

Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros and the Occult in Modern Art,
by *Celia Rabinovitch*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 2003, 312pp., ISBN 13:
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Celia Rabinovitch has produced a bold and innovative critique of the established historiography concerning the surrealist irrational in her suggestion that the discourse had a certain semi-religious character. She firmly locates the surrealists' psychological experiments within the occult revival of the early twentieth century and this, most significantly, includes their interest in Freudian psychotherapy.

In an important chapter she discusses Bruno Bettelheim's accusation that English translators had implicated Freud's account of the human psyche within a materialist concept of human psychology that he did not intend.¹ In supporting Bettelheim's objection, Rabinovitch makes it possible to argue that certain aspects of surrealism, most especially, the sexual mysticism, were founded not on a materialistic Freudian interpretation of desire, but arose from an intuition related to that of religious belief and practice. Consequently, she argues that Freud's importance to the surrealist movement has been exaggerated and that his psycho-analytic theory has been awarded the undeserved character of a unique revelation:

In the occult revival in late nineteenth-century Vienna, Freud's ideas form one element within a broader context that includes alternative religions, para-psychology, and a distrust of conventional rationality and religion.²

The central issue for Rabinovitch is the role of sexuality in surrealist metaphor and she has produced an effective argument concerning the image of the 'daemonic goddess,' the summation of desire and terror. In this context she refers too briefly to Georges Bataille's theory of the erotic which, had she explored its implications further, could have allowed her to develop a more incisive account of the various erotic economies projected among the different surrealists, rather than regarding them as subscribing to a uniform model of desire and sexual encounter.³ (Bataille's erotic mode, one recalls, was founded on the concept of an unformed consciousness hovering between life and death: a decayed, twilight being in a mode of existence that was in the process of becoming something else.)

The least satisfactory aspect of Rabinovitch's thesis, one that flaws the argument to the point of dissolving it altogether in places, is her over-broad definition of the concept of the 'sacred.' She makes repeated forays into the history of different aspects of the irrational in the work of the surrealists in an attempt to produce a working definition of this term. She examines such notions as that of the fetish, the taboo, the daemonic, and the uncanny. Eventually she settles on the idea of an object and a space that is set apart from everyday consciousness within a frame, or an exclusionary boundary. Frames fix an object in 'imaginal space.'⁴ In an analysis



of Meret Oppenheim's altered objects, she discusses the notion of 'unspecified power' as being an essential part of archaic religious experience.⁵ She argues that: '... the pervasive sense of significance - the mysterious attraction and fear that is the numinous or the holy - is the most striking feature of surrealist art.'⁶

At another point, she reviews some of Freud's texts, including the most relevant work for her argument, *Totem and Taboo*, in which he had provided a notorious analysis of the ritual actions that are at the origins of religion, specifically, parricide. Rabinovitch seems to ignore the discourse that has resulted from Freud's account, although this could have facilitated a more specific definition of the term 'sacred.'

Julia Kristeva has also examined the notion of 'sacredness' which she regards as a fundamentally repressive concept. She based her argument on Emile Durkheim's study of the origins of primitive religion and its use of sacrificial ritual.⁷ Kristeva identified 'the sacred' with an initiating act of sacrifice that was the foundation of the social and symbolic spheres of human life; in Freud's interpretation that of the killing of the father by his sons. It was this act that violated the previous established social order and inaugurated its replacement. Kristeva argued that the role of the sacred was to mediate between known and unknown worlds and to make law. It was through the notion of the 'sacred,' that leaders of established religion could define and control social space and culture. This belief provided a defence for established values and it legislated what could be represented within the symbolic sphere of social and political engagement.⁸

Etymologically the term 'sacred' comes from the term 'sacer' (sacrifice), while a priest is a 'sacerdos,' one who makes the sacrifice. In whatever way the concept of the sacred is to be regarded, whether as liberating, or as limiting, it is a term that implies a preceding sacrificial action. It is this act alone that consecrates the object, space or person. A cursory review of world religions reveals that there are few, if any, exceptions to the requirement of a primal sacrifice: whether of Isaac by Abraham, or Christ's crucifixion, or Boddhisatvas laying down their lives for other beings. In the Vedas, the Primal Man, Purusha, is the object of sacrifice and from his body the gods constitute the universe, a myth repeated in Gnostic texts where Macrocosmic Anthropos dies to become the world's substance. The same vision is echoed in Norse myth where the slaying of Baldur initiates the final days of strife and the eventual recreation of the universe. Whether it is Native American initiation rites, or those of the indigenous Australians, always it is blood, or its kin, sweat, that has to be poured out (it is hardly necessary to be reminded of Aztec ritual). The sacrifice of one human life sanctifies all life.

Breton was courageous in being willing to sacrifice his individuality in return for union with the unconscious, effectively a type of death. Anna Balakian argues for Breton's fundamental



atheism and Rabinovitch has not altered this view by her argument concerning the spiritualising (even religious) tone of surrealist metaphor. For Breton, the spiritual element existed only within the individual psyche. Surely he did not accept any notion of a transcendent otherness?

In his early work, many of Breton's visions involved imagery of massacre and blood, as in *Poisson Soluble*, but his most important reference to the theme of self-sacrifice and self-renewal appears in *Arcane 17* (1947), written during a purgatorial stay in Canada in 1944. In this familiar text, a Tarot card provides the central icon, that of the Star, a female figure pouring a libation into a stream. Her vase contains the dew of the stars, associated with menstrual blood. She is engaged in a sacrificial rite.

The work of other surrealists also commonly engages with sacrificial metaphors, Salvador Dalí in particular, of course, as in his depictions of coital death, or impotence (*Narcissus*) or his direct appropriation of the crucified Christ in the *Last Supper*. Max Ernst's *Oedipus Rex* may be cited as a reference to the ancient myth of self-mutilation. As in the case of Breton, these two artists employed alchemical iconography in which human sacrifice and sexual death were the primary subjects. It should be noted that alchemy, *par excellence*, was a Tantric practice, whether in its Western, Chinese or Indian forms. It was the Tantric god Shiva who governed the Indian arts of alchemy, dance and Tantric sexual acts. (In Rabinovitch's discussion, the term is used to describe a discourse concerned with the transformation of materiality and there is no suggestion of any direct influence from Asian Tantrism.)

Rabinovitch does not refer to Tantrism, although it may well have been relevant to her argument. For, she suggests that the notion of the 'sacred' is employed as a term to inter-link the material world with the spirit. A 'sacred' object is the meeting point of these two opposite states. This issue could have been explored more precisely by taking recourse to anthropological studies of 'Tantric' practices present in all the world religions, among which Roman Catholicism is one of the main exponents in the sacrificial Mass that changes matter into God. Catholicism was a major source in the production of Surrealist metaphor and myth. Bataille's Catholicised sexual discourse fleshes out into a dark, 'left-handed' Tantrism that could be regarded as quite an authentic exposition of the ancient practices (in its own way).

Sacrifice is a Tantric act in the sense that, by this action, a common material object is remade, ritually, into an extraordinary supernatural entity. Henceforward, it exists on two levels simultaneously, both spiritual and material. Though Breton and the surrealists did not refer to the historical phenomenon itself, nevertheless, their notion of sexuality is Tantric in that it is a means whereby to re-formulate physical and psychic forces.



Rabinovitch's account of the surrealists and their concept of the sacred remains an exceptional book for its extensive review of their encounters with the irrational. She presents an original view of the surrealist world. In rejecting materialistic Freudianism, she displays no small degree of courage. The book is one of a kind and will probably remain an authority.

Urszula Szulakowska
University of Leeds

¹ Celia Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred. Power, Eros and the Occult in Modern Art*, Boulder, Colorado, 2004, 117-43.

² Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, 143.

³ Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, 214.

⁴ Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, 176.

⁵ Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, 174.

⁶ Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, 176.

⁷ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, London, 1976 (2nd ed.), 326-50. See also Ivan Strenski, 'Durkheim's bourgeois theory of sacrifice,' in N. J. Allen, W. S. F. Pickering and W. Watts Miller (eds), *On Durkheim's Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, London, 1998, 116 ff.

⁸ Julia Kristeva, 'Logics of the Sacred and Revolt,' in John Lechte and Mary Zournasi, *After the Revolution*, Sydney, 1998. Also see Kristeva, *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, New York, 1987.

