

Surrealism, History and Revolution. By Simon Baker, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2007. ISBN 978-3-03911-091-9

Most texts on, not to say exhibitions of surrealism that have sought to critically examine the movement have promoted its understanding in terms of desire as a matter of the unconscious or of sexuality. Those texts that address the central political desire expressed in the title of their journal *La Révolution surréaliste* are fewer. These approaches, even when dealt with in combination, run the risk of reading surrealism in terms of an often-reifying rhetoric of revolution or liberation in purely poetic or aesthetic terms. Meanwhile, those histories which have focused on the politics of surrealism have often sadly remained limited to a debate on their affiliation, or not, with various existing political traditions. That is, most critical writing on surrealism has been written from above, from a perspective which identifies and critiques the way surrealism is disciplined by institutions of state (international fairs, war), capital (advertising, mass reproduction), gender, normative sexuality, and so on, or the ways in which the movement interacted with already-existing counter-institutions (the communist party, anarchist collectives).

Simon Baker's *Surrealism, History and Revolution* stands out against this context in its attempts to describe surrealism from below, employing a genealogical method to draw out its own particular imagination of revolution. He focuses on the surrealists' use and transformation of images, institutions and values, selecting key trajectories such as the formation and use of a surrealist pantheon; the uses of monumental representation; the street; and the construction of de Sade, vis-à-vis the monument of the Bastille, as a surrealist hero – identifying what we might call a series of surrealist refrains. In doing so, Baker offers an astonishing textual and visual map of surrealism. And where an exemplary text such as Denis Hollier's *Against Architecture* (1989) might set out a similar critical ground, Baker exposes fascinating specific, concrete, histories of images and objects and their (mis)uses.¹

It is an approach that works across, and even against, the surrealists' own method of self-description. The territorialising form of enunciation of the manifesto and its associated declarations were, at most, parodies of the existing political form of the party. Rather than beginning with manifestos, the series of refrains presented by Baker read surrealism through these shifting machinic enunciations which uncommonly draw together gestures, images, movements or even statements of position precisely to orient and situate something *new* which doesn't correspond to existing political or aesthetic forms. Such a genealogical approach is not only more intimate and historically engaged than one that takes surrealism at its word; it is truer to surrealism's own methods.





Fig. 1: The return of Charles Fourier, Paris, 10 March 1969



Fig. 2: Winston Churchill modified during a Reclaim the Streets event, London, 1 May 2000

This remapping of surrealism has strong contemporary resonances, and might even suggest trajectories of radical avant-gardism that extend beyond surrealism itself and its particular historical concerns. Perhaps the strongest example here is the surrealist refrain of statuephobia, a 'bronze iconoclasm' concerned with the uses of public space, social memory and geographical and visual regimes of discipline. Baker coins this particular surrealist thematic to describe their reaction to the 'statuomania' which Gustav Pessard, a historian of Paris, saw as overtaking the city with a massive proliferation of statuary in evidence during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Beginning with 'the statue's speech' in Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, Baker explores the surrealist tendency for reappropriation and antagonism towards the statues of Paris, and the critical engagements with historical memory that it constituted.² Neither simply criticism nor innocently playful appropriation, these practices functioned as another means for surrealism to compose a collective identity and to place itself historically. Through a fascinating original reading of its texts, works and practices, Baker outlines the shape of surrealism's statuephobia.

Indeed, this reading of surrealism offers one useful way to read the trajectory of post-surrealist practices that took up its radical claims and took the city itself as a site of practice. Not least of these, the Situationist International gave one of the few examples of what it might approve of as a 'situation' in describing a group of students who, in 1969, replaced a statue of Charles Fourier to its original place on an empty plinth in the Place Clichy in Paris, long after it had been removed by the Nazis. A plaque underneath reads, 'A tribute to Charles Fourier, from the barricades of the Rue Gay-Lussac.' Statuephobia even extended to those groups affiliated to the SI. Jorgen Nash, of the Scandinavian wing, was responsible for the decapitation of the statue of the Little Mermaid in Copenhagen, whilst from 1964, a nascent



form of the Provos in Amsterdam (soon counting ex-Cobra members Bergen Lucebert and Constant Nieuwenhuys among their number) began by organising ritualistic happenings around the Lieverdje statue, an image of the 'Dutch public' donated by a tobacco company, during which they would often set the sculpture alight. Such a concern has continued to mark the ideas and practices of post-Situationist currents of art-activist groups within social movements, although their concerns have usually moved from the role of the state in public space to that of capital, particularly billboards and logos. Perhaps there is a case for looking back at the relationship between surrealist statuephobia and the surrealist advertising-phobia discussed more briefly in, for example, Amy Lyford's *Surrealist Masculinities* (2007).³

The same struck me as true of the book's analysis of the construction of a surrealist pantheon. Baker gives detailed accounts of surrealism's construction of a pantheon of mythic precursors which both places surrealism historically and constructs a surrealist history. This took direct forms in Breton's poetic lists of proto-surrealists in his manifestos or Jean Scutenaire's collage *From Marat to the Bonnot Gang* (1934). This history of identification and counter-identification later folded in upon itself as groups in the 1960s that took the surrealist pantheon at its word set it militantly against the later New York reception of surrealism. On the opening night of William Rubin's 1968 MoMA show 'Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage' the exhibition needed to be protected by crash barriers and a tactical police unit from protests in the name of the true spirit of surrealism on the part of the Yippies, the Rebel Worker/Chicago Surrealist Group and Up Against the Wall Motherfucker, art-activist groups fresh from organising a Festival of Life against the 1968 Democratic National Convention, who again had perspectives close to those of the SI.

Baker's chapter on Sade's figuration as a revolutionary hero, or as a figure of revolution itself, explores in fascinating detail how this construction – and the later construction of monuments to Sade or analyses of his use value – were made possible by his connection to the Bastille. As a result, these connections themselves have to be picked apart from their mythical retelling, a critical task which Baker takes on in relation to the mythology and self-imagination of surrealism. Many of Baker's surrealist refrains, unsurprisingly, return to the French Revolution. Despite this central tradition of post-surrealist revolution, which I have suggested exhibits its own engagement with mythic pantheons and statuephobia and focuses on the idea of revolution-as-festival, Baker does not address the well-documented popular festivals of the French revolution. Instead, he turns his attention to some of the darker and more difficult aspects of the surrealist constellation of revolutionary symbols and values which, for this very reason, are more revealing. His genealogical focus on the edge of surrealism rather than on finished images produced by the movement – the images and tropes, for example, of de Sade, and the competition for their symbolic terrain – is in the end more productive than a form of critique which relates the supposedly 'finished' form of surrealism to other disciplinary



institutions. Opening surrealism up, as a cabinet of curiosities, Baker's reading leaves much more room for points of departure which understand surrealism in terms of political agency and possibility.

In concluding, Baker is drawn to discuss the street in relation to Contre-Attaque, as a fragmentary episode that marks a last engagement with the local peculiarities of politics in France before surrealism arrives in New York and is given a new conceptual currency, not to say a new level of cultural capital. The excavation of these refrains does not mark a political surrealism as something archaic, or suggests that such concerns simply end after 1940. Instead, they constitute a valuable inquiry into surrealism's initial conditions of composition. As I have suggested above, it was for others under different conditions to redeploy surrealism itself as part of their own revolutionary pantheon.



Fig. 3: Quantitative Teasing, somewhere in London, June 2009 (Photo courtesy of Immo Klink).

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¹ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of George Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing, Cambridge Mass., MIT Press, 1992.

² Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor, London, Picador, 1971.



³ Amy Lyford, *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War One Reconstruction in France*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007.

