

# **Defining/Circumscribing Surrealism**

# WHAT IS SURREALISM?

(Icecrawler september 2007)

The apparently easiest way of defining surrealism is to resort to a purely historical definition; surrealism is the movement founded by André Breton and his comrades in Paris during the years following world war 1, which was publicly announced 1924 and then has spread over the world and been developed in many different forms. Such a definition is obviously unsatisfactory since it in itself does not exclude anything at all of the uninteresting rubbish that in many circumstances have been associated with the term, it is just the most sweeping of ostensive gestures.

Many active surrealists would like to try to draw a dividing line by putting themselves into equation, and say for example that surrealism is anything that falls within the collective and individual activities of the active organised partakers in the surrealist movement in each historical collection. As a definition this does even worse though. Not only is a lot of the things that organised surrealists do quite obviously not surrealist (many of them are a lot more general and inclusive activities, and/or rather pertaining to their specific social or cultural forms and habits, and/or to neighboring fields of interest like politics or art) but the definition also does not the job expected from it until the surrealist movement is defined in some qualitative way, and some difference between "real" surrealists and purely nominal surrealists have been accounted for - such a distinction is often very easy to make on a spontaneous basis (sometimes admittedly far too easy and thus misleading) but very difficult to do in an explicit and objective way. Furthermore, if surrealism really is anything at all, a definition which relies on both an extreme formalism which resembles circularity (surrealism is what surrealists do) and on authority as epistemological source (surrealism is what the surrealists say it is) is intellectually deficient.

Many (not the least me and my friends) have tried to abstract forth the most fundamental content of surrealism with flowery language and hyperradical phrases ("the total liberation of man" and all that) but that remains just suggestive characteristics of a content, and still nothing which makes it possible to objectively identify what is actually included and what is not. Such phrases quite simply can not distinguish surrealism from a lot of other things, other forms of revolutionary politics, everydaylife activism, psychological experimentation, imaginative creativity, mysticism, etc - all these things which between them may possibly have a shared core which surrealism reveals (or, if not, rather a virtual core which surrealism constructs), but which taken one by one is definitively not identical with surrealism in any meaningful sense.

(In the connection from where this text is taken, it was relevant to refer, for additional examples, to a sentence from the Stockholm group's declaration "The objective situation of life june 2002": "The activities of the surrealists really only pertains to investigating the means of exalting life beyond personal happiness, carreer, money, wage labor, family and common sense" or to the whole tract "The scream in the sack" (elsewhere on the icecrawler pages, or in the "hellchoirs" pdf.)

Well, to start with, we have to bake into the definition a circumscription of its range, admitting a specificity to surrealism, meaning that we can never reduce it to any easier or more complex theory or selection of themes, and that while possibly trying to make such a formulation still never expect it to be exhaustive, and see that surrealism can only

be the realisation of any such content in a particular historical form which keeps attracting, is expressed by, and is further developed by, real human beings in concrete social historical connections throughout the world. So here I would like to sketchily characterise the contents by a structural analysis of its themes and activities inspired by Imre Lakatos's model for analysis of "research programmes" (with a "hard core" which can't be questioned, a "protective belt" of more flexible corollaria, and an imbedding in "positive and negative heuristics" which tells how to go about in practice).

For surrealism, the innermost core is obviously *poetry*, the concern for which is largely untouchable. Around it are the fundamental attitudes towards poetry, still not negotiable; simply *creativity* and *nonconformism*. It is *not* the case that creativity is the inner, individual and/or esoteric side while nonconformism is the outer, social and/or exoteric side. On the contrary, they are both equally important as basic pillars in intrapsychic, intersubjective and social aspects.

Level 3, surrounding creativity and nonconformism, are their most important forms: *experimentality* (curiosity in methods and in results; no superordinated aesthetic criteria or trusted formulae), *non-careerism* (non-utilism in the social sphere) and *permanence* (this is not a phase or a game to walk in and out of). Those are what is needed to distinguish between surrealism and all its laughing-mirror images, which usually lacks one or more of these, thus transforming the poetic content to a mere means for one or other form of temporary transgressions, nostalgic roleplaying, philately or clowning, moments in an eclectic and utilistic personality development, tools in one or other desired or ongoing cultural career or academic career. Let us say that anything that fits this far is actually an instance of "objective surrealism" of one kind or another.

Then we can say that the next layer, level 4, are the historically determining forms for this activity; all that which characterises the activity of those who have regarded themselves as surrealists: *collective*, *traditional* (of course in the sense of actively investigating and shaping a tradition and using it creatively, not in the sense of nostalgia, lack of experiment, reliance on doctrine, habitual behavior), *politically revolutionary*, *literate*, *odd-educated*. These five are in practice indispensable for any organised surrealist activity, but not for each individual surrealist subjectively, and they are not at all necessary for fulfilling an objective surrealism.

The outermost layer, level 5, the purely protective heuristics, sometimes decisive for belonging, the establishing of a typical or normal, recognisable form, is the whole surrealist tradition and everything it suggests, teaches and warns for; including the good and bad experiences made, as well as any shared vocabulary, set of techniques, particular habits and social attitudes. This is the background against which we link up with each other, communicate, and an important part of how we suggest and evaluate initiatives and how we evaluate and criticise them. You can be a surrealist without all of this, especially if you are in a collective surrealist activity where you leave much of this to other members as some specialised field of activity and knowledge (stressing a hierarchy in the group which may be fairly neutral as a mere spatial distribution in center and periphery - hopefully multidimensional-complex rather than unidimensional -, but potentially dangerous). Any objections to surrealism formulated exteriorly to this can be dismissed (and sadly will be dismissed by many surrealists) as simply not relevant because it is not surrealist. At the same time any part of this can be considered outdated, irrelevant or in need of revision by any active surrealists, as long as you do this from the perspective of the more central contents of the concept and don't start

dispensing with these, which would constitute objective revisionism and usually personal renegadism and obvious non-surrealism.

In spite of this attempt, distinguishing between surrealism and non-surrealism remains in some cases difficult without reference to the surrealist experience. However, as far as that can not be explicated in analytical terms, a definition is not the right place to determine its status.

## **What about the surrealismologists**

### **- to the question of surrealism and ideology**

(Icecrawler january 2008)

Something could be said about the general topic of surrealismology, especially since this scholarly appropriation of surrealism nowadays finally seems an equally active force in academia and mass media as the good old bagatellisation, denunciation or denial, which perhaps may better be described as forms of misappropriation.

But almost since the beginnings of surrealism, critics, gallerists and academics have been writing essays and books and staging exhibitions to represent surrealism. The surrealist movement has usually distrusted and often loudly denounced such representation, but of course also recognised that there is a big difference between sympathetic and unsympathetic initiatives, and between serious and unserious initiatives (the two distinctions not always being the same). But on the whole, contemporary active surrealists have often made a kneejerk reaction out of denouncing such outside representationers as parasites, gravediggers, counterfeiters, and often actually to the level of themselves not being able to explain what surrealism is other than in negative terms; surrealism is not whatever you have been taught it is, surrealism is not an artistic or literary movement, surrealism is not within the realm of the historians of art and literature, surrealism has nothing to do with... bla bla bla. This mere negative positioning does not contribute anything to a greater understanding of surrealism, even though it may possibly contribute to the inner dynamics of the group expressing it, establishing a solid infantile feeling of being universally misunderstood and isolated and thus, at least for some time, a source of inspiration for not accepting ideologically entangling compromise.

Still, any attempt to sum up surrealism in an accessible form, any attempt to ensure it a share of exposure within contemporary culture, tends to reify surrealism and make it a part of this society's ideology. Anything which is part of this society's selfunderstanding is ideological; and it is very obvious that radical cultural movements are very easy swallowed up into an embellishing function, only proving the breadth and diversity of the blossoming cultural sphere under capitalism. Active surrealists more or less necessarily contribute to this when they publish to look for allies and show their

works. Of course there are differences in degrees and strategies here, with rather different implications of different media and different levels of active mystification and of the active response demanded from the receiver, but there are no general solutions or obvious circumscriptions. Many surrealists want to disseminate their knowledge, their experience and their continuous thinking about surrealism in some form; thus writing books, book prefaces, pamphlets, newspaper articles, giving conferences, blogging, arranging exhibitions, readings, festivals. Objectively, this is all part of the general movement of transforming surrealism into ideology, but in practice this is of course countered by whatever active involvement, independent thinking, radical initiative it might inspire, and this in the long run rather than the short, so it is very difficult to assess.

These ideologists do then not form a distinct group but a spectrum blending into the very centre of surrealist activity. Some of the academics writing about surrealism have actively befriended surrealists and received an unofficial but very real stamp of "accepted" - of course they are sympathetic, but it varies a lot whether they actually had anything to contribute to the understanding of surrealism - compare for example the solid empirical work of Marguerite Bonnet with the rather superficial flow of books from J H Matthews. Some commentators have been active in the movement and often remain involved, while still preferring and putting most of their efforts into writing *about* surrealism; again contributing *more or less* to the understanding of surrealism. Compare for example Michael Richardson's and Krzysztof Fijalkowski's fruitful efforts to think critically about the issues involved, with on one hand the ceaseless flow of informed and sympathetic overviews of for example José Pierre, Ragnar von Holten, Michel Rémy and (though a bit more trustworthy than the others) Edouard Jaguer, all very informative and very shallow, and on the other hand some minor spirits who are trying to impress their academic colleagues (probably in vain?) with "real life" experience of surrealist activity while still writing only the most shallow derivatory work in their field with a smaller or larger portion of simple exoticist journalism. There seem to have been an increase lately in allowing surrealists into academic contexts (conferences, journals) with essayistic presentations of one or other subject related to surrealism (sometimes a vague sketch of the conditions and particular spirit of surrealism within a certain country), of course of very varying quality but usually lacking any real scrutiny in any method, serious thinking and even academic formalities, thus having been brought along primarily for the sake of breadth, exoticism and entertainment, thus just *representing* surrealism in connections where it can have very little hopes of performing any fruitful subversion.

So it is obviously not the degree of sympathy which determines whether the commentators have anything to say or not. What then about critiques of surrealism from the outside? Again we have to involve the concept of ideology from the start. Any attempt to accuse a struggling radical nonconformist movement for exaggerations, naivety-puerility, overconfidence, rash generalisations etc, are mostly just the voice of the reproaching father or even more often the nervous wellbehaved sibling, and are usually formulated from a secure viewpoint of a comfortable everyday life with a job and a family and no struggle whatsoever; thus they evaluate authentic liberatory initiatives in comparison with the entire system of available ideology - such a criticism will rarely be relevant, independently of how factually true it may be in specific points! The academic feminist and poststructuralist critiques of surrealism are very often in this genre; regardless of whether their reproaches are true or not, they are simply *not legitimate* as long as they are offered from academic chairs and pertaining to no

application into real critical-creative activity and actually no application at all, perhaps other than *less surrealism* or less activity in general. For the critique to be really relevant, it must be a critique aiming to a more radical, more coherent, praxis. This could be a critique suggesting new lines of research and action; a critique reminding of coherence or particular important factors that sometimes gets lost in the process, rectification of specific misunderstandings, or a critique pointing out where unconscious or consciously tactical halts and compromises in thought and action are made. It is obvious that such a critique could be made, and sometimes has been made, from the viewpoint of situationist thought, from the viewpoint of struggling feminism outside the academies, from the viewpoint of several other radical movements, but actually also from the viewpoint of the guardians of certain senses of truth, truth as coherence, truth traditions, truth as poetry: occasional outstanding thinkers in some philosophical, poetological, psychological and occult disciplines.

Now when glancing through this mountain of books, conference reports and journals that constitutes surrealismology, it strikes one as such a monumental waste of effort. The academic journals devoted to surrealism are many, *Mélusine*, *Pleine Marge*, *InfoSurr*, *Cahiers DadaSurréalisme*, *Dada/Surrealism* are only the ones you most often find references to. They have slightly different profiles (and some of them are cancelled), most of them are there so that the various academic students of surrealism (be it students in history of literature, history of art, history of film, anthropology, aesthetics, or "surrealism studies" in the places where that has surfaced as a separate discipline) can publish their entirely mediocre papers, usually poor explications or simple comparisons concerning surrealism and this, surrealism and that, usually not even on a general scale but confined to the context of one or two artists or authors, often only one or two works. Every now and then there are papers based on actual empirical work, presenting new or forgotten documents and historical facts about certain old surrealist, surrealist activities in certain cities or countries; of course these are sometimes good and sometimes bad, but there is obviously some meaning in writing and publishing them. Very rarely there are papers including real thought efforts in terms of actually interpreting, enquiring, reconstructing and criticising surrealism. Any efforts to interpret and criticise other things in the light of surrealism are entirely absent (naturally, since this would be the activity of the surrealists rather than the surrealismologist). So, even though much of this is sympathetic, and some of it may be really interesting, the effort to keep updated and active in the field is the profession of professional academic surrealismologists, and the rest of us have no big reason to regret we don't have the time or patience to keep up with it, there is little illumination and inspiration of surrealist practice from that source.

They are not even very interesting from a strategic viewpoint, to keep detailed track of the ideological appropriation (so-called recuperation) of surrealism, since they are confined to the sphere of specialised academics, and cannot disperse outside that sphere without only putting people to sleep. It is merely the fact of the existence of this sphere, and its little brotherhood of professionals, that is interesting; in order to study the forms of ideological appropriation (and the corresponding countermovement) it would be much more important – and slightly less tedious – to study so-called popular culture, by which I then mean mostly advertising and commercial design (but also the cinema, music, comics and humor industries), and also its relationships with real social forms, habits, creativity and inventiveness, slang, superstitions and humor (the latter sphere perhaps popular culture in a more rigid sense).

But then of course, keeping track of the history, people, developments, strategies, tactics and works of surrealism is of course one of the tasks of the surrealists, and this is one area where we can counterparasitize and steal back valuables from the academics wherever our own records are insufficient. It is only the surrealists who can judge where to draw the relevant circumscriptions, what makes true surrealism and parasurrealism and interesting parallel investigations and what makes sterile derivatives of isolated surrealism elements and superficial stylistic similarities and ideological trends regarding shared interests. No, in fact not even the surrealists. But the viewpoint of the surrealists is in itself much more relevant since it is directed towards praxis and transformation.

## **Surrealism is a shrimp**

by merdarius

(Icecrawler february 2008)

We don't need a definition of surrealism. We need surrealist activity and surrealist sensibility. And within that, we will now and then stumble upon practical and theoretical problems which will make it interesting for us to think about the meaning, the logical and ontological status of surrealism, and the mechanisms by which it is detached from other concepts, by which it creates itself staying separate but making alliances and partial confluences with other currents, movements and perspectives, et cetera.

### **Some basic semantics: the surrealist tradition**

Surrealism is a movement, a tradition, an activity, a sensibility and a point of identity. It is not a style, a doctrine, a religion, a theory and an institution. Of these different aspects, these different ways it is meaningful to talk about surrealism, the surrealist tradition seems to be the logically central as all the others gain their meaning from it. For different people, in different situations, other aspects might seem more central or even more fundamental, but it is also by way of the surrealist tradition that surrealism gets a content that makes it possible to make objective correlates. For example, the surrealist movement is surrealist, can recognise itself as surrealist, and can meaningfully claim to be surrealist, only inasmuch as it rests on the surrealist tradition, and also its innovations, novelties and deviations only make sense inasmuch as they take the surrealist tradition to new areas and new combinations.

Then, the surrealist tradition is the part worth taking a closer look at. It is mostly a continuously disenveloping investigation and creative expression of a field of investigation and creativity; a rhetoric, a spirit, a vague methodology, a particular hope, connecting with each other a growing set of classic themes, classic aims descriptions and

classic techniques. The tradition is the voluntary historical continuity of these investigations, a freely chosen and mythical social community spinning over many decades and countries accumulating experience in this field. As soon as we place ourselves in this tradition, we become comrades with the earlier explorers, and their results become ours.

Thus, the core meaning of surrealism is dynamically and intrinsically tied to the developments and activities of the surrealist movement. We do find surrealism outside it, and long before it, but it is only in the light of the ongoing activities that these various elements get their surrealist meaning. The adherence of such elements to the surrealist tradition is a part of surrealist activity. The tradition and the activity do not exist without each other. Schuster's famous idea of the distinction between eternal surrealism and historical surrealism makes no sense and is just a piece of really bad metaphysics; this has been pointed out before but is worth repeating.

### **Some boring semantics: the surrealist adjective**

There is a surrealist identity. Different criteria can be applied to who is a surrealist. The most common criteria is either or a combination of three: subjective surrealism (who regards himself/herself as a surrealist, preferably based on adequate knowledge of the surrealist tradition), objective active surrealism (who pursues a surrealist activity, in everyday life investigations and subversions, in thinking, writing, painting, playing etc, preferably in several of these), objective formal surrealism (who is involved in the surrealist movement by participating in a group or in network collaborations, in discussions, journals, exhibitions, anthologies, declarations from within the surrealist movement, preferably actively and by own choice). These criteria all make sense by way of the surrealist tradition.

The subjective and the objective formal criteria are very straightforward to apply, even though the circumscriptions will have to be specified for the particular purposes wherever the question is asked. But the objective active criterion is more fundamentally problematic. What activity do we regard as surrealist if not a subjective surrealist identification or an association with the surrealist movement is there to highlight it?

On an intuitive level this is still fairly easy, and we might explicate it as those activities which are in line with the overall aims and some of the particular methodological characteristics and some of the thematic focuses that are part of the surrealist tradition. Again it is the surrealist tradition which decides. In this sense, it is also fully comprehensible and makes sense to speak about not only the surrealist painters and surrealist poets but also their surrealist paintings and surrealist poems. Single works merit the adjective by their being congenial with the surrealist tradition, often but not necessarily also inspired by and in turn inspiring that perspective. It does not have to be more difficult than that.

(Some people are eager to make it more difficult. A particular strand of surrealists like to modestly repeat that "we probably don't really live up to surrealism". Michael Richardson recently in a personal communication gave this a more coherent explication, claiming that surrealism must not be conceived as something attainable, and specifically that no works can be surrealist films, surrealist paintings or surrealist poems, because surrealist work is "the annihilation of being into a jewel that is neither of ice nor fire', lies beyond life and death and therefore cannot exist in this realm of existence". This perspective does have some appeal, but it is not consistent with the traditional usage

within the surrealist movement (and indeed, would force the the movement to rename itself as the “movement for surrealism” instead?) and mostly it will just create unnecessary difficulties.)

Because of course we keep forcefully denouncing that there could be any stylistic or doctrinal criteria from which to judge whether things are surrealist or not. Let us not be obstinate, there are stylistic and doctrinal elements in the surrealist tradition, yes there are, but none that are homogenous, straightforwardly applicable, nor very interesting. A certain style which we associate with surrealism, or a certain opinion we regard as central to surrealism, may serve to initially awaken our interest when we see it elsewhere, but we would certainly not regard it as part of surrealism unless we also found a meaningful creative relationship with other and more general concerns within the surrealist tradition.

### **Some ludic semantics: the surrealist shrimp**

As the meaning of surrealism rests in the surrealist tradition which is continually actualised and partly revised in the surrealist movement, it is quite obvious that one of the things we can do with it is to play with it. As we have learnt from this tradition itself, play is an easy, difficult, joyful and instructive way of opening new perspectives and leaving behind ones own petty prejudices. Similar to how experimental identifications of the self in play and in poetry is far more interesting than the self which is analytically or spontaneously-defensively constructed; identifications of surrealism which appear in surrealist games, in poetry, in playful improvisations which are part of alliances and collaborations, will produce numbers of suggestions which can gain further meaning when they are confronted with each other, or pondered upon, or transferred into new media, and thus incorporated into the elements of a mythology in becoming. “Surrealism is a secret society, which will initiate you into death” Oh yeah? Well how is this going to happen?

A couple of years ago, the Stockholm surrealist group were fond of a game we invented that we called “the objectification of morals”. It was a simple analogy game where we found concrete objects as correlates to abstract concepts. We chose an abstract concept, each player suggested one sensory characteristic associated with the concept, and from the constellation of adjectives we kept discussing until we found an object that embodied all these sensory characteristics. The first succesful round was doing this with the seven deadly sins, which we sent as a somehow contribution to the surrealist exhibition in Plzen 1999. Once, we tried with Surrealism. I don’t remember now what the actual sensory adjectives were, (like, hmm, wet, calcareous-hard, quick, submarine, itching? this is obviously just a pedagogic later rationalisation) but it was very easy to realise that what we had all converged in a shrimp.

# Platforms in the Canopy of Z

## – Surrealism and Objectivity

by NN

(Icecrawler september 2010)

There may be a lesson to learn from how we were once, and rightly so, snubbed for our enumeration of objective themes in the old text "Scream in the sack" which I would enunciate like this: at the next attempt we must try to better communicate the dynamics of elusiveness (which JE recently described as "something that generates a content but keeps moving beyond this content.") By better I think I mean – rather contrary to the vocabulary that in speculative hegelian terms talk about objectivity in an absolute sense – with clarity about the fact that surrealism is manifested in the individual case and is not present in the particular idealisation (and I'm not talking about its objective characteristics, because that I call sociology) which is being formulated ever so carefully and exhaustively as a support for our intentions and self-consciousness.

In that case, it is reasonable to speak about the essence of surrealism, namely, as immanent in the materialised poetic phenomenon, in the collective experience giving flesh and life to those intuitions which haven't yet been conceptualised and the concrete results of activity that, rather than living up to the contents, tend to establish new platforms in the unknown, or, like in the "Silent hand"-experiment, for a moment evokes that this is the case.

In the Stockholm group, a pronounced tendency can be perceived to recognise and suggest the possibilities of each trodden approach, and to imply that their logical or other contexts form the starting point for a specifically surrealist field of research where always "almost everything remains to be done". This scientific or pseudoscientific attitude also entails a mythopoetical or actually even literary exaltation of the intentions in a sublime self-consciousness concerning the modest proportions of the ego before the magnitude of the unknown, which admittedly makes an adequate representation of epistemological honesty, insider humor, and (by extension) hopeful despair.

So, what we are less good at is to demonstrate that we yet and always are "almost there", which is to say that surrealism hardly shares the existentialist gesture of an unattainable ideal or pretends to be an atomistic constellation of aspects holding merely an abstract configuration of wholeness, but instead that the unpredictable poetic phenomenon not just timelessly "heals the rift in the world" but also consummates the image of surrealism with a living reality that is all the more vivid and even more real because it is shared. And, as someone said, it seems to be the French who assumes the task, in their counterproductively totalitarian-poetic prose, to bear witness to and try to perpetuate this particular state and, at worst, to prove it. In the witnessing freedom of thought no difference between the marvellous and the sublime point is being reflected, but whenever one slyly wants to communicate in a more concise and directed form, there could be a point in showing that we count on two different moments, one of which is an external configuration, and which we want to learn to be attentive towards, and the other one shows itself as a mental state. And furthermore, that there are relations and methods to connect these two moments in a wider continuum, and that the rite of surrealism is aimed at freedom of movement in both directions. The pretentious implications of the discoveries, and confounding the one who benefits from the unusual

states of mind, is a possible summary of the dynamics which should not be reduced to "we are interested in a, b, c..."; surrealism means "x + y but also z".

If we stick to the fact that this irrepresentable mystery makes surrealism something far more than a collection of themes, and something more than the academics' focus on the relationship between the statements of the surrealists and the representative exemplifications of these statements, then you too realise where I am going when I am saying that the romantic idealization of the scientific methods may potentially play us a trick concerning the attempts to communicate or determine surrealism, especially if it concerns communicating with the tattered sphere of humanities, that sometimes succeeds to trap us in a position where we refer to our group experience as an "independent observer before a subject". It is this objectivity in a non-hegelian sense that reifies surrealism as a subject matter – and thereby also the typical questions of the decadence phase about legitimacy, succession, authenticity, purity etc which make up the part of the sociological viewpoint that we could do very well without – that makes me think it could be time to sharpen the conflict between the humanities and surrealism (natural science still seems a less dangerous hearth to warm ourselves by, though).

## Three eras of surrealism

by MF

(Icecrawler October 2010)

The history of surrealism remains a source of inspiration and a battleground. While the quality of much of academic surrealismology has certainly been rising the past decades, it is still very often the old traded misunderstandings and simple errors that reach wide circulation in exhibitions, newspaper criticism and popular books, and other areas of historiography; and in many cases even those who are attracted by surrealism and take part in it swallow much of their general knowledge of the movement's history through such popular sources – in the cases where they do not have a special interest in history, thus impatiently striving to put it into practice rather than caring for historical detail. It must be admitted at this point that the official internal traded version of the history of the movement may hold some flaws and some dangerous simplifications: a few decades ago, back in the days of reigning poor surrealismology, it was safe to say that generally surrealists were far better "experts" in surrealism than the experts in surrealism were (whatever it would actually mean to be an expert in surrealism, we're not going into this here), but this is sometimes not the case anymore. Not only are several of the academics now quite careful and well-read, it is also the case that very many surrealists see little meaning in taking up the competition over knowledge of historical detail with them who are getting payed for dealing with it but who will always miss an important dimension due to the lack of own experience and therefore integrated sense of a whole surrealist perspective. But then, it becomes quite crucial which sources the active surrealists utilise as their standard references for historical information.

So, in order to make the various small points of surrealist historiography and its consequences for surrealist strategy and organisation that is one of the more prominent themes on the Icecrawler blog, I find it necessary to lay down some basic terms here.

It seems to be of crucial importance for understanding the conditions of surrealist activity at different points in time to see that this is something which had clearly changed its objective character in history. (Many surrealists themselves will deny that for polemical reasons, instead emphasising the exemplary continuity, as if historical change would seriously threaten their legitimacy.) Now for any particular historiographical project, one will have to assess periodisations depending on the factors relevant for these particular questions. Obviously the surrealist movement has gone through all kinds of changes depending on the failures and successes of organisational initiatives, on events in the world such as wars, crises, repression, radical upsurges, etc. What I'm suggesting here is just that the sense of being a movement has fundamentally changed twice.

Surrealism remains one and continuous, and in order to stay one and stay in history it has twice rejuvenated itself in fire. Thus three times (the inception and the two reinceptions), surrealism has been in a fluid state in the midst of a dramatic favorable wind, and come out with a different face, for some less recognisable, or actively denied. According to this there has been three different eras, three different basic historical modes. It is not very important for me to pinpoint any exact dates for change (especially since the overlaps are huge, and the objective characteristics of several periods are manifested simultaneously) nor to suggest fancy terms for the periods, what I am emphasising is the importance of recognising that such major shifts in historical focus have occurred. I don't think it will be that controversial, even though I do loan myself to some simplifications in matters that will surely prove more complex under careful thinking and careful historic study.

a) Classic surrealism from the inception of the group under the new term and in the new direction of experimentation in 1922, throughout historical changes of the 30s and the hardships of war (internationalisation was an early consequence of the inner dynamics, 1929 was not a major direction shift, the war outbreak was circumstances made more difficult). This might also be called 1st generation surrealism. Surrealism slowly gave itself its shape through its temporary historical decisions, and had no heritage to be concerned about (except that freely chosen), and kept developing and going forward through new discoveries, abandoned areas of experimentation, strategic decisions, etc.

b) Late-classic surrealism from the reorganisation of surrealism in the late 40s. This might also be called post-war surrealism or 2nd generation surrealism. Organised surrealism cared much about keeping the tradition alive to hand it over to the future. It made less inventions, and no overall changes as its concerns about itself emphasised continuity, inclusivity and integrity to the point of reintegrating abandoned or conflicting viewpoints and strategies and thereby creating a sense of timeless surrealism. While the more impatient, vanguardist or ultraradical currents typically budded off into new para-surrealist movements. Indeed most of the surrealist advances on the theoretical, artistic and political levels were made outside the surrealist movement in the most narrow sense, yet it was there that they were reintegrated. After the few years in the late 40s that was a great favorable wind, the quantitative summit of the surrealist

movement, and a dramatic situation of fruitful uncertainty, the 50s and early 60s were an all-time low, when more or less all groups outside the Paris group stepped over into various varieties of para-surrealism or simply ceased activity.

c) Post-classic surrealism from the refounding of surrealism in a new paradigm of popular radicalism in the 60s. This might also be called post-breton surrealism or 3rd generation surrealism. Throughout the decade (and partly still!) a rather unresolved tension surfaced between new groups that were based in the new radicalism and old groups which had difficulties relating to the new radicalism even though they indeed had heralded and inspired it. In the french group, these difficulties were added to the difficulties naturally following Breton's death, expressed in the partial and ineffective participation in the '68 movement, and finally triumphed in the dissolution of the french group. In the new situation, the surrealist movement found itself being far more underground, without the mass media's or art world's attention, a more democratic network structure, and in all kinds of ways finding a new relevance based in the new paradigm for all of surrealism's traditional themes and methods.

(The only terminological issue that may be important is a minor one. "Postsurrealism" is a common and fitting term for an eclectic abandoning of surrealism, especially in the art world - let it remain that and don't ever accept any attempts to confusionally and derogatorily apply the term to active post-classic surrealism.)

Now I would say that for most historical questions, this division into three periods suggests something of the different framework for dealing with various questions and ideas throughout surrealist history. But from a historical viewpoint, what I consider very crucial to surrealism is to look closer at these periods of transition, to see what the options were and what were the factors that decided the routes to follow. This is of course of great strategical importance to the surrealist movement, and while I am not surprised that the academic historians have usually failed to see the crucial relevance of these transitional periods (or merely seen them as chaotic accumulation of anecdotes of contradictions), I think it is important for us as surrealists to grapple with them.

A somewhat more detailed exposition of these transition periods are found on the Icecrawler blog or in the "Transition periods of surrealism" pdf.

Appendix:

## **Variables and contradictions**

*various technical notes in the margin towards the history of surrealism boreal and else*  
by MF

Much can be learned from looking at surrealist activities in different countries. How are the influences spread and how are they put to use, what similarities and what differences become obvious in different settings, which parts are constants and which parts are variables, etc. Surrealism has always been a remarkably international movement, but even to this day most of the historical works dealing with it exclusively looks at the French context, or mentions various other countries only as mere examples of the wide influence, occasionally taking a closer look at surrealism in Belgium and England.

The only explicit rationalisation of the latter perspective I've seen is the one given by Jean Schuster in a famous interview in *Grid* in 1986, when he claimed the Belgian and English groups were the only real surrealist groups ever to have existed outside France, because they were the only ones to pursue a line of their own. In the case of many other activities, Schuster's judgment here surely rests on mere ignorance, but in some parts it is a question of blatant denial. The Prague group for example, with which he collaborated intensely himself in 67-68, and which was obviously independent enough to enter a polemic with him over several years about his various tactical assessments and weird moves when he was regarding himself as the voice and hand of French surrealism (French surrealism for him being identical with "historical surrealism", that's how much he actually appreciated independence) ending in his terminating it.

Yes, any sane observer must regard the Czechoslovakian surrealist activities, springing out of the indigenous Poetist movement and pursuing a very distinct tradition of investigations through periods of openness and periods of clandestinity, as having an independent direction. The same is true for the Romanian activities and a few others. Some, on the other hand, do look suspiciously derivative, like, for example the Serbian, Egyptian, various early Latin American efforts, and in a distorted way the Japanese (but then of course there is a certain shortage in information about these). In fact this applies to much of the English and Belgian stuff as well! But, modern anthropology has taught that there is no such thing as passive reflection of influence - influence always involves a choice based in particular indigenous needs, the implant of received elements into a new cultural context always creates a new constellation of conflicts, possibilities and relationships. This means there is always something particular and in a sense "independent" in the surrealist activity of any country, but that this may very well be unconscious and involuntary on the part of the actors, and that this is a topic that always merits study!

In order to understand this we can look at a number of different variables. Some of them have been thoroughly discussed regarding surrealism in England specifically, which is one of the favorites of the surrealismologists and one of the problem children of the surrealists, so that from both sides there has been a thorough discussion of the different conditions in England compared to France, and the resulting difficulties for surrealism in establishing an indigenous presence and an indigenous relevance.

Café life and groupings (the immediate conditions and traditions of actual physical organisation of social life: such as Mediterranean male café life, or Swedish "folk movements" and "societies democracy")

Mentality, religious and philosophical traditions (rationalism/empiricism/anti-rationalism, catholicism/protestantism/atheism, guilt/shame, individualism/collectivism, sacrilege, work ethics, culturally available forms of excess and deviation, propagandistic/subjectivistic/analytic rhetoric, etc)

Politics (politics/antipolitics, bureaucracy/ action, pragmatism/ principles, voluntarism/analysis, as well as the myriad of purely political divisions)

Continuity or break? Surrealism as a continuation of a local romantic tradition, or as a radical break with everything classicist and realist? If the latter, as a continuation of a modernist spectrum, or as a radical break with all primarily aesthetic occupations?

Independence or internationalism? Surrealism as a broad internationalist endeavour or with a particular sense in the new setting? If the former, with a distinct franco-philic flavor or actually somehow universalized? And if the latter on the contrary, as a particular tinge within an international current or as a distinct local unit?

Freely chosen or necessary surrealism? Surrealism as a vein/style/spirit/ set of techniques or criteria in ones creative work or in life in general? If the latter, as a personal choice of attitude or an inner necessity? And also, as an individual direction in life or as a revolutionary project?

Then there will be conflict lines within the group that will often be denied as they are external to the surrealist project and in principle not acceptable within it, for example generation conflicts (very often expressed as brilliance/voluntarism conflicts), sexual conflicts, individual power conflicts, and for that matter even stylistic conflicts - and they may all be disguised as each others and people may have very different opinions as to which is the central one. Which lines are active, and which strategies are employed in and against them, are very much dependent on the cultural context too.

In "Surrealism is a shrimp" we suggested that there are three important criteria of surrealist identity: the subjective criterion, the objective activity criterion, and the objective association criterion. For historiographic purposes, it could be interesting to work out the various degrees of these. The individual identifications, inasmuch as they are about subjective-objective surrealism and not any variety of parasurrealism, can be construed as a grade of intensities, common to the subjective criterion and objective criterion (of course there will be some incongruences between the two, in cases of ignorance, misinformedness or lack of interest in the surrealist tradition, but that is not important here).

first degree: *Sympathisers and fellow travellers*: persons with a sympathetic interest in surrealism, who may occasionally take part in surrealist activities if they are organised by someone else, and who may themselves make very valuable efforts in presenting surrealist artefacts (books, art etc) and sometimes also surrealist ideas, but who do not identify themselves as surrealists and who typically often keep up an equal sympathetic interest in other currents.

second degree: *Surrealists in their work*: persons who not only sympathise with surrealism but actually regards themselves as surrealists in the sense that they think that the surrealist tradition or whatever they regard as surrealist style is what makes best sense of their own creative work. This has no particular implications for the rest of their attitudes. Based on this they may be active in traditional cultural forums, or on the internet, or not active at all ("sunday painters"), or they may be in contact with some facet of the surrealist movement, for exhibiting and publishing opportunities or perhaps for affiliation and fun. They may be very knowledgeable advocates of surrealist ideas or be happily content with ignorance or vague misconceptions.

third degree: *Surrealists in spirit*: Persons who not only regards themselves as surrealists but do so not as an option but as some kind of necessity, out of a deeply felt affinity with surrealism regarded as a new sensibility, heralded or manifested in surrealist works, in surrealist theory, and perhaps in the surrealist tradition or even the surrealist movement. Typically but not necessarily this is also expressed in other preferences in life, in moral and political attitudes, in labor and hobby choices, in personal relationships.

fourth degree: *Surrealist "livers"*: Persons who not only feel a deep affinity with surrealism, but also feel this affinity to be demanding in terms of living; who feel a necessity (often not even explicit but immediate) to base their lifestyle and their relationships on curiousness, nonconformism, experimentation, radical despair and radical hope. All aspects of life will be more or less affected by this direction, and a lot of contactseeking will be based on the need for such richer and in some sense oppositional communication and investigation. Because of this, a more or less active involvement in the surrealist movement in some sense is quite natural, but may be obstructed by geographical, psychological, social isolation, bad experiences, or just any particular individual prerequisites.

fifth degree: *Surrealist activists*: Persons who regard the dynamics of such a deepened sense of living as superordinate to other possible concerns in life (career, family, comfort, self-fulfillment) and thus as a revolutionary project: something which all points in one way or another towards creating radically new conditions for another type of social organisation, for a generalised sense of another sensibility or another life. It usually includes organisational efforts (for surrealist activities) as a necessary step, and very often also a voluntarist attitude of "unselfish" efforts for realising all kinds of more or less strange ideas. It may or may not include political activism as well.

This grade is intended to be a historiographic tool, for analytical purposes; but it is quite obvious that it may fill the function of a weekly-magazine "test yourself"-test. Which I don't mind, since that would obviously be just a game, which like all games may invite to experimental identifications and inventing transgressions. But perhaps I must add that I do emphatically not think it would be a useful tool to introduce explicit gradings between collaborators in various projects somehow within the surrealist movement.

There are also some specific difficulties to it, for example that the scale might bite its own tail, and thus the fifth degree occasionally be difficult to distinguish from the first degree, in the case of activists or weirdos immersed in any kind of revolutionary project with their whole life in general, which could be identified with the surrealist revolutionary project or not depending on whim and on the intensity of the particular collaboration at hand.

So if on the individual scale, the two aspects of the subjective and objective criterion were expected to go more or less hand in hand but deviate in relation to some problems, the third criterion of surrealist identification, the objective association criterion, is a different matter. To apply it, it must necessarily have two components, but these are fundamentally different, and they are straightforward to apply. If to determine the degree of engagement in organised surrealist activity, the degrees refer to first an intensity of involvement, second an objective character of the specific organised activity.

Regarding intensities of involvement; we first have several varieties of peripherally involved: the allied (for particular purposes); the hangarounds (social, general, or relating to one or other particular part of the activity); the distant

correspondents; and the occasional partakers. Beyond that there is with increasing intensity regular partakers, activists and animators. For most people, their position in this respect will differ between periods of time and regarding different projects or parts of the activity.

The activities, according to a similar scale;

1. an informal circle interested in surrealism among other things, occasionally making some experiments, having some contacts;

2. similar but formalised as something; a reading group, a journal editorial board, etc, providing a more regular activity but with surrealism still as only a part of it,

3. an objectively surrealist grouping, which is a formal or informal grouping, explicitly related to surrealism or not (but not an explicit surrealist group), which keeps up a regular, objectively surrealist activity,

4. an explicitly surrealist grouping with focus on only one part of surrealist activity; such as a surrealist artists group, a surrealist game-playing group or a surrealist reading group,

5. an explicit surrealist group, which thereby renders itself the freedom to locally define activities as surrealist or not by including them in their shared core activities or not.

Then, in yet a new way, a more rigid classification of the notoriously ambiguous category of "parasurrealists", which could impossibly be construed as a more or less unilinear grade. It is more a matter of distinguishing different possibilities of falling inside that category.

\* *fellow travellers*; sympathisers and occasional partakers who prefer to define their focus and forward their own activity under some other banner, an eclectic one of their own, or one of some objectively related movement. Often this is connected with some particular personal objections against surrealism (or rather beefs with it) which sometimes are engaged in a lifelong inner dialogue, or in some cases rather personal objections with the local surrealist individuals and organising efforts available at the time and place. In this case it may be people high up the "surrealist engagement" scale, who simply choose not to take up the competition for the designation.

\* "*surréalistes*": people who display inspiration, sympathy or conscious parallels with surrealism without acquiring any objective association with the surrealist movement, and without any subjective designation as surrealists or any objective embodiment of a comprehensive width of the surrealist project.

\* "*unconscious*" surrealists; reacting with similar attitudes and methods as surrealists do towards similar conditions without any knowledge or any particular interest in surrealism, often where surrealist activity is not present.

\* "*objective*" surrealists; partaking with their efforts or works in the same direction or the same struggle as the surrealists (the latter must then of course somehow elaborate this direction or struggle in objective terms in order to be able to distinguish this)

\* *various associates*; collaborating or communicating with the surrealists in certain particular matters, which are among the core of the surrealist activities, but where broader goals and attitudes may not be shared.

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