

Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche by Steven Harris, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, 340 pp, 35 half tones, £60.00/US\$90.00, ISBN 0-521-82387-0 (hardcover)

In January 1938 the young painter and art critic Jean Bazaine co-authored an exhibition review with Maurice Morel for the newspaper *Temps présent* that they titled 'Faillite du surréalisme,' 'the failure of surrealism.' The occasion that instigated the review was the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts with its astonishing installation design, its mannequin street, objects and paintings by both the stalwarts of the movement and by newcomers such as Roberto Matta or Wolfgang Paalen. However, Bazaine and Morel were not at all impressed. Their review is an attack on several fronts, explicitly on surrealism's insufficiencies in terms of painting, and implicitly, on surrealism's failure as an avant-garde dedicated to the overcoming of traditional categories of art, to the project of representing inner life, and to the formation of a new structure for society. On the first score, Bazaine and Morel found that surrealism had failed to significantly alter the conditions of painting, avoiding the pictorial questions of colour and space and relying on an anachronistic form of naturalism to depict either preconceived dream scenarios or default literary narratives. With reference to the second issue, the review concluded with the verdict that the surrealists'

...bits and pieces constructed in an epoch of disgust ... finish up at the decorators, the ad-man's, the hairdresser's, and the fashion designer's. When one thinks of what they've done with all that they touched, with such a craving for purity, such indignation, one wants to cry out: *A d'autres!*¹

Although this criticism may seem reiterative of the standard response of many modernist painters and conservatives to surrealism, Bazaine's interrogation of surrealism's achievements as an avant-garde derives from his own efforts – as part of the group around the personalist philosopher Emmanuel Mounier and the journal *Esprit* – to envisage a new relation between art and society that would in turn prefigure a new regime of existence. Bazaine and Morel see the fundamental crime of surrealism as its betrayal of the original intention to produce 'the total liberation of man and the immediate social consequences that that would entail, and finally, a revelation of the unknown.' A decade later, Bazaine would admit and admire the fact that surrealism had been, in his view, the first movement to denounce the 'divorce between man and the universe that one calls in an intuitive manner his *milieu*.' In effect, Bazaine was not so much an enemy of the surrealist project and its works than someone bitterly disappointed in surrealism's inability to truly convert art into the authentic expression of inner life and something that would no longer be a separate, aesthetic category or activity but would belong to and be practiced by all. In his *Notes sur la peinture*



d'aujourd'hui (1948) the situation of the surrealist object preoccupies him for several pages as an emblem of this failure: 'The machine that liberated monsters becomes the reassuring domestic ornament ... the only instrument of unrest is blocked mid-way. Like the dream object, the object taken from the world loses its impact quickly.' Duchamp's bottlerack having performed its de-utilising gesture, Bazaine considered that 'a world of hooligans and liberated slaves stirs things up usefully but is insufficient – it is a blind and anarchic force that awaits its embodiment.'²

During the so-called second period of surrealism, from 1929-1939, the intertwined fates of the surrealist object and the movement's engagement with radical left politics could not be so easily or simply construed as 'failure'; Bazaine's diagnosis indicates the necessity for an artist in the 1930s and 1940s to negotiate surrealism's principles and works and to come to a proper understanding of what that 'failure' meant. This is a task that has renewed itself through the decades of first-hand accounts of the group and in the art historical analysis of more recent generations of students and scholars. To give a short list, a foundational narrative of failure was laid out by participants Maurice Nadeau (*The History of Surrealism*, 1945) and André Thirion (*Revolutionaries without Revolution*, 1972), in Robert Short's essential text 'The Politics of Surrealism, 1920-1936' (1966) that one assigns to every undergraduate class, in books by Helena Lewis (*The Politics of Surrealism*, 1988), Louis Janover (*Surréalisme, art et politique*, 1980), or Hal Foster (*Compulsive Beauty*, 1993), and in a plethora of articles detailing various issues, episodes, and associations. To this substantial literature can be added Steven Harris's book *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche*, a book that makes an important and timely contribution to our ability to re-imagine the stakes of the avant-garde investment in politics during this ideologically overwrought period.

As its title suggests, *Surrealist Art and Politics in the 1930s* is a historical study of a limited period; within the 1929-1939 decade, most attention is in fact given to the five years from 1931-1936. The book presents a densely woven, cohesive narrative of these years based upon close readings of surrealist texts, artworks, and the intellectual sources for surrealism, situated by the author within a detailed cultural and political context. The narrative that unfolds tells in large part the history of the item (I am now reluctant to ever again refer to it as an 'artwork') that has often been presented as the paradigmatic surrealist production – the surrealist *objet* – but which has, until now, curiously lacked its own specific study. This book in no way functions as verification of all the objects produced by the group, mentions all the artists involved in object production, or sets out to provide a definitive, all-encompassing theory of the surrealist object. Instead, through the course of five solid, tightly argued chapters, Harris places the surrealist object within the immediate setting of surrealist aesthetic theory, collective action, political affiliation, and personal affectivity.



At the same time, Harris offers an account of the period that successfully argues against seeing it as characterised by decline and establishes its importance (compared to the 1920s) to the history of the movement. He does this through an attention to the politics of surrealism that deepens our comprehension of the complicated and often denigrated or only very partially understood (at least by students) alliance with the Communists, not least through the readings of texts and artworks that allows their political valence in surrealist terms to be clearly seen. Finally, Harris makes his methodological claims evident through close dialogue with primary sources - whereupon the footnotes constitute an ancillary evidential narrative - and careful historical accuracy, in order to demonstrate his basic contention about the principles and status of surrealism as an avant-garde dedicated to the supersession of traditional categories of art and life: surrealism, he shows, does not merely capitulate to the exigencies of real-world politics but makes its decisions in constant tension with both party politics and the cultural field of modernist art production.

The introduction lays out the stakes of the investigation with regard to method, where Harris quickly establishes the inadequacy of a formal or curatorial approach that describes the surrealist object merely as a kind of construction made of found articles that combine to produce poetic meaning. At the same time, he acknowledges the contributions made to the study of surrealism by Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, and Denis Hollier, but firmly sets himself against the privileging of Georges Bataille and his base materialism that these authors have pursued at the expense of André Breton's supposedly irredeemable idealism. By re-positioning the surrealist attack on modernist aesthetics, for example in object production or through the concept of convulsive beauty, as a de-sublimatory strategy that is absolutely central to their work in the 1930s, Harris argues instead for the strength and depth of the surrealist effort to de-sublimate the aesthetic, to break down art's isolation and purity, and to return art to its sexual origins. In this effort, Harris re-reads and reconstructs the texts of Hegel and Freud that provided the surrealists with their ammunition, or rather, the tools by which the recasting of art as 'research' could eventuate in its supersession. Again, the insistence on the historical specificity of surrealism's understanding of these authors distinguishes Harris's approach from the deployment of psychoanalysis as a governing structure of interpretation that motivates the work by Krauss, Foster, and also, more recently, that of David Lomas in *The Haunted Self* (2000) (with crucial differences from the former two authors). Hegel's thought, as Marguerite Bonnet has indicated, is inescapable as the guiding structure for Breton's re-thinking of automatism that took place from 1931 and for the Prague lectures of 1935 that focus on the object; the same issue of *Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (no. 3, 1931) that displayed Alberto Giacometti's *Boule suspendue*, Salvador Dalí's *Objet à fonctionnement symbolique*, and Valentine Hugo's still fascinating and disturbingly fetishistic *Objet* – all of which are discussed by Harris in his first chapter dedicated to the '*au-delà de la peinture*' and surrealism's relationship to the genealogy of modernism – also featured a page dedicated to the 100th anniversary of Hegel's death. Harris likewise



emphasises the romantic and symbolist dimension that, along with Hegel and Freud, informs the counter-tradition that the surrealists build in opposition to a Kantian-inspired modernism (and here we might recall the pages of Breton's scrapbook that present photographs of his poet heroes as well as the double-page pantheon of names in *Littérature* nos. 11-12, October 1923, that includes Hegel and Fichte).

If, as Harris states in chapter one, the imperative for the surrealists is to stand against modernism but to maintain a fruitful relationship to modernity, then a dialectical operation with respect to traditional categories of art, literature, and indeed, politics, becomes visible in the surrealists' self-conscious avant-gardism. This perspective allows Harris, and the reader, to develop a nuanced understanding of the situation of the object as an equivocal construction that derives its attributes in part from collage, in part from sculpture, but deploys these features against their modernist origins. The specific readings in chapter one of several early and influential surrealist objects in terms of their de-sublimated aesthetics, their troubling of the stability of socially constructed regulations of sexuality and gender, their deliberate regression from *métier*, and their relation to the social, leads the reader into the realm of politics more strictly.

The second chapter works its way through the web of negotiations with the PCF (French Communist Party) as the surrealists attempt to merge their revolutionary supersession of modernist art with revolutionary politics without, of course, giving in to the demand to make political art. As we re-read the details of the Kharkov episode, with an interesting emphasis on Louis Aragon's position, the intensity of the crisis of 1931 becomes palpable, when, as Harris points out, the only collective activity that was seen to be possible was anticlerical. Including an excursus into the question of Soviet policy on proletarian literature and its application in France, against which surrealism would position itself, and the discussion of the factions involved in the founding of the AEAR (the Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists, from which the surrealists are excluded) Harris adds crucial detail and nuance to the narrative previously supplied by Short's article. Out of this malaise of 1931, and the surrealists' activities against the Colonial Exhibition, the object emerges within this specific political setting and moment of collective crisis as the creative activity that will offer so many possibilities: a renewed collective effort that will both re-energise the group as well as demonstrate the principle of a poetry made by all; a concrete manifestation and verification of the dream and all its elements of desire, fetishism, perversity and de-stabilisation; an anti-utilitarian *and* anti-aesthetic (for all its origins in collage, Duchamp or de Chirico) defiance of both rational use-value and the beauty of modernism.

The third chapter - titled 'A delay in glass' in reference to Duchamp's *Large Glass* but that, for me, evoked the questions of dialogue and opacity implicit in the founding text of automatic writing, the 'La Glace sans tain' section of *Les Champs magnétiques* - is a complex one that



requires close reading. Harris takes us through an analysis of the texts that preserve the debate in the surrealist group on the functions and nature of automatism that in the end divided Breton and Claude Cahun from Dalí, Tristan Tzara and Roger Caillois. He explores in clearly structured sections the theoretical principles of Breton's conception of the autonomy of automatism against the alternative positions of Dalí's formulation of the theory of paranoiac criticism or Tzara's attempt to establish poetry as a synthetic activity that integrates with politics (in the form of collaboration with the Popular Front). Within this methodological discussion the political stakes are embedded and Harris explores the way in which Breton comes to support a delay in the avant-garde project of melding art with life in order to better research its possibilities for a time when the political situation of Europe might offer superior opportunities for revolution. Harris does offer a convincing, psychoanalytically-inflected exegesis of the object as a 'theoretical' compensation for the delay – one that caused further dissensions and departures from the core of the group around Breton. The chapter further explores the contributions of Freud and Hegel to texts such as *Les Vases Communicants* (1932) by Breton, as well as the principles of objective humour and chance, and the significance of science as a paradigm for the surrealist casting of their activities as 'research' over and beyond 'art.'

From the comments on Tzara and Caillois's writing for the little-known, single-issue Popular Front journal *Inquisitions*, Harris then moves to chapter four to discuss the fraught moment of 1935-1936 as the surrealists re-energised their efforts to intervene in the unfolding of events in the political sphere and simultaneously presented their research into the object at the now-famous exhibition at Galerie Charles Ratton. Too many histories of surrealism separate the discussion of the politics from the attributes of the artworks and their theorisation in the texts of the group's writers; Harris demonstrates throughout each chapter how much the interpretation of the surrealist object is structured by politics and at the same time is constructive of the surrealists' rapidly evolving stance towards the possibility of effective political action. Via a detailed exegesis of the frightening, talismanic, mixed media *Objet* by Claude Cahun – a crucial addition to understanding her role in the movement in contrast to the isolated consideration of her photographic self-portraits – and the further theorisation of the object in articles by Cahun, Breton, Dalí, Caillois and René Crevel, Harris evokes the fragility of the surrealist effort to revolutionise art in tandem with working at a revolutionary politics that did not partake of the nationalist affirmation of culture that all parties, including the PCF, were espousing in the confrontation with the fascism. The object is primary for the group in its staging of the passage between subjective and objective, re-iterating the presence of uncontaminated thought and of a surplus of desire in subjective experience (noted in a section discussing Gaston Bachelard's *surrationalism*, or, an excess of rationalism that floods the channel between sensibility and reason). In contrast to this surfeit of reflection and creation, Harris's research has found only a single review of the 1936 objects exhibition (which Bazaine seems not to have seen, perhaps due to his involvement with Popular Front



cultural activities) – an indication of the marginal and estranged position that the surrealists inhabited at this moment on through to the dispersal of the group with the onset of war.

The fifth and final chapter focuses on the intensity of this turn inwards, away from the political sphere as *Contre-Attaque* imploded, and towards the seeming purity of interpretation. This immersion in the object and the dynamics of automatism is, as Harris comments, a restatement of the most radical aspects of surrealism at the very moment that Breton and the group acknowledge their failure in the political domain and when, though the object continues its rearguard battle against modernism, the surrealists turn to the defence of modern art. As with previous chapters, Harris gives a full reading of his selectively chosen objects that includes the psychoanalytic dimension that would underscore the objects' role, at least in part, as symptoms of political crisis. This time Breton and Jacqueline Lamba's enigmatic constructions, *Le Grand paranoïaque* and *Le Petit mimétique*, are contrasted to particular paintings and objects by Dalí in order to plot the methodological and formal differences between them on automatism. Neither position, nor indeed that of Bataille, would be able to triumph over the determining political conditions of the late 1930s and Harris concludes his book with an overview of the situation of frustrated actions, isolation, and crisis that surrealism endured whilst painfully adjusting to its historicised position as a movement of modern art.

Given the density and strength of the material explicated in the chapters however, this is not a conclusion that turns reflexively to a simple verdict of failure. The value of this study resides in the close, contextual readings of carefully chosen examples, always situated against the structuring issue of avant-gardism and its specific goals in the artistic and political domains, that succeed in giving the surrealist object a historical and interpretative depth it had hitherto lacked in art historical scholarship. As Breton demanded in 1935, the object assumes its relevancy when read 'dans son sens philosophique le plus large.' Harris's re-readings of Hegel, Freud, Trotsky, and the surrealist texts themselves are dense but never heavy-handed and though often beyond the scope of many undergraduate readers, illuminate the dependence of the surrealists on their intellectual sources. Harris's intimate knowledge of the primary sources allows his interpretation of the group's activities to emerge from an active engagement with the problems faced by the group. Some readers may regret that his study restricts itself to only a few members of the so-called 'orthodox' group, but its strength is in its foveal attention to the details of a limited number of richly informative texts and objects. The activities of other members of the group around Breton may be situated in relation to the narrative established for the 1930s by Harris and although Bataille is only present in the margins, the assessment of the de-sublimatory strategies of Breton and his companion-in-arms suggests further avenues for the continuing exploration of the interdependence of the two groups.



It may also be pointed out that modernism suffers short shrift in this book for being the constant foil for surrealism's attacks and that much work is yet to be done on the dialogues between the variant and complex modernist artists, factions, and proposals, and surrealism. This is not intended to be a criticism of a book that is to be admired for the thoroughness of the research, the considered and carefully worked-through argument, the evaluations of objects that have long been in need of a subtle presentation, and the elegant and convincing appraisal of the relationship between art and politics that is the historical legacy of avant-garde theory and practice. The status of the surrealist collective and its avant-garde ideals emerge from this study as the result of an engagement with the social sphere that is, as always, still open to critique, but that reminds us, as it did Jean Bazaine and many others in the post-war years, of the primary task.

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¹ Bazaine and Maurice Morel, 'Faillite du surréalisme,' *Temps présent* (28 January 1938), 4 (my italics).

² Bazaine, *Notes sur la peinture d'aujourd'hui* (1948) re-printed in *Le Temps de la peinture*, Paris 1990, 86-92 (my translations).

