

**Photography & Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent** by *David Bate*, I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd, London and New York, 2004, 272 pp., 42 b & w illls, £19.95, ISBN: 1 86064 379 5 (paperback)

As David Bate points out in his preface, a critical space exists between the corpus of works dedicated to Surrealism and those concerned with the field of photography. The dearth of publications detailing both in equal detail (and which he deems to be suitable for his photography students) is to be rightly lamented and thus it is implied that this work will fill the gap currently bridged by publications that Bate describes as being 'too difficult, too simple, ahistorical' or missing 'the whole point of surrealism'(p.vii). In opening with this criticism Bate sets the parameters of his own work - directed at a particular intellectual level of undergraduate audience - as redressing these problems by providing a considered re-evaluation of the subject which aims to resituate Surrealist photography within the context of the movement's relationships with contemporaneous social and political issues. Although Bate does not specify the targets of his condemnation, it can be assumed (due to the paucity of material on the subject) that the work of Rosalind Krauss on Surrealism and photography<sup>1</sup> and the catalogue of essays accompanying the influential 1985 *L'Amour fou* exhibition<sup>2</sup> constitute that which is 'too difficult'. Although these assessments of the role of photography within Surrealism are not without their own set of problems, in particular their insertion into Krauss's *October* orientated project to assert an alternative trajectory for Modernism and to focus on the indexicality of the photographic image,<sup>3</sup> they provided the first serious attempts to theorise the photograph as integral to the Surrealist project. Bate thus assumes that acknowledging photography as intrinsic to Surrealist production is no longer necessary. Rather than locating certain themes of Surrealism in the photographic productions of the Surrealists he seeks to read the larger themes of Surrealism through photography. To this end, the book is predicated around three particular issues: sexuality, colonialism and social dissent. Bate's claim for Surrealism is that it operated within terms that may be understood through an analogous relationship to the Oedipal triangle of father, mother and child, the Surrealists working against the role of the parents as played by 'bourgeois sexual relations, masculinity and femininity,



institutional treatment of the ill, social prejudices, religious bigotry, Eurocentrism and colonialist politics' (p.ix). Indeed, this initial reference to psychoanalysis sets the tone for the remainder of the book, which repeatedly turns to Freudian and Lacanian exposition, not so much for interrogation of the images in hand, but to explain the rationale behind Surrealist attitudes and the responses of the individuals involved to their historical and cultural conditions.

Connected to this use of psychoanalysis is the successful attempt in the first chapter to classify and clarify Surrealist photography, in order to remove it from the 'too difficult'. In dividing the photographic output of the Surrealists along explicit terms which utilise photographic semiotics as much as psychoanalysis, the reader and student is provided with a framework for their own understanding and investigations. The three categories of Surrealist photography given as the mimetic, the 'prophotographic', and the enigmatic, effectively separate the objects of the study into, respectively, illustrative images, those already containing Surrealist 'content', and those photographs which 'obscure meaning' (pp.22-29). The last category is one that is repeatedly alluded to within the book and is dependent upon the employment of Jean Laplanche's concept of the 'enigmatic signifier'. According to Laplanche an enigma 'can only be proposed by someone who does not master the answer, because his message is a compromise-formation in which his unconscious takes part'.<sup>4</sup> The usefulness of this concept for Bate is dependent upon his assumption that the unconscious of the photographer or manipulator of found photographic images is necessarily implicated within the aforementioned historical and social conditions. This allows Bate's project to both refuse a closure of meaning on any particular image (as it is impossible to definitively analyse all potential influences on the formation of the unconscious) and to avoid the problems associated with an assumed autobiographical psychoanalytic reading of the artist.

In fact the breadth of psychoanalytic, semiotic and cultural theory is so wide that it operates occasionally to divert the reader's attention from the subjects of the book to Bate's own intellectual supports. Although the use of Althusser, Barthes, Bhabha, Freud, Lacan, Laplanche and Said among others, is carefully considered within each chapter of the book, the combination lends itself to a complexity which might bewilder its intended audience. However, this theoretically rich approach does result in an expansion of the terms in which we can



productively consider Surrealist photography. For example, by drawing on the interrogation of the emblem in studies of seventeenth-century literature Bate usefully proposes a reading of the captioned photographs of *La Révolution surréaliste* that projects them as poetic image, a particular convention of the combination of text and image (pp. 35-37).

The first chapter, 'What is a Surrealist photograph?' carefully delineates not only the aforementioned categorisations of the photograph, but also concerns itself with an exemplary signifier of Bate's entire project. In taking the famous photomontage of Germaine Berton surrounded by portraits of the Surrealists and Freud, as published in the December 1924 issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, he successfully extends the usual contextualisation of the work. This is carried out through painstaking historical research that allows the interpretation of the work as a celebration, of Berton's act of anarchy in shooting the right-wing political leader Marius Plateau to be supplanted by a new analysis of the formal appearance of the montage and Berton's recent suicide. In combining a deconstruction of the photograph itself and its socio-cultural background Bate introduces the reader to many of his themes: the role of 'woman' within Surrealism, death and love, murder and suicide, the political affiliations of the group, and the role of the image as emblematic representation of the dream-work.

Chapter Two is more curious in its relationship to the book as a whole. Taking as its subject 'the automatic image' it provides an excellent account of the development of automatism within the field of psychology and inserts this into a reading of the equivocal relationship between the visual or verbal automatist production of the Surrealists. In this discussion the proposal appears to be that the problematic of automatism was not the difficulty of rendering a pure automatist image without recourse to conscious control, but rather Breton's insistence on disrupting the conventional pattern of signifier and signified, inserting into the gap the psychical structures of the unconscious. Photography is hereby reinserted into the context of all visual Surrealist production and simultaneously removed from the assumption that it is innately automatist in its indexicality. Bate's proposal is clear and useful, although the lack of detailed analysis of any particular photograph distances it from the structure of the rest of the book.



Chapter Three elaborates a re-reading of the Parisian photographs of André Breton's book *Nadja* within the familiar terms of their connections to sites of revolution and insurrection (as first described by Margaret Cohen<sup>5</sup>) and the emptiness of the images. However, his concentration on the commissioned photographs of Breton's Paris curiously leaves unexplored the other images of the book, which are at least as interesting. What is the role of the doubled photograph of Robert Desnos and the relatively unexplored addition to the 1964 edition of the photomontage of Nadja's eyes? It is possible to conjecture that Bate is avoiding reference to Krauss's theories of doubling,<sup>6</sup> but the expertise he demonstrates in the remainder of the book suggests that he could have provided a useful interpretation of these works within the context of his argument.

In Chapter Four the reader is presented with an apposite analysis of a work that Bate claims remains largely overlooked in critical examinations of Surrealism, an aspect he finds puzzling when considered in relation to the notoriety of the photograph. This discussion of Man Ray's *Le Violon d'Ingres* (1924) does indeed redress this perceived slight to the work, carefully analysing it in relation to the cultural currency of Ingres, the appropriation of 'the oriental' into fashion and the associated intimations of sexuality that may be derived from its references to the French master and the 'otherness' of the image. In these terms the chapter acts as a companion piece to Kirsten Hoving Powell's article on the same subject, which incidentally extended the argument to an evaluation of the writings of Sade on the work of Man Ray, a topic which is the subject of Bate's next chapter, 'The Sadean Eye'.<sup>7</sup> In this discussion the author analyses the influence of Sade on Surrealism, carefully differentiating between an implied misogyny and the practice of sadism and the personal lives of the Surrealists and their artistic output. As he rightly suggests, such distinctions also need to be drawn carefully: otherwise they risk collapsing the 'symbolic and imaginary registers together' (p.148). Bate chooses to configure his argument through a discussion of the Surrealist emphasis on love. In referencing the ideals of courtly love within the same context as sadistic desire he proposes a re-reading of the Surrealist engagement with love through an ideal of suffering that encompasses a Freudian reading of the obsessions of the subject projected onto the Surrealist image of woman as a framework for their own desire.



The sixth and seventh chapters 'Black object, White Subject' and 'The Truth of the Colonies', are constructed around the examination of Man Ray's *Noire et Blanche* (1926) and the photographs of the *The Truth of the Colonies* exhibition (1931) in terms of their involvement within the contemporaneous discourses of colonialism and the more recent examinations of the meanings of such relationships. As such, Bate posits an illuminating discussion on the Surrealist's complex critique of Imperialism that connects it to his thesis that photographs were used within the movement to produce conflicting images which destabilise both conventions of representation and dominant ideologies. The book concludes with a brief account of the passing of Surrealism in the face of impending fascism, drawing attention to its few last gasps as an international literary and artistic avant-garde and a localised point of political resistance in left-wing French politics. In this division he replays the concerns of the book which revolve around the analysis of the photographic objects of Surrealist art production and the actions of a group committed to social and political dissent.

In conclusion the book is a valuable contribution to the existing literature on the subject of Surrealism and photography. However, as is clear from my brief précis of the chapters Surrealist photography is not really the subject of this book. Rather, the use of the photographic by the Surrealists is proposed as a methodology in itself (via the analytic toolkit that Bate acknowledges in his preface) for reading through the concerns of the movement. The author himself appears aware of this aspect of his project and it therefore appears unjust to make it a criticism of this work, especially when a new survey of photography and Surrealism is not really needed. Instead, I would like to suggest that this book is as valuable for its dissections of its subtitle 'sexuality, colonialism and social dissent' as it is for its ostensible topic. While the book maintains related concerns throughout it resists the tendency to explain the role of photography for Surrealism, presenting in its place eight distinct chapters each of which is able to stand independently from the rest of the text.

Samantha Lackey,  
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<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1985, 87-118.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingstone, *L'Amour fou. Photography and Surrealism*, Washington D.C., The Corcoran Gallery of Art and New York: Abbeville Press, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> In focusing on the indexicality of the Surrealist photograph Rosalind Krauss refers back to her assertion that the diversity of American art of the 1970s may be resolved through recourse to the importance of the photographic index (as mediated through Duchamp). Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America (Part 1),' *October*, no. 3, Spring 1977, pp. 68-81 and 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America (Part 2),' *October*, no. 4, Fall 1977, pp. 58-67.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, Routledge, London, pp. 254-5, note 46 as quoted in Bate p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination. Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Krauss's argument points to the strategy of doubling within the Surrealist photograph, emphasising the resulting effect of deferral as registering 'the paradox of reality constituted as sign', a project she places at the heart of Surrealism. Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,' pp. 109-113.

<sup>7</sup> Kirsten Hoving Powell, 'Le Violon d'Ingres: Man Ray's Variations on Ingres, Deformation, Desire and de Sade,' *Art History*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2000, pp. 772-799.

