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# Surrealism and Imagery

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- 1 Among the various ideas that Surrealism revamps, and which Werner Spies sweepingly overviews in his introduction to the catalogue for the *La Révolution surréaliste* exhibition (Georges Pompidou Centre, 2002), one in particular is as obvious as it is unresolved : the image. The poets and artists in the group would actually endlessly deal and experiment with, and mix together, the varied range of accepted senses which make up the very word : image, juggling deliberately with its semantic shakiness. Thus for André Breton in the 1924 *Manifesto*, the poetic image served to explore the subconscious and the product of dreams, especially by fuelling the automatic writing revealing them. To borrow Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron's words in her 1984 book *Le Surréalisme* : "Whether the "stupefied" consciousness produces visual images, or whether language (in particular automatic writing) produces, through the abundance of its figures, an irrational mental representation marked by eclipses, the two movements are alternately, and at times jointly, explored by Surrealism. For these productions, be they fantastical or rhetorical,

seem to it to provide the models for worlds “to come.” The upset of the real, the disorientation which Surrealism practised as if with a life project, and the revolution of this latter, all issue from a dynamic that is invariably being informed by iconicness : mental images, dreams and hallucinations ; rhetorical figures and linguistic interplay ; visual arts (painting, photography, film)... The surrealist image contravened itself on principle in order to invent a visuality where images mingled, ill-defined, floating and immaterial.

- 2 So there is such a thing as the contemporaneousness of the surrealist image, and the publications accompanying the *La Révolution surréaliste* exhibition often express as much by at times helping to push things forward in these links between Surrealism and the visual arts, where, as René Passeron notes in *Le Surréalisme*, in a fine essay which accurately encompasses the movement within the catastrophe of the First World War, “the painting of Max Ernst is Surrealism itself”. The importance of this art in André Breton’s eyes is well demonstrated by a new edition of *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*. The radical aesthetics informing this collection of writings, and the heuristic function that it finds for painting (both being underscored by a famous opening gambit : “The eye exists in the wild state (*l’Œil existe à l’état sauvage*)”), also unveil the extraordinary alliance that bonds poet and artists. So how is it possible not to read the analysis of Mir—’s *Constellations* as an invitation that painting issues to language ? For the relation between text and image is still the crux of the Surrealist experiment and experience. In *Nadja*, for example, the problematic relationship between Breton and the (detailed) description makes him replace this genre with photographs. And the experimenting encouraged by the shaky definition of the Surrealist image, like the emancipation of the image-text link-up ushered in by the magazine *La Révolution surréaliste*, suggests an enthusing field of research. Werner Spies neatly emphasizes this : “At once autonomous and complementary, narrative and imagery produce the Surrealist “supertext”, and this form of completely novel expression, imbued with a new afflatus, gave shape to Breton’s aesthetic concept : “convulsive beauty”. Something inchoate and immediate comes to us : the word seeks its transgression in the image, and the image in the word”. It is also in this light that he presents his “*Il y aura une fois*” argument, the anthology of Surrealist writings that Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron has compiled : “Today”, writes Spies in his preface to this book, “this relationship between writers and painters seems to us to have no equivalent—there is no other 20th century movement that has so closely connected texts and images, images and texts”. The meaning, its thrust, openness and denial, is the challenge of this set of problems also noted by topical works such as *Le Surréalisme* by Gérard Durozoi and *Le Surréalisme, la révolution du regard* by Anne Egger, who devotes one of her chapters to words and images (Mir—, Magritte, Breton).
- 3 This subject matter also permeates the work by Rosalind Krauss, Jane Livingston and Dawn Ades, *Explosante-fixe*, writings about the Surrealists and photography, with Lászl—Moholy-Nagy, in the article *Surréalisme et photographie*, studying photographic experiments like a “new form of creation by light”. The importance of Surrealism in photography for Rosalind Krauss’s *Photographique* analyses is well-known, and the two texts in this 1985 book have fuelled them. For this author, actually, the importance of vision/seeing in André Breton, and the differing phases of the photographic manufacture, taken as the mirror of the process of automatic writing, together construct the new arrangement of the Surrealist language. So taking a fragment of the real from randomness and unusualness, as dream element, and approaching the unsuspected zones

of the unconscious turn this art into one of André Breton's visionary approaches. With regard to Man Ray in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, Breton talked about photography as an "object of exchange" (with writing and the world). Lastly, there is a tribute to Man Ray, photographer, in *Les Surréalistes, une génération entre le rêve et l'action*, a work more akin to Surrealism from the angle of the history of political and literary ideas, and the discussion thereupon.

- 4 What of the contemporaneousness of Surrealism? Didier Ottinger deals with this in *Surréalisme et mythologie moderne, les voies du labyrinthe d'Ariane à Fantômas*, where myth appears as a poetics and a form of symbolism, or even a poiesis of movement. Whatever the case may be, the contemporaneousness of the image as understood by Surrealism is unconditional. As open spaces and times which cross a variety of visual arts (painting, photography, film, as well as drawing and collage), the image forms an autonomous system of meaning, the short-circuit possibly develops a sequence of signs playing with the factors of the readable, and creates gaps in the imaginary : the image smithereens and then passes over appearances.