature of rational architecture.'²⁵ The whole space simulated a kind of artificial womb. In a text edited for Matta by Georges Hugnet, the idea of this 'soft house' was set out:

Man looks back at the dark pulsions of his origin which enveloped him with humid/dank walls where the blood pulsed close to the eye with the noise of the mother...we must have walls like damp sheets which deform themselves and join with our psychological fears... the body insinuated as into a mould, as into a matrix based on our movements.²⁶

It was the task of the architect, Matta concluded, 'to find for each individual those umbilical cords which put us in communication with other suns, objects in total freedom which would be like plastic psychoanalytical mirrors.' Against what Le Corbusier had polemically defined as a 'Mathématique raisonnable,' Matta posed his 'Mathématique sensible,' proposing an 'architecture of time' against the modernist 'architecture of space.' We know that Frederick Kiesler's *Endless House*, designed in multiple versions between 1924 and 1965, was similarly conceived. Hans Arp spoke of this 'egg' like form as if it were the egg of Columbus: 'In his egg, in these spheroid egg-shaped structures, a human being can now take shelter and live as in his mother's womb.'²⁷

In the end, the Surrealist attack on modernism, an attack launched simply enough by revealing that which modernism had repressed, was entirely founded on the (popularised and crudely assimilated) principles of psychoanalysis. The blurring of lines between the mental and physical, the organic and inorganic, that was, for the Surrealists, one of the characteristic pleasures of art nouveau,



was immediately transformed, by Dalí among others, into a formulation that stressed the fatal intersection of the biological and the constructional, building and psyche, architecture and hysteria, in order to produce the ultimate object of desire, or, at least, its reification. Characterized by its mimesis of the digestible – gates with panels like pieces of calves-liver, columns with bases that seemed to say ‘eat me!’, buildings that as a whole might be assimilated to cakes – it was an architecture that, in Dalí’s words ‘verified that urgent “function,” so necessary for the amorous imagination: to be able in the most literal way possible to eat the object of desire.’²⁸ Opposed to modern functionalism in every way, the Style 1900 discovered its real functions in the appetites and desires.

A ‘traumatism’ for art, this style equally modeled itself on the postures of human trauma and psychosis. Using Charcot’s photographs of female hysterics at the Salpêtrière, Dalí drew a ‘psycho-pathological parallel’ between these images of ‘ecstasy’ and the carving of the art nouveau:

Invention of ‘hysterical sculpture.’ – Continuous erotic ecstasy. – Contractions and attitudes without antecedents in the history of statuary (I refer to the women discovered and understood after Charcot and the School of the Salpêtrière). – Confusion and ornamental exacerbation in relation to pathological communications; precocious dementia. – Close relations to the dream; reveries, day dreams. – Presence of characteristic oneiric elements: condensation, displacement, etc. – Blossoming of the sado-anal complex. – Flagrant ornamental coprophagy. Very slow, exhausting onanism, accompanied by a huge feeling of guilt.²⁹

The well-known theory of Surrealist inspired ecstasy that followed, summarized in Dalí’s collage ‘le phénomène de l’extase,’ with its focalisation of ears (‘always in ecstasy’) and juxtaposition of Charcot’s photographs with art nouveau sculpture, also included a telling image of a tipped chair, empty as if having thrown its contents out of the picture.

This uncanny property of objects to adopt the characteristic behaviour of their owners, thence to take revenge, this habit of the inanimate to take on the characteristics of the animate, and vice-versa, had already been recognized by Freud. In a passage that seemed to anticipate Ernst’s collages, he speaks of a naive story recounted in a war-time issue of the English *Strand Magazine*:

I read a story about a young married couple who move into a furnished house in which there is a curiously shaped table with carvings of crocodiles on it. Towards evening an intolerable and very specific smell begins to pervade the house; they stumble over something in the dark; they seem to see a vague form gliding over the stairs – in short, we are given to understand that the presence of the table causes ghostly crocodiles to haunt the place, or that the wooden monsters come to life in the dark, or something of the sort. It was a naive enough story, but the uncanny feeling it produced was quite remarkable.³⁰

This sensation, evoked, Freud explains, by an ‘over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality,’ was the precise equivalent of Dalí’s architecture of ‘hyper-materialism.’ Le Corbusier characterized the sensibility, accurately enough, as a disturbance in the balance of ‘our technico-cerebro-emotional equation,’ an over-investment of ‘sentiment’ in objects, to the extent that:



The feeling for cause and effect falters. We are seized by disquiet because we no longer feel well-adapted; we revolt against our enforced servitude to the *abnormal*.³¹

And yet, of course, modernism's own object imaginary was hardly less disquieting. Walter Benjamin, indeed, went beyond Dalí's simple opposition to make the conceptual link between the technical vision of modernism and the apparent anti-technical stance of art nouveau. Benjamin, who cited Dalí on the 'delirious and cold buildings' of art nouveau³² formulated a vision of the Jugendstil that was, in reality, an 'attempt of art to take the measure of technique.'³³ Precisely because, Benjamin argued, the Jugendstil considered itself no longer 'menaced' by technique, it could identify itself with technique. Thus he quoted Dolf Sternberger on relation between the curving lines of art nouveau and their modern counterpart:

In the characteristic line of the Art Nouveau are brought together – united in a montage of imagination – the nerve and the electric wire (and which in particular brings into contact the world of organism and of technique by means of the intermediary form of the neurovegetal system).³⁴

For Benjamin, this intersection of technology and nature was represented by the displacement of symbols from Romanticism to Modernism.

Here we may begin to trace the affiliations of Surrealism and modernism on the level of technique, affinities that were announced by Benjamin himself in the aphorism: 'The reactionary attempt that seeks to detach the forms imposed by technique from their functional context and to make natural constants out of them – that is to say, to stylise them – is found sometime after art nouveau, in a similar form, in futurism.' The structure that united the two, in Benjamin's terms, was fetishism. For it is fetishism that, in its multiple displacements, 'suppresses the barriers which separate the organic from the inorganic world,' that is as 'at home in the world of the inert as in the world of the flesh.'³⁵ Such confusions of identity were, as Sigfried Giedion noted, the inevitable product of the modern mechanization of the dwelling in its mission of repression against the bric-a-brac of the nineteenth century.³⁶ Giedion observes of the interiors of Ernst's *Une Semaine de bonté*:

Of the billowing drapes, of the murky atmosphere, Ernst's scissors make a submarine cave. Are these living creatures, plaster statues or models of the academic brush found reclining here or rotting? To this question no answer can or should be given. The room, as nearly always, is oppressive with assassination and non-escape.³⁷

Surrealism and Purism alike, indeed, fetishized precisely the same *types* of objects: what for Surrealists were 'objets trouvés' or vehicles of oneiric desire, and for Le Corbusier were 'objets-membres-humains,' or the physical extensions of the body. As Le Corbusier himself recognized:

The new 'Surrealists' (formerly Dadaists) claim to lift themselves above the brute nature of the object and are ready to recognise only relationships which belong to the invisible and subconscious world of the dream. Nevertheless they compare themselves to radio antennae; thus they raise radio onto their own pedestal... the supremely elegant relationships of their metaphors... are all the time very clearly dependent on the products of straightforward conscious effort... the finality necessary to polished steel.³⁸



To prove the point Le Corbusier cited De Chirico, writing in the first number of *La Révolution surréaliste* in December 1924: 'They are like levers, as irresistible as those all-powerful machines, those gigantic cranes which raise high over the teeming building sites sections of floating fortresses with heavy towers like the breasts of ante-diluvian mammals.'³⁹

In this dependency of Surrealist fantasy on the real objects of the machine world, 'type-objects' and 'sentiment-objects' were joined in their common aim to overcome technique in its banal manifestations in favour of a technological imaginary that would transform technology into the human and vice-versa, into the prosthetic and potentially critical devices of the cyborg. It was not by chance that Walter Benjamin identified Olympia, the automat doll of E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'Sandman,' and subject of Freud's analysis of the uncanny, as the ideal woman of the art nouveau. 'The extreme point of the technical organization of the world,' concluded Benjamin, 'consists in the liquidation of fertility.'⁴⁰

This then is the context that inspired Benjamin to the aphorism, which I will now cite, that underlies my argument. Noted as if at random in the *Passagenwerke*, it reads:

'To embrace Breton and Le Corbusier – that would be to draw the spirit of contemporary France like a bow which strikes with knowledge to the heart of the present.'⁴¹ If, this afternoon, I have broken ground on Breton's side to make this embrace historically supported, I know that Stanislaus von Moos's talk tomorrow will do the same for Le Corbusier, thus allowing this conference to claim a fulfillment of Benjamin's desire.⁴²

¹ Cf. Dalibor Vesely, 'Surrealism, Myth and Modernity,' Bernard Tschumi, 'Architecture and its Double,' and Rem Koolhaas, 'Dalí and Le Corbusier: the Paranoid-Critical Method,' in *Architectural Design*, 48, nos. 2-3, 1978, pp. 88-95, 111-116- and 152-163 respectively.

² Vesely, 'Surrealism, Myth and Modernity,' op. cit., p. 91.

³ Kenneth Frampton, 'Has the Proletariat No Use for a Glider?,' *Architectural Design*, 48, nos. 2-3, 1978, p. 96.

⁴ Vesely, 'Surrealism, Myth and Modernity,' op. cit., p. 91.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁶ André Breton, *Nadja* (Paris :Gallimard, 1964), pp. 18-19.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism,' in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Peter Demetz ed., transl. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 180.

⁸ Georges Bataille, 'Poussière,' *Documents*, 1, no. 5, 1929, p. 278.

⁹ André Breton, 'Crise de l'Objet' (1935), cited in Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays on the Modern Unhomey* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), p. 150.

¹⁰ Le Corbusier, 'Louis Sutter. L'inconnu de la soixantaine,' *Minotaure* 9, October 1936, p. 62.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Passagen-Werk,' in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), p. 513.

¹² Leonora Carrington, *The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1988), p. 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Tristan Tzara, 'D'un certain automatisme du goût,' *Minotaure*, 3-4, December 1933, p. 84.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*

²¹ Sigmund Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,' *Collected Papers*, vol.3, trans. Alix and James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1959).

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 580-1.

²³ Tzara, 'D'un certain automatisme du goût,' op. cit., p. 84.



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- ²⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), in *Art and Literature*, The Pelican Freud Library, vol. 14 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 368.
- ²⁵ Matta Echaurren, 'Mathématique sensible - Architecture du temps' (adaptation by Georges Hugnet), *Minotaure*, 11, 1938, p. 43.
- ²⁶ Ibidem.
- ²⁷ Cited by Vesely, 'Surrealism, Myth and Modernity,' op. cit., p. 94.
- ²⁸ Salvador Dalí, 'De la beauté terrifiante et comestible de l'architecture modern'style,' *Minotaure*, 3-4, December 1933, p. 72.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 73.
- ³⁰ Freud, 'The Uncanny,' op. cit., p. 367.
- ³¹ Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, translated and introduced by James I. Dunnett, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1987), p. 72.
- ³² Benjamin, 'Passagen-Werk,' op. cit., p. 680, citing Salvador Dalí, 'L'âne pourri,' *Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, I, 1930, p. 12.
- ³³ Benjamin, ibid., p. 680. The first attempt was that of realism, the second, art nouveau.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 694.
- ³⁵ Ibid., pp. 693, 118.
- ³⁶ See the evocative passages on Max Ernst and 'mechanized adornment,' in Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 360-1, 387-8.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 388. The illustration discussed, Fig. 199, p.341, is Ernst's *Night Shrieks in Her Lair...*, from *La Femme 100 têtes*, Paris, 1929.
- ³⁸ Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, op. cit., p. 77.
- ³⁹ Ibidem.
- ⁴⁰ Benjamin, cited in Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, op. cit., p. 157.
- ⁴¹ Benjamin, 'Passagen-Werk,' op. cit., p. 573.
- ⁴² Stanislaus von Moos's keynote address dealt with the relation between Le Corbusier and Surrealism.

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