

Provide a brief description of the stylistic attributes and conceptual principles of surrealism.

“Surrealism aims to destroy by the denial of reason.”

George Dunderow, Republican, Michigan, USA 1

Speaking at the time of the inception of abstract expressionism, Dunderow bemoaned the ‘world wide conspiracy of modern art’, which he cited as having sought by various means to demolish the foundations of bourgeois, in this case American, ideology. Surrealism’s ‘denial of reason’ had followed Dada’s method of ‘ridicule’, and indeed Dunderow’s bemoanings appear to have succinctly captured the essence of both movements. Dada was conceived in Zurich during WW1, and sought to demonstrate its disgust towards those who had plunged the world into war, and to liberate itself from the traditional values that had led to war. (For the Dadaists, the bourgeoisie, who had caused the deaths of so many, did not deserve the beauty of art but rather the ugliness of ‘anti-art’.) Surrealism however, though too vehemently rejecting established bourgeois values and the *rationalism* that had been used to justify the war, was a clear progressive development of Dadaism, in that it sought more than the mere nihilism and the ‘cult of absurdity’ that the latter had to offer.

From the launching in Paris 1919 of the anti-literature review, *Littérature*, by the poets André Breton, Louis Aragon and Philippe Soupault, surrealism (the term *surrealism* was borrowed from the playwright Apollinaire) grew from a primarily literary revolt against society’s inhibitive fetters on creativity, to the revered art form recognisable today. Throughout its development, psychoanalysis, class struggle

and revolution provided fuel for the movement that had as its broad aim the liberation of the human mind and imagination from societal constraints; A movement that rejected the aesthetic values of the ruling classes and the hierarchical methods of production they demanded, and advocated both an artistic and a proletarian revolution. Surrealism's intellectual leader, André Breton, encapsulated the movement's ideology.

"Let it be clearly understood that for us, surrealists, the interests of thought can not cease to go hand in hand with the interests of the working class, and that all attacks on liberty, all fetters on the emancipation of the working class and all armed attacks on it cannot fail to be considered by us as attacks on thought likewise." ²

Sigmund Freud's recognition and exploration of the unconscious mind had led the poets to delve deep into their psyches, through dreams for example, and to make literary use of the images found there. Similarly, psychoanalysis had led to the practise of 'automatism', which involved writing down furiously all that came to mind, as in an unconstrained monologue, allowing neither editions nor quest for rationality. In this way, unconscious thought was brought to the fore and 'rational' thinking was shown to be balancing precariously on an unstable foundation. (Unlike Freud however, the surrealists did not believe in 'cures' nor did they accept the idea of a *normality* into which Freud attempted to reintegrate his patients)

In 1924, with the publication of the first 'Surrealist Manifesto', Breton had defined surrealism as follows:

SURREALISM, n. Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought. Thought's dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all esthetic or moral preoccupations ³

ENCYCL. Philos. Surrealism rests in the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association neglected heretofore; in the omnipotence of the dream and in the disinterested play of thought. It tends definitely to do away with all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in the solution of the principal problems of life.

Although these methods were initially employed in the literary field, they were also used in visual art, by the *plastic* artists, with *automatic drawing*, according to Breton, being invented by Max Ernst and André Masson. Ernst, a German painter had co-founded the Cologne Dada group together with Hans Arp, but had progressed to surrealism. From *collage*, which brought together realities that would rationally be considered unsuitable bedfellows, Ernst developed *frottage*, which involved obtaining tracings from sources such as wooden floorboards, leaves or pieces of fabric, and bringing to life the images that then became apparent to him. According to Ernst, frottage was, “nothing but a technical medium, in order to increase the hallucinatory abilities of the spirit, to awaken visions automatically and to get rid of one’s blindness.” ⁴

Masson was a French painter who had been badly wounded in WW1. His experience of the horrors of trench warfare had led him to question human motivation and he became deeply interested in the non-rational artistic impulse. Masson’s automatic drawings were, to put it succinctly, random scribbles on paper, whose suggested forms were then developed to become recognisable images.

The idea of delving into the deepest recesses of the mind in the quest for greater, more authentic artistic creativity was not in of itself a new concept, yet what set the surrealists apart from their predecessors was that this method was to be put to political as well as artistic use. Among the surrealist’s literary publications were two series of journals; *The Surrealist Revolution* (1924-29) and *Surrealism at the service of the Revolution* (1930-33). Although never quite finding ‘the dialectical unity of art and revolution’,

“The other problem which presents itself to us is that of the social action to be adopted-action which, according to us, has its proper method in dialectical materialism, action which we cannot forego in as much as we hold that the liberation of mankind is the first condition for the liberation of the spirit, and that this liberation of mankind can only be expected from the proletarian revolution.” ⁵

the surrealist movement was nonetheless an ostensibly political movement, with Breton and many others belonging to the Communist Party, and in the days of Stalinism, to its Trotskyite faction. (Unfortunately, Aragon became an apologist for

Stalin) Although it was never an unproblematic alliance, Trotsky and Breton were easily united in their abhorrence of Stalinism and its didactic art form, '*socialist realism*', and together they penned a manifesto for artistic freedom. It is somewhat ironic then, that Salvador Dalí has come to represent in the minds of many spectators some of the greatest achievements of surrealism, when in fact his inclusion in the surrealist movement lasted only some five years, from 1929 to his expulsion in the 1930s for 'pursuing interests contrary to the aim of surrealism.'

While undoubtedly Dalí's contribution, the *paranoiac-critical* method - by controlled simulation of paranoia, working a state of induced delirium, the artist is led multiple interpretations of situations - was embraced by the surrealists, both his artistic methods and personal politics quickly became incompatible with surrealist ideology. Surrealism's intention was to expose the methods employed in the production of a work of art, to demystify the process of production and to dispute and negate artistic hierarchical conventions. Dalí however, maintained these conventions, with his work, "sinking into *Academicism* – an *Academicism* which calls itself *Classicism* on its own authority alone – and since 1936 has had no interest whatsoever for *Surrealism*." ⁶ Furthermore, Dalí was opposed to any kind of social change and was completely at home with the fascist forces of reaction in Franco's Spain, which epitomised all that the surrealists despised most.

While style and technique has varied greatly among the many artists who have come and gone within the surrealist movement, perhaps the work of a little known French postman can best demonstrate the English surrealist Poet, Gascoigne's assertion that, "All that is needed to produce a surrealist picture, is an unshackled imagination and a few materials.....The marvellous is within everyone's reach." ⁷

In a small French village south of Lyon, stands the *Palais Idéal*, ⁸ the fruit of thirty-three years of the labour of Ferdinand Cheval, who with absolutely no formal training, built his palace from imagination, the finished result demonstrating a plethora of styles and paying homage to the concept of the *marvellous* being attainable by all.

In conclusion, this paper has in no way been able to do proper justice to the surrealist movement and to give credit to its numerous collaborators, both the

famous and the less well known. Perhaps it can be said that although troubled with unresolved (and arguably unresolvable) political dilemmas, surrealism has sought to undermine the capitalist ethos by giving voice and substance to the unreal and irrational, thereby challenging the authenticity of *rationality*. In the words of Breton, *“By surrealism we intend to account for nothing less than the manner in which it is possible today to make use of the magnificent and overwhelming spiritual legacy that has been handed down to us. We have accepted this legacy from the past, and surrealism can well say that the use to which it has been put has been to turn it to the routing of capitalist society.”* 9

Notes`

- 1 From 'Hidden Hands': A different history of modernism. Ch4 production. 1995
- 2 Internet article: André Breton. What is Surrealism
<http://pers-www.wlv.ac.uk/~fa1871/whatsurr.html>
- 3 Breton later corrected himself for his use of *outside all esthetic or moral preoccupations*, "It should have least have been said: *conscious* esthetic or moral preoccupations..." (p134, Read, H) while addressing the idealism of surrealism's *intuitive* first epoch.
- 4 Internet article on Max Ernst
<http://www.bessersprechen.de/balloonings/ernst.htm#ttt>
- 5 Read, H: A concise history of modern painting, p134
- 6 Read, *ibid*, p141
- 7 From Modern Art and Modernism: Manet to Pollock. Programme 23 "Dalí & Surrealism"
- 8 One of many websites containing information on Cheval
<http://sadtomato.net/cheval.html>
- 9 Internet article: André Breton. What is Surrealism

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(UNL Video – 709.04 OPE)
- Internet article on Max Ernst**
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