



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

The 'Continuing Misfortune' of Automatism in Early Surrealism

Bauduin, T.M.

Publication date

2015

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Communication + 1

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bauduin, T. M. (2015). The 'Continuing Misfortune' of Automatism in Early Surrealism. *Communication + 1*, 4, [10].

<http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1032&context=cpo>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

2015

The 'Continuing Misfortune' of Automatism in Early Surrealism

Tessel M. Bauduin
t.bauduin@let.ru.nl

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cpo>

 Part of the [Modern Art and Architecture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bauduin, Tessel M. (2015) "The 'Continuing Misfortune' of Automatism in Early Surrealism," *communication +1*: Vol. 4, Article 10.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cpo/vol4/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in communication +1 by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Abstract

In the 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism* surrealist leader André Breton (1896-1966) defined Surrealism as ‘psychic automatism in its pure state,’ positioning ‘psychic automatism’ as both a concept and a technique. This definition followed upon an intense period of experimentation with various forms of automatism among the proto-surrealist group; predominantly automatic writing, but also induced dream states. This article explores how surrealist ‘psychic automatism’ functioned as a mechanism for communication, or the expression of thought as directly as possible through the unconscious, in the first two decades of Surrealism. It touches upon automatic writing, hysteria as an automatic bodily performance of the unconscious, dreaming and the experimentation with induced dream states, and automatic drawing and other visual arts-techniques that could be executed more or less automatically as well. For all that the surrealists reinvented automatism for their own poetic, artistic and revolutionary aims, the automatic techniques were primarily drawn from contemporary Spiritualism, psychical research and experimentation with mediums, and the article teases out the connections to mediumistic automatism. It is demonstrated how the surrealists effectively and successfully divested automatism of all things spiritual. It furthermore becomes clear that despite various mishaps, automatism in many forms was a very successful creative technique within Surrealism.

Keywords

Surrealism, automatism, André Breton, spiritualism, automatic writing, automatic drawing, Philippe Soupault, Paul Éluard, Louis Aragon

Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgement This article incorporates some material previously published in Bauduin, Surrealism and the Occult.

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Introduction

In 1924 André Breton (1896-1966) published the *Manifesto of Surrealism*, thereby formally positioning a group of young aspiring poets and artists who had been undertaking collective creative experiments since 1919, as an avant-garde movement. In this first manifest, he provided two definitions of Surrealism; defining it, to begin with, methodologically, as ‘psychic automatism.’ Subsequently, he formulated it along the lines of a religious creed, elucidating that as a psychic mechanism or state of mind, Surrealism served as a solution for the problems of life. Moreover, in Surrealism the reality of dreams, ‘neglected associations,’ and the play of thought were to be considered superior.

SURREALISM, *n.* Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

ENCYCLOPEDIA. *Philosophy.* Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of the dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life [...].¹

‘Psychic automatism’ was formulated and constructed as both concept and technique in response to a particular problem: how to express ‘thought’ as it was ‘actually functioning?’ That is to say, thought as it was assumed to run purely and free in the unconscious, unfettered and unrestricted by reasonable, moral, or aesthetic concerns. The desired automatism is psychic and not psychological, because it is neither necessarily logical nor, more importantly, in any way pathological. As Breton had enough of a background in medicine that he could also have opted for a psychiatric career rather than one in literature,² we can be

¹ Breton, André, *Manifestoes*, Seaver, Richard and Helen R. Lane (trans.), USA: University of Michigan Press, 1972 (1969), 26.

² Ellenberger, Henri F., *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*, London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1970, 837.

certain the adjective ‘psychic’ was chosen very carefully. His background accounts too for the other part of the mechanism: automatism. This technique was well known and frequently used in psychiatric research and treatments during the later decades of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, in French psychiatry particularly but abroad as well. Around the middle of the nineteenth century automatism had been appropriated by psychiatrists from Spiritism, the French current of Spiritualism. Breton was well aware of this, as he also kept abreast of parapsychological studies. His relatively frequent scathing remarks about the possibility of communication with the dead or spirits indicates his awareness of a spiritist subtext clinging to the term ‘psychic.’

The 1924 definitions of Surrealism followed upon an intense period of experimentation with different forms of automatism, predominantly automatic writing, which had begun in 1919. Indeed, even though 1924 is canonically considered the beginning of Surrealism, there is no doubt that Breton’s *Manifesto*-definitions were the outcome of the automatism experiments that took place during the very formative years 1919-1924. The surrealists continued their experimentation during the second half of the 1920s and several automatic techniques were further developed — with varying success. In the 1933 essay ‘The Automatic Message’ Breton returned at length to the subject of automatism. ‘I am not afraid to admit that the history of automatic writing in Surrealism is one of continual misfortune,’ he wrote.³ Those misfortunes were many, and have to do with quality, quantity and authenticity of automatism, among other things. For all that, though, Breton stuck by automatism—that is, predominantly, automatic *writing* — as the core practice of Surrealism until the end of his life, continuing to practice it on many occasions. For many others, not least fellow writer and poet Benjamin Péret (1899-1959), and artist Max Ernst (1891-1976), both of them surrealists of the first hour, automatism in one form or other also remained a fundamental technique throughout their long careers.

Here I will explore how ‘psychic automatism’ functioned as a mechanism for communication or expression of thought through the unconscious.⁴ Taking my cue from Breton’s comment about automatic writing’s misfortune, I will explore various forms of automatism, in various settings and in various ways, over the

³ Breton, André, ‘The Automatic Message’, Melville, Anthony (trans.), in: Breton, André, Paul Éluard, and Philippe Soupault, *The Automatic Message - The Magnetic Fields - The Immaculate Conception*, Gascoyne, David, and Anthony Melville (eds.), Idem, and Jon Graham (trans.), London: Atlas, 1997: 11-36, 18.

⁴ In Bretonian Surrealism spoken thought in the unconscious resides emphatically in the interior. It is still something entirely different from — indeed directly opposed to — the interior monologue many of the canonized modernist writers explored. Hutchinson, Ben, *Modernism and Style*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 235.

course of the 1920s (or early Surrealism), and their possible successes and failures: in other words, the problems encountered during surrealist experimentation with automatism. I will tease out the considerable extent to which early Surrealism was indebted to concepts and ideas from dynamic psychiatry, while also highlighting the few but essential ways in which surrealist automatism was different. As I will show, under leadership of Breton the surrealist group around him — or, ‘Bretonian surrealists’ — appropriated the technique of automatism as well as its object of investigation, the unconscious or subliminal. In the process they reinvented both technique and object in an original and far-reaching way.

Below, automatism will be discussed in three sections, proceeding from the three states of mind Breton professed faith in in his *Manifesto*: the ‘superior reality’ of ‘neglected associations;’ ‘the omnipotence of the dream;’ and ‘the disinterested play of thought.’ Red thread is the declaration that psychic automatism expresses something ‘verbally, by means of the written word or in any other manner;’ that is to say, in different forms of automatism. To begin with, I will explore disinterested thought and automatic writing, focussing on the first official surrealist automatically written work, *The Magnetic Fields* (1919), the characterisation of the surrealists as ‘modest recording instruments’, and the appreciation of hysteria as automatism of the body. Subsequently, I will turn to the ‘omnipotent dream:’ discussing the sessions the surrealists organised with the aim to dream lucidly, and the foundation of Surrealism as a serious branch of psychical research, with its own bureau and journal. Finally, we will come to the ‘neglected associations,’ which will serve to discuss forms of automatism in the visual arts, clairvoyance, predictions of the future, the role of simulation, and another masterpiece of surrealist automatic writing, *The Immaculate Conception* (1930).

1. The disinterested play of thought: automatic writing, hysteria

Automatism, as a concept and as a practice, made its way into Surrealism by way of dynamic psychiatry, the medical discipline that would give rise to modern-day psychiatry, psychology, psycho-analysis, and psychical research (or parapsychology). A veritable “doctor’s club” formed the core of the surrealist group, as several of its earliest members had a background in medicine. Louis Aragon (1897-1982) and Breton had studied medicine and trained in psychiatric wards during the First World War. Max Ernst had taken courses in psychology in Bonn, Philippe Soupault’s (1897-1990) father was a medical doctor, and photographer Jacques-André Boiffard (1902-1961), for instance, had been

studying medicine until his introduction to the surrealists in 1924.⁵ Free association and/or automatism, usually in the form of writing, was used in the psychiatry of the day and the young surrealists would have been familiar with the method in practice as well as the various theories behind it.

In 1919 Breton and Soupault, still two aspiring poets, were reading *L'Automatisme psychologique* (1889) by eminent French psychiatrist Pierre Janet (1859-1947).⁶ Struggling with problems of originality, authenticity, poetic spontaneity and the seat of creativity—issues that plagued many, if not all, Modernists and avant-gardists—they wondered if automatic writing might not be a solution, as Soupault recounted later.⁷ Breton himself provided another, more poetic version of their discovery of automatic writing at the time. One afternoon in 1919 (or so he informs his readers), he found himself on the verge of falling asleep. Suddenly, ‘phrases of varying length’ sprung to mind. ‘These sentences, which were syntactically correct and remarkably rich in images, struck me as

⁵ Roudinesco, Elisabeth, *Jacques Lacan & Co: A History of psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 5. In the first half of the 1930s psychiatrist Jacques Lacan moved in circles close to Surrealism, and was in contact with Salvador Dalí, for instance, for a time. In the same decade several of the surrealists from the Bataille-group had themselves analysed. In other words, the links between Surrealism and psychiatry and psychoanalysis were many, varied, dynamic, and continued well into the 1930s and beyond. See further, besides sources mentioned below, Chevrier, Alain, ‘André Breton et les sources psychiatriques du surréalisme,’ in Béhar, Henri (ed.), *Mélusine XXVII: Le Surréalisme et la Science* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 2007), 53-76; and Hulak, Fabienne (ed.), *Folie et Psychanalyse dans l'Expérience Surréaliste* (Nice: Z'éditions, 1992).

⁶ The (possible) influence of Janet upon Bretonian Surrealism has been contested, but is increasingly more accepted. See, for instance, Bacopoulos-Viau, Alexandra, ‘Automatism, Surrealism and the making of French psychopathy: the case of Pierre Janet,’ *History of Psychiatry* 23, 3 (2012): 259-276. Also, Haan, Joost, Peter J. Koehler and Julien Bugousslavsky, ‘Neurology and Surrealism: André Breton and Joseph Babinski,’ *Brain* 135 (2012): 3830-3838. In fact, the reception of works and ideas in Surrealism has in the past been a contested issue with regards to many great (white male) heroes of dynamic psychiatry, including Sigmund Freud, Jean Martin Charcot, Joseph Babinski, William James, and Frederic Myers; recent studies are making it clear that all of these and a great many more can certainly claim some sort of afterlife in Bretonian Surrealism. The classic study is Starobinski, Jean, ‘Freud, Breton, Myers’, in: Idem, *L'Oeil Vivant II: La Relation Critique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001): 381-403; particularly insightful are also the detailed commentaries of Marguerite Bonnet and others in their four editions of Breton's *Collected Works*.

⁷ Soupault, Philippe, *Vingt mille et un jours. Entretien avec Serge Faucherau* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1980), 63-4.

poetic elements of the first rank.’⁸ First only jotting them down, Breton and Soupault subsequently decided to ‘voluntarily’ re-create in themselves ‘the state in which they took form:’ ‘all [they] had to do was shut out the external world.’ Thus suspended in an extended moment of slumbering or almost-falling-asleep, they quickly and immediately wrote down sentences, without apparent thought or pause for re-reading or editing.⁹ The resulting co-authored work, composed entirely of — and by means of — automatic writing, was published in 1920 as *The Magnetic Fields* and is considered a milestone in surrealist exploration of automatic writing; indeed, a milestone in the history of automatic writing in modern literature generally.¹⁰

The Magnetic Fields is composed of ten sections, and includes narrative-like sequences, poem-sequences, and conversation-like sequences that read as an absurd dialogue. Several passages have a sad or depressing subtext, indicative of the war just past and its formative effect upon the two poets.

Prisoners of drops of water, we are but everlasting animals. We run about the noiseless towns and the enchanted posters no longer touch us. What’s the good of the fragile fits of enthusiasm, these jaded jumps of joy? We know nothing any more but the dead stars; we gaze at their faces; and we gasp with pleasure. Our mouths are as dry as the lost beaches, and our eyes turn aimlessly and without hope. Now all that remains are these cafés where we meet to drink these cool drinks, these diluted spirits, and the tables are stickier than the pavements were our shadows of the day before have fallen.¹¹

⁸ Breton, André, *The Lost Steps*, Polizzotti, Mark (ed.) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 90.

⁹ Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 90-1.

¹⁰ Breton, André, and Philippe Soupault, ‘The Magnetic Fields,’ Gascoyne, David (trans. & intr.), in: Breton, André, Paul Éluard, and Philippe Soupault, *The Automatic Message - The Magnetic Fields - The Immaculate Conception*, Gascoyne, David and Anthony Melville (eds.). Idem, and Jon Graham (trans.) (London: Atlas, 1997): 37-145. See Bonnet’s commentary, Breton, André, *Œuvres complètes* I, Bonnet, Marguerite, Philippe Bernier, et al. (eds.) (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 1121-1146; and Gascoyne, David, ‘Introduction,’ Breton, André, Paul Éluard, and Philippe Soupault, *The Automatic Message - The Magnetic Fields - The Immaculate Conception*, Gascoyne, David and Anthony Melville (eds.), Idem, and Jon Graham (trans.) (London: Atlas, 1997): 39-54.

¹¹ Breton & Soupault, ‘The Magnetic Fields,’ 59 (first paragraph of the first section, ‘The Unsilvered Glass’).

During the writing process phrases and sentences sprung to their mind with such speed that the authors had to ‘resort to abbreviations’ in their notation, or so Breton reported. Variations in stylistic effect were only caused by ‘a change in velocity,’ he continued, and ‘each chapter had no other reason for stopping than the end of the day on which it was composed.’¹² These are classic characteristics of automatic writing: speed, no clear beginning or end, and (seemingly) a lack of narrative and of style.

Automatic writing is a magic dictation, wrote Breton in a 1922 essay, and it is *thought* that dictates from the unconscious. He refers to ‘heeding’ the voice of one’s own unconscious also;¹³ while in the 1924 *Manifesto* he declared that the aim was to obtain from himself a monologue ‘akin to *spoken thought*.’¹⁴ A poet’s obsession with words and in particular the spoken word shines through. The unconscious *speaks* – if only one knew how to listen! This brings us to one of the main threats to surrealist automatic writing: heeding *other* voices, thereby risking ‘compromising this self-murmur in its essence.’¹⁵ We can connect such misfortune, as it were, directly to the first definition of 1924, where Breton emphasizes again that *thought dictates*. As he adds, this happens ‘in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.’¹⁶ Reason, aestheticism, and morality can be considered other voices, I suggest, which interfere with heeding the correct one of ‘essential self-murmur.’ The connection to speed is clear: one has to write quickly not only to keep up with thought’s velocity, but also to keep from listening to the voices of reason, aesthetics or morals.

Automatic writing should also be done quickly to keep from going back over one’s text, another possible pitfall. Describing the method for automatic writing in his *Manifesto*, under the telling heading ‘Secrets of the magical surrealist art,’ Breton notes: ‘[w]rite quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you’re writing and be tempted to reread what you have written.’¹⁷ Although it remains implicit, the understanding is that rereading will lead to revision and editing—the very (considered and rational) intervention in the literary creative process that surrealist automatism was supposed to avoid. This exposes the double function of automatic writing in Surrealism: to access the unconscious, of course, but the very method itself is framed as an attack on established literary practices as well. Describing his and

¹² Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 90.

¹³ Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 91.

¹⁴ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 23 (emphasis original).

¹⁵ Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 91.

¹⁶ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 26.

¹⁷ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 29-30.

Soupault's writing process for *The Magnetic Fields* once more, now in the *Manifesto* (Breton was nothing if not thorough in making his contribution to the literary revolutionary cause quite clear), he notes that they wrote quickly, easily, and with 'praiseworthy disdain for what might result from a literary point of view.'¹⁸

Listening to the voices of reason, morality or aestheticism is one misfortune that may befall psychic automatism in its written form; another is giving in to rereading and redaction and similar concerns from the 'literary point of view' that ought to be disdained. I would posit as a third listening to voices *outside* of one's self. Automatism and automatic writing in particular were techniques that were central to Spiritism, after all, where spirits 'from the other side' (of death) or otherwise disembodied agencies might communicate with the living by speaking or writing through a spiritist medium.¹⁹ The bereavement of many on account of the war just past had led to a renewed surge of Spiritism in French bourgeois circles, spilling over into the media and popular culture.²⁰ Still, listening to such external voices is not something that would befall a Bretonian surrealist, apparently: Breton and others categorically rejected and ridiculed the beliefs of Spiritism on several occasions. Nevertheless — and as their insistent rejections indicates — they were cognisant of spiritist automatism and its popularity. In several respects, surrealist practices rather resembled those of Spiritism, particularly on first glance. Instruments such as the *planchette* or Ouija-board were never used in Surrealism, possibly to avoid any suggestion that *outside* voices might be dictating. The hand always remained directly connected to the surrealist body. Indeed, because of the focus upon one's own inside voice, the surrealists *themselves* in fact became the instruments. Writes Breton,

But we, who have made no effort whatsoever to filter, who in our works have made ourselves into simple receptacles of so many echoes, modest

¹⁸ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 23.

¹⁹ More on the development of Spiritism in France in Lachapelle, Sophie, *Investigating the Supernatural: From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychological Research and Metaphysics in France, 1853-1931* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011); and Monroe, John W., *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in France* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2008). See further automatism's history in psychiatry and in, and in relation to, Spiritism, in Crabtree, Adam, "'Automatism" and the emergence of dynamic psychiatry,' *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 39, 1 (2003): 51-70.

²⁰ This also led to a resurgence in popular culture of *belle époque* themes such as ghosts and hauntings, (stage-)hypnotism, (stage-)spiritism, and stage magic, as well as to an aesthetic of the disembodied, fluid and ghostly.

recording instruments who are not mesmerized by the drawings we are making, perhaps we serve an even nobler cause. Thus we render with integrity the “talent” which has been lent to us. You might as well speak of the talent of this platinum ruler, this mirror, this door, and of the sky, if you like.²¹

The phrase ‘echoes’ implies sound and the possibility of a voice to be heard. The surrealists-as-recording-instruments may be taking down sound waves, namely those of their (speaking) subliminal. As befits instruments, they do not filter. Their talent is that they have no talent — or rather, the talent lies in making themselves an instrument, a mere device, just as talentless as a device that measures, and one that reflects; at the same time, as talentless as particular gateways (door, sky), poetical metaphors indicating the *limen* of the subliminal and supraliminal. The surrealists becoming instruments and their lack of talent constitute a further attack on the literary status quo — psychic automatism is not only quick and easy, but talentless and instrumental to boot; all characterisations existing in radical opposition to the notion of the inspired literary genius.

Spiritist mediums too were instrumentalised (even captured in the actual phrase, ‘medium’). However, Breton’s emphasis that the surrealists-as-instrument are ‘*not* mesmerized by the drawings [they] are making’ serves to clearly distinguish them from those who are: mediums as well as psychiatric patients, who, other than the surrealists, do *not* know whence their automatisms originate (and that they are thought’s dictation). In their case, their doctors know, be they psychiatrists or psychical researchers. Taking Surrealism’s thorough grounding in psycho-dynamic studies into account, I am certain this was the surrealist view as well.²²

In these early days of Surrealism, 1919-1923, those aiming to act as a ‘receptacle’ for the echoes of their subliminal were in the main (aspiring) poets and novelists; it is therefore hardly surprising that they took so much to automatic *writing*, and that they conceptualised their subliminal as the *voice* of thought. The young surrealists would turn to automatic speaking as well, as I will discuss

²¹ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 27-8 (emphasis original).

²² The term ‘mesmerized’ here is decidedly *not* neutral and is again revealing of a subtext indicating Breton’s knowledge of the history of dynamic psychiatry, which originates, together with Spiritism, in the eighteenth-century semi-medical, semi-esoteric practice of Mesmerism, as I have traced in Bauduin, Tessel M., *The Occultation of Surrealism: A Study of the Relationship between Bretonian Surrealism and Western Esotericism* (PhD dissertation, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2012), 67-80. See further the studies of Ellenberger, Crabtree, and Monroe.

further below. But what about those did not use words in expressing their unconscious?

In one of his seminal works on the mind, British psychiatrist Frederic Myers made a distinction between passive, or ‘sensory automatism,’ and active ‘motor automatism:’

[P]roducts of inner audition or inner vision [are] externalised into quasi-percepts

[sic]—these form what I term *sensory automatisms*. The messages conveyed by limbs or hands or tongue, initiated by an inner motor impulse beyond the conscious will—these are what I term *motor automatisms*. ... They will be seen to be *messages* from the subliminal to the supraliminal self....²³

Sensory automatism is perceived with senses such as hearing or vision, albeit here inner, and is passively experienced. Examples are dreaming and hallucination. Writing, speaking and other physical movements, including walking, are active sensory automatisms.²⁴ All are messages from the subliminal, and, at least as far as the surrealists were concerned, all are meaningful in themselves because of that. One of the more famous expressions of motor automatism was hysteria, which could be considered a form of automatic ‘subliminal uprush’ according to Myers’ theories.²⁵ This was enough of a criterion to reinvent hysteria as a creative act in Surrealism. In 1928, when it had become quite obsolete medically, Breton and Aragon celebrated hysteria as poetical expression in an article on the fiftieth anniversary of its ‘invention’—a characterisation indicating both authors’ familiarity with the trajectory of hysteria from serious (women’s) illness, to mass affliction, to invented disease hypnotically induced in apparently fraud-prone patients. The ‘dismemberment of the concept appears to be complete,’ the authors noted; which allowed them to divest the concept of pathology, insist that it existed independently from the

²³ Myers, Frederic William Henry, *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death, Part I* (New York: Longmans, Green &co, 1954): 222 (emphasis original).

²⁴ On ambulatory automatism or the fugue, see Hacking, Ian, ‘Automatisme Ambulatoire: Fugue, Hysteria, and Gender at the Turn of the Century,’ *Modernism/Modernity* 3, 2 (1996): 31-43.

²⁵ Myers, *Human Personality*, I: 222.

medical establishment, and grant it aesthetic rebirth as a poetical performance.²⁶ They celebrated it as an example of *bodily* automatism, a point perhaps made less explicitly in their text but put forward by their choice to illustrate it with photographs of hysterical and erotically suggestive poses performed by a night dress-clad Augustine (image 1; Louise Augustine Gleizes, 1861-?), a renowned hysterical patient of the inventor of hysteria, Parisian neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893).²⁷

The appropriation of an originally medical condition as creative, erotic, and subversive illustrates, in my view, Surrealism's treatment of the phenomena, sources, language, and methods of dynamic psychiatry: subverting and fundamentally repositioning particular concepts as creative and possibly aesthetic. I would summarise the surrealist agenda as: radically reinventing psychiatric concepts as art as well as reinventing art itself by means of these (originally psychiatric) practices and methods, even while 1) simultaneously retaining a medical-scientific sheen, 2) appealing to popular culture's fascination with the unconscious, mediumistic phenomena and psychical research, and 3), criticising medical practices from the insider's position Surrealism assumed for itself. It is an impressive feat and early Surrealism managed to pull it off frequently. Importantly, the surrealists removed pathology entirely from the equation: 'Hysteria is not a pathological phenomenon and may in all respects be considered as a supreme means of expression.'²⁸ Considering the rather tragic life stories of Augustine and other patients, this might seem rather insensitive. Yet at the same time, the surrealists triumphed not only in wresting the unconscious and its expressions from medicine and the medical establishment's desire to pathologize it, but likewise in establishing it as a serious seat or source of independent creativity. The misfortune of hysteria within medicine, became the source of its success in Surrealism. Perhaps one might go so far as to say that the personal misfortune of Augustine and others — to be locked up in mental institutions, to be

²⁶ Aragon, Louis and André Breton, 'The Fiftieth Anniversary of Hysteria,' in Breton, André, *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, Rosemont, Franklin (ed.) (London: Pluto Press, 1978): 320-321, 321. Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, 23; also Rabaté, Jean-Michel, 'Loving Freud Madly: Surrealism between Hysterical and Paranoid Modernism,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 25, 3/4 (2002): 58-74, 64-5.

²⁷ Ellenberger, *The Discovery*, 89-101. Crabtree, Adam, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (New Haven [etc.]: Yale University Press, 1993), 164-5. More on the construction of hysteria as a spectacle in Didi-Huberman, Georges, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Alisa Hartz, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (Cambridge [etc.]: The MIT Press, 2003).

²⁸ Aragon & Breton, 'The Fiftieth Anniversary,' 321. Originally 'Le Cinquantenaire de l'hystérie, 1878-1928,' *La révolution surréaliste* 11 (1928): 20-22.

an object of study — was partly avenged by the surrealists. In Surrealism expressions of the subliminal, considered to be expressions of unrestrained creativity, in whatever form, means or context, were always framed as poetical. With the reframing of hysteria as an invented disease, its performative qualities only increased.

Moreover, with an overwhelming majority of hysterics, patients, and mediums being women, one should also not underestimate the importance of the surrealist validation of such traditionally feminine (and therefore, perceived as weak) faculties as intuition, imagination, hallucination, the dream, and the subliminal generally, as relevant, creative and authentic. In the surrealist assumption of the passivity of automatism, there is a certain amount of gender-bending going on.²⁹

Still, with respect to automatic writing, its inherent passivity courted misfortune in Surrealism. For all the success of *The Magnetic Fields* and the enthroning of automatic writing as essential surrealist practice in the first *Manifesto*, it was a success hard to repeat: '[n]evermore after [*The Magnetic Fields*], on the occasion when we awaited this murmur in hopes of capturing it for precise ends, did it take us very far.'³⁰ One had to wait, and hope to be graced by the voice of one's unconscious. This passive approach as practiced by Breton and Soupault during the conception of *The Magnetic Fields* was perhaps exhausted after a time. Eventually, apparently, the voice of consciousness came to intrude constantly during automatic writing. Perhaps a solution might be found in another (passive) mental state, one in which 'incursions of conscious elements'³¹ were considerably reduced and possibly even absent: the dream.

²⁹ Note: this does nothing to diminish Surrealism's misogyny in (many) other areas. For all the positive validation of automatism and feminine qualities, the surrealists appropriated those for themselves *as men*.

³⁰ Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 91.

³¹ Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 91.

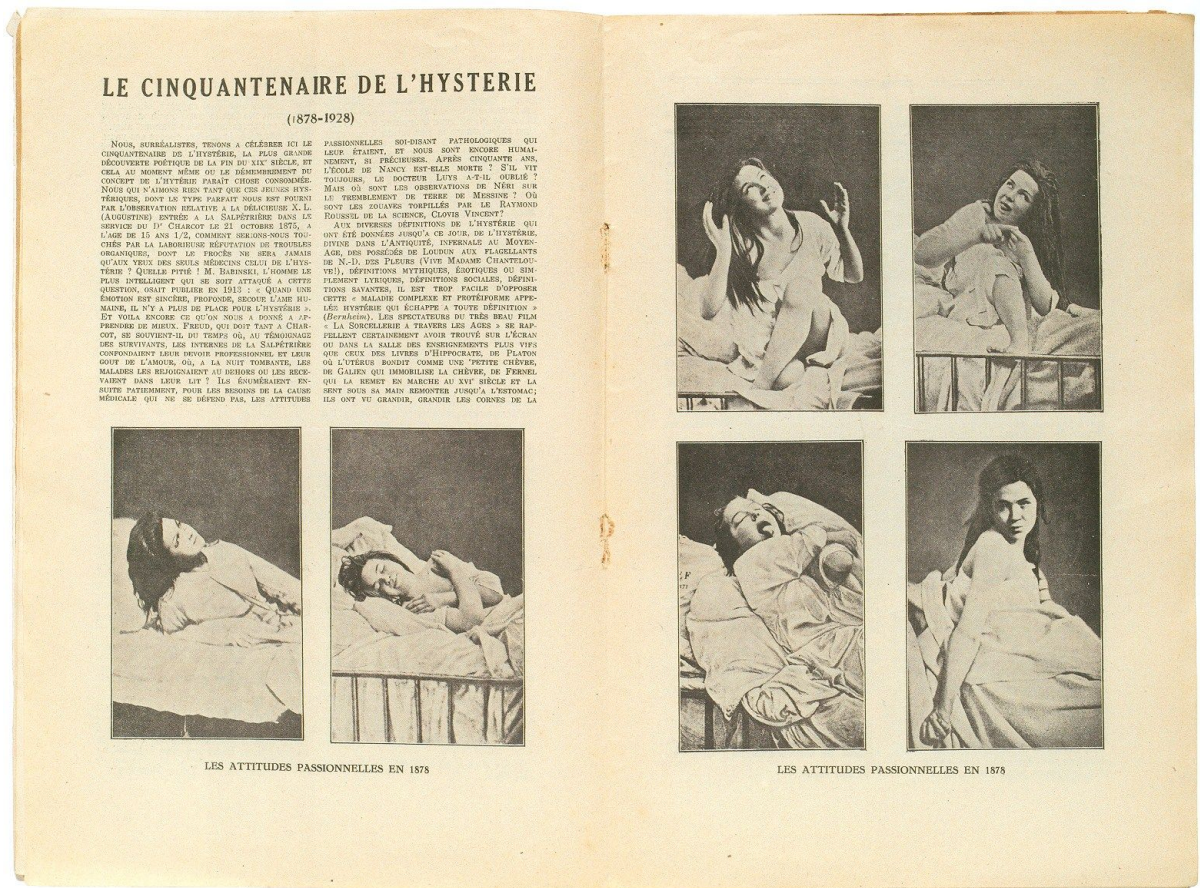


Figure 1. 'Les attitudes passionnelles' (1928), in: *La Révolution Surréaliste* 11 (1928): 20-2.

2. The omnipotence of the dream: the sleeping sessions and the Bureau of Surrealist Research

Psychiatric studies and practice did not only introduce Breton and others to automatism and free association, but also to the dream. And in particular, to the idea that dreams can be considered another gateway to the subliminal. One experiences sensory automatism in dreams. It should be noted that the surrealist fascination with dreams is in part a legacy of an interest in dreaming that permeated two of Surrealism's (grand-)parental movements, fin-de-siècle Symbolism and nineteenth-century Romanticism. Early Surrealism's captivation with the dream as a source of creative expression was fuelled further by Freudian theory, which fermented the notion that dreams served as direct portals to the

subliminal.³² Indeed, in a definition predating the first *Manifesto* Breton wrote that Surrealism ‘designate[s] a certain psychic automatism that corresponds rather well to the *dream state*.’³³ Psychic automatism, then, while not a dream (or state of dreaming) per se, can still *lead* to such a state.

The fascination for dream work, dream states, and dream narratives prevalent in early Surrealism found its expression in specific paintings, for instance by Ernst, but more prominently in dream descriptions. Individuals would write dreams down and circulate them in the surrealist group. Many such descriptions would eventually be published, in surrealist journals or in the poetry, a novel or collected works of a specific surrealist. The surrealists would further recount their dreams to each other at nightly meetings. From the outset obstacles were encountered. Many surrealists, Breton and Ernst most prominently among them, worried about the issue of remembering dreams correctly. Moreover, upon waking the dream did not only need to be remembered but also to be written down — creating ample opportunity for further interventions, intended or not.³⁴ Thus misfortunes such as revision and editing that dogged automatic writing reared their heads here too. The group therefore searched for a way to access the dream-state as directly and immediately as possible. Starting in September 1922, they undertook a series of séance-like sessions, the goal of which was to dream lucidly.³⁵ More specifically, the aim was manifesting the dream as a creative product *in itself* — which, as an aside, runs rather counter to the Freudian understanding and objective of dream work.

The sessions were generally called the ‘sleeping sessions,’ while the entire period during which they took place (September 1922-February 1923) became known as the *époque de sommeils* or time of slumbers. The impetus was provided by René Crevel (1900-1935), who had participated in a few spiritist séances during his holidays and was therefore familiar with spiritist techniques for

³² Although it should be noted that only Ernst could read Freud in the original. The majority of the surrealist group had to make do with partial French translations and abridged editions, which presented a somewhat distorted interpretation of Freudian theory. Freudian influence upon Surrealism is frequently overestimated, therefore.

³³ Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 90 (my emphasis).

³⁴ Gee, Malcolm, ‘Max Ernst, God, and the Revolution by Night,’ *Arts Magazine* 55, 7 (1981): 85-91, 85-6. Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 91-2. Breton was well versed in unedited dream-description, but still he distrusted his own efforts, let alone those of others.

³⁵ See also Ades, Dawn, ‘Between Dada and Surrealism: Painting in the Mouvement Flou,’ in Neff, Terry Ann R. (ed.), *In the Mind’s Eye: Dada and Surrealism* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986): 23-41, 36. Carr, Adrian N., and Lisa A. Zanetti, ‘The Emergence of a Surrealist Movement and its Vital ‘Estrangement-effect’ in Organization Studies,’ *Human Relations* 53, 7 (2000): 891-921, 893.

entering an alternate state. Standard procedures were followed in the surrealist sessions, as the lights were dimmed and the participants would sit around a table holding hands.³⁶ After a certain amount of time, one of the participants would enter a light trance or sleep-state, and start speaking, sometimes on their own, sometimes in response to questions (mostly concerned with the future: when will someone die? where will someone be a couple of years from now? etc.).³⁷ Often the entranced person would be given paper and pencil, and start writing and/or drawing. From the outset, therefore, the surrealists courted not only the passive, sensory and hallucinatory automatism of dreaming, but combined it with motor automatisms like speaking, writing, and drawing.

The surrealists called the trance state one of ‘hypnotic slumber,’³⁸ a designation that reveals not only the core group’s psychiatric background (hypnosis having just been discovered in dynamic psychiatry), but also that the motif of slumber — a state similar to sleep, that is to say to that of the somnambulist, with whom Romantic medicine from Mesmer onwards had been obsessed with³⁹ — is key to understanding these sessions. In two published descriptions of events, Breton’s ‘The Mediums Enter’ (1922) and Aragon’s ‘A Wave of Dreams’ (1924), terms such as ‘dream,’ ‘sleep’ or ‘slumber’ are prominently present.⁴⁰ In fact, ‘The Mediums Enter’ is the same essay in which Breton tells the brief anecdote about how he “discovered” in 1919 the poetic potential of automatic writing when on the point of falling asleep or slumbering (discussed earlier). This anecdote is preceded by the definition of psychic automatism as corresponding to the dream state, and followed by a lamentation on the deficiency and unreliability of memory when it comes to remembering one’s

³⁶ Warlick, M.E., *Max Ernst and Alchemy* (Austin: University of Texas, 2001), 64.

³⁷ See also commentary of Bonnet in Breton, *OC I*, 1302, 1304.

³⁸ Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 92. Originally, ‘Le lundi 25 septembre, à 9 heures du soir, en présence de Desnos, Morise et moi, Crevel entre dans le sommeil hypnotique...’ Breton, *OC I*, 276.

³⁹ See also Méheust’s excellent two-part study *Somnambulisme et médiumnité*: Méheust, Bertrand, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité*, 2 vols., *I: Le défi du magnétisme. II: Le choc des sciences psychiques* (Le Plessis-Robinson: Institut Synthélabo pour le Progrès de la Connaissance, 1998, 1999).

⁴⁰ ‘Entrée des mediums,’ *Littérature* (new series) 6 (November 1922), which also included some transcriptions of sessions; ‘Entrée’ was later included in Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 89-95. Cf. Breton, André, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, Polizzotti, Mark (ed. & trans.) (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1993), 59-78. ‘Une vague des rêves’ appeared originally in *Commerce 2* (1924). Aragon, Louis, ‘A Wave of Dreams’, De Muth, Susan (trans.), [Papers of Surrealism 1](#) (2010; original translation 2003; accessed 10 June, 2014). Descriptions of original sessions in Jean, Marcel (ed.), *The Autobiography of Surrealism* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 100-7.

dreams; in other words, a sleep state, dreaming, automatism, the creativity of the unconscious (accessed through dreams or automatic writing) and the problematic issues regarding such access, are all intimately connected discursively in this text.⁴¹ The recurring use of sleep-related terminology reinforces the understanding that lucid dreaming, that is, verbal automatism, was the objective of these sessions.

For all the superficial similarities to Spiritism, the practical methodology of the surrealist séance was very probably first and foremost inspired by practices in psychical research. Psychiatrists-turned-psychical researchers like Théodore Flournoy (1855-1920) had found that using the séance setting in their experimentation with mediums was beneficial to their research of a medium's psyche. Flournoy suspected the medium — in his case, Hélène Smith (Catherine-Élise Müller, 1861-1929) — to be much more at ease in a séance held at home than in a laboratory environment, and the more at ease she was, the more all the facets of her unconscious that Flournoy was so fascinated by might be displayed.⁴² The frequent references to Smith herself, and her tales and glossolalia (spoken words), writings, and drawings in Breton's writings, in combination with several surrealist art works celebrating her, testify to Bretonian Surrealism's familiarity with Flournoy's research. The surrealists clearly adhered to William James' influential judgement that '[m]ediumistic possession in all its grades seems to form a perfectly natural special type of alternate personality';⁴³ hence Breton's celebration of the diversity of Smith's mediumistic expressions.

In any case, in his description of events during the time of slumbers, Breton also took the occasion to reject Spiritism's premises:

⁴¹ Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 90-2.

⁴² Shamdasani, Sonu, 'Encountering Hélène: Théodore Flournoy and the Genesis of Subliminal

Psychology,' in Flournoy, Théodore, *From India to the Planet Mars: A Case of Multiple Personality with Imaginary Languages*, Shamdasani, Sonu (ed.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): xi-li, xiiiiff. Relevant publications of Flournoy are: *From India to the Planet Mars: A Case of Multiple Personality with Imaginary Languages*, Shamdasani, Sonu (ed.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Idem, *Nouvelles observations sur un cas de somnambulisme avec glossolalia* (Geneva: C. Eggimann, 1902). Idem, *Esprits et mediums. Mélanges de métapsychique et de psychologie* (Geneva: Librairie Kundig, 1911).

⁴³ Cited in Shamdasani, 'Encountering Hélène', xvii. See also Micale, Mark S., 'The Modernist Mind: A Map,' in Idem (ed.), *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): 1-19, 14.

It goes without saying that at no time, starting with the day we agreed to try these experiments, have we ever adopted the spiritualistic viewpoint. As far as I'm concerned, I absolutely refuse to admit that any communication whatsoever can exist between the living and the dead.⁴⁴

In Surrealism, the voice of the dream, like the voice of automatism, can only be one's *inner* voice, residing in one's own subliminal (and living) mind.

Initially, the sleeping sessions were very successful. Within ten days of their starting the séances, even 'the most blasé, the most self-assured among us [i.e., the surrealist group] stand confused, trembling with gratitude and fear.'⁴⁵ The young poet Robert Desnos in particular proved to be very successful at entering a trance and uttering phrases, sentences and eventually, entire spoonerisms. Breton may have mastered the art of writing down the dream without editing, stated Aragon, but Desnos mastered the art of *dreaming without sleeping*: '[h]e contrives to speak his dreams at will.'⁴⁶ This judgement underscores my interpretation of these sessions as attempts at lucid dreaming, that is at speaking one's dreams.

Besides speaking and writing, frequently in response to questions, some dreamers would also start to draw automatically, and even move about, bodily performing as it were parts of the dream or dream state. Monologues that seemed like indictments or like crime stories would issue forth. Eventually — or so it is reported — Desnos only needed to close his eyes to enter a dream state, regardless of whether he was sitting in busy cafés or in the enclosed and silent environment of Breton's study. Breton lauded Desnos in the first *Manifesto* as one who, more than any of the others, 'has perhaps got closest to the Surrealist truth;' who '*speaks Surrealist* at will,' and who was 'extraordinar[ily] agil[e] in orally following his thoughts.'⁴⁷ Both this last citation and Aragon's characterisation of Desnos (he 'speaks his dreams') highlight once more the recurring subject of the oratory quality of the subliminal, the *voice* of thought. It shows further that Surrealism is, or to be surrealist is, to directly communicate one's unconscious.

The sleeping sessions were a new line of surrealist experimentation with automatism, not intended to replace but developed in parallel to automatic writing in the passive sense as practiced during the composition of *The Magnetic Fields*. Several elements differ, though. For one, the techniques diversified considerably,

⁴⁴ Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 92.

⁴⁵ Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 92.

⁴⁶ Aragon, 'A Wave of Dreams,' 7.

⁴⁷ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 29.

I find, as automatic speaking, writing, and drawing, as well as bodily automatism took place during these sessions, sometimes in succession during one session, sometimes separately. More than just writing, the trances attained during the sleeping sessions resulted in a variety of literary and artistic products, such as spoonerisms, poems, stories, predictions of the future, drawings and performances.

Secondly and more importantly, rather than waiting for the ‘essential murmur’ in automatic writing, the setting of the séances served directly to *induce* an altered state in someone, indicated not least by the use of the phrase ‘*hypnotic slumber*.’ Therefore, even though during the sessions themselves the group still had to wait and see who would become entranced and what would happen, the mere fact of their regular organisation indicates the surrealist group’s much more active pursuit of automatisms — or perhaps more properly, their active creation of automatism-facilitating conditions. Thirdly, these very conditions were to a large extent structured, and to some extent also directed. During their heyday the sessions were organised multiple evenings a week, while the asking of particular questions and other signals provided some initial direction to the entranced person.

Finally, there was a notably democratic side to the slumber sessions. In theory, anyone present could enter a slumbering state independent of their membership of the surrealist group or even artistic aspirations.⁴⁸ There is a clear link here with automatic writing. Although surrealist automatic writing was practiced more or less by surrealists alone, it was positioned as a technique that was quick and easy, potentially available to all whether schooled or unschooled in literature, and thereby ‘praiseworthy disdainful’ of established literary practice and High Literature’s connotations of elitism. As said earlier, Surrealism’s psychic automatism is a double edged-sword: a method, automatism, to access the unconscious, but in that very methodology an attack on the literary/artistic status quo. Along the same lines dreaming lucidly during a sleeping session was also presented as quick, easy, and potentially possible for all.

Despite initial successes, misfortune eventually arrived. As the sleeping sessions continued into the first months of 1923, they gradually became more dark in tone — dreamers predicting illness and death — as well as violent. Participants attacked one another; Desnos refused to wake up; an attempt at group suicide was prevented just in time. Aragon:

⁴⁸ Breton, Ernst, Éluard, and Morise never entered a sleeping state ‘despite their goodwill’ (Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 95) and neither did Aragon. However, some of the non-surrealists attending did.

Those who submit themselves to these incessant experiments endure a constant state of appalling agitation, become increasingly manic. They grow thin. Their trances last longer and longer. They don't want anyone to bring them round any more. They go into trances to meet one another and converse like people in a faraway world where everyone is blind, they quarrel and sometimes knives have to be snatched from their hands. The very evident physical ravages suffered by the subjects of this extraordinary experiment, as well as frequent difficulties in wrenching them from a cataleptic death-like state, will soon force them to give in to the entreaties of the onlookers leaning on the parapet of wakefulness, and suspend the activities which neither laughter nor misgivings have hitherto interrupted.⁴⁹

Aside from all this, accusations of faking and fraud were made. Breton, acting as leader of the group, decided to finish the sessions once and for all. Verbal (and other) automatism by way of collective lucid dreaming came to an end.

The dark turn of events nevertheless did not lessen the interest in the dream and the creative narrative potential of dream description. In fact the sessions resulted in various successful new undertakings that were implemented immediately after, in 1924. To start with, as a surrealist counterpart to the investigations of psychical research, the experimental sleeping sessions successfully demonstrated the fruitful possibilities of more or less organized experiments that were aimed at investigating a hidden part of the mind. In due course, therefore, the Bureau of Surrealist Research (*Bureau de recherches surréalistes* or BRS) was founded in October 1924. It was to function explicitly as a central location for research into, experimentation with, and the gathering of data about the hidden mind.⁵⁰

Surrealism proposes a gathering of the greatest possible number of experimental elements, for a purpose that cannot yet be perceived. All those who have the means to contribute, in any fashion, to the creation of genuine surrealist archives, are urgently requested to come forward: let them shed light on the genesis of an invention, or propose a new system of

⁴⁹ Aragon, 'A Wave of Dreams,' 6-7.

⁵⁰ 'Ce bureau s'emploie à recueillir par tous les moyens appropriés les communications relatives aux diverses formes qu'est susceptible de prendre l'activité inconsciente de l'esprit.' Breton, *OCI*, 481, 1451.

psychic investigation, or makes us the judges of striking coincidences [...] or freely criticize morality, or even simply entrust us with their most curious dreams and with what their dreams suggest to them.⁵¹

This press release abounds in language that is research and experiment-oriented: ‘experimental,’ ‘archive,’ ‘invention,’ ‘system,’ and ‘investigation’ — ‘*psychic* investigation,’ no less, a referral both to psychical research and to Surrealism’s own psychic automatism. Surrealism was of course not a science, but many of its early members did have some medical training and knowledge, its automatic methods were taken directly from medicine, and some of its avowed goals make use of medical and scientific jargon and phrasing. As far as Breton was concerned, he and his fellow poets and artists were ‘explorers of the hidden mind,’ and he considered the surrealist undertaking to be similar to the studies of Freud, for instance.⁵² Early Surrealism therefore has a para-scientific character at least, drawing partly upon medicine and partly upon psychical research.

One finds in the BRS’ press release a reiteration of a democratic theme that stands in radical contrast to literature’s elitism, already mentioned, but likewise contrasts science’s and medicine’s exclusivity: *all* are invited to contribute to surrealist research. ‘We are on the eve of a revolution,’ an 1924 [advertisement](#) for the BRS proclaimed, ‘you can take part.’ Surrealism was proclaimed to not discriminate any (forms of) subliminals either, besides persons: ‘Surrealism lies within the reach of all unconsciousnesses [sic],’ a BRS-calling card from the same period made clear.⁵³ To ensure proper documentation, a journal was kept at the BRS, the *cahier de la permanence*, in which the dreams and stories visitors to the Bureau contributed were entered, as well as timestamps and details of their visits, besides furthermore dreams, poems, incidents, stories, conversations, etc. of the surrealists themselves.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Caws, Mary Ann, *Surrealism* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2004), 51; Breton, *OCI*, 481-82.

⁵² Letter from Breton to Freud, cited in Polizzotti, Mark, ‘Preface: Steps Meandering and Guided,’ in Breton, André, *The Lost Steps*, Polizzotti, Mark (ed.) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996): xi-xxi, xvii.

⁵³ One of eight calling cards, from the personal collection of Breton, available online: <http://www.andrebretton.fr/fr/item/?GCOI=56600100788480#> (accessed 9-12-2014).

⁵⁴ The entire cahier is available in the *Archives du surréalisme*-series: Thévenin, Paule (ed.), *Bureau de recherches surréalistes: cahier de la permanence, octobre 1924-avril 1925*, Archives du surréalisme 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

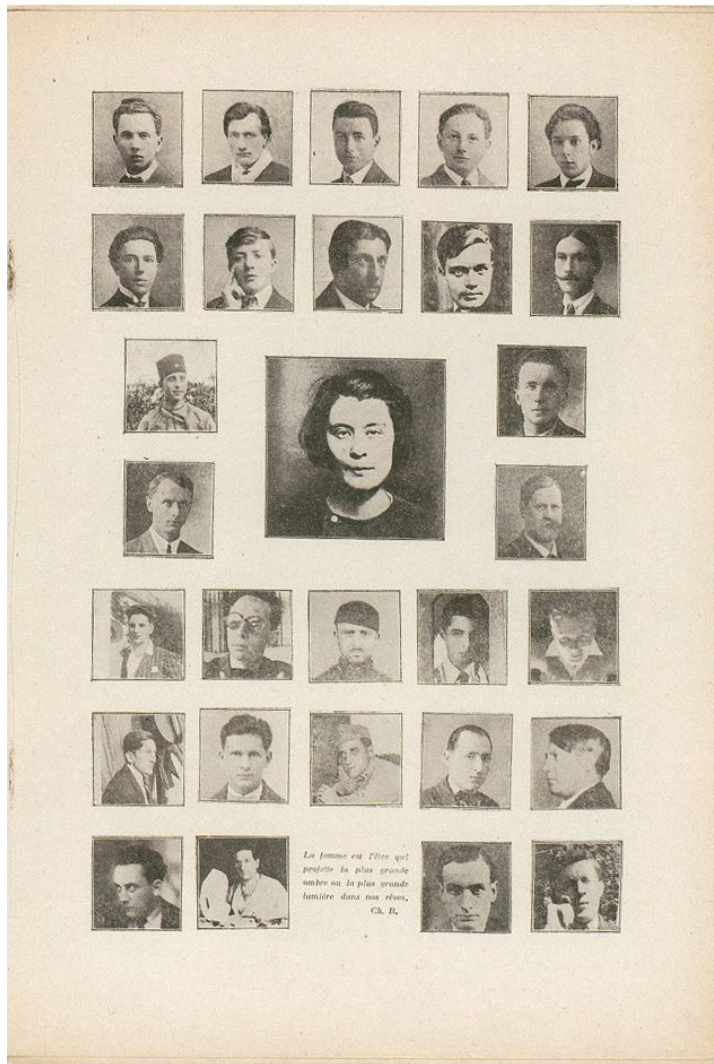


Figure 2. *La femme est l'être...* (1924), in: *La Révolution Surréaliste* 1 (1924): 17.

A further instrument of surrealist research was founded: the journal *La révolution surréaliste* (LRS), modelled upon journals such as *La Nature* and *Science*. Its austere, two-column lay-out echoes those scientific magazines and serves to emphasize the seriousness of the surrealist undertaking. It also, perhaps unintentionally, reinforces the early surrealist obsession with the *word* as main carrier of meaning. The journal further illustrates another successful outgrowth of the sleeping sessions: the creative potential of the dream. For years dream descriptions were published in the issues of *LRS*. In *La révolution surréaliste*'s first issue, for instance, pages 3-6 are dedicated to 'Rêves' (dreams), namely one

of Giorgio de Chirico, three different dreams of Breton, and one (rather long) dream by Renée Gauthier, an active participant in the sleeping sessions and in other early surrealist activities. This section of dream reports is followed by twelve pages of ‘Textes surrealistes,’ which includes texts by ten surrealists and sympathizers, and some brief news clippings, besides small drawings by de Chirico and Ernst (twice), an automatic drawing by André Masson (1896-1987), as well as two photographs by Man Ray (1890-1976), and a photograph of a Carnival-truck. Also, just as importantly, a photomontage of small portrait photos of the young surrealists and a selection of their heroes, arranged around a central photograph of the criminal Germaine Berton (image 2). It includes a citation of Charles Baudelaire that unites the topic of the dream with that other obsessions of the (overwhelmingly male) surrealists, the opposite sex: ‘Woman is the being who casts most darkness or most light in our dreams.’⁵⁵

Besides advertisements for surrealist works and several essays and ‘chronicles’ by surrealists, the issue also includes a section on ‘Suicides,’ newspaper clippings regarding self-inflicted death that were also treated (and touted, even) as surrealist text.⁵⁶ For all the emphasis upon (automatically generated) text, the pervasive presence of illustrations in *LRS* 1 claims a role for the visual too. With *LRS*’s format of a rigorous scientific journal in mind, the surrealist texts and images, be they automatic drawings or photographs, taken together, testify to Surrealism’s serious research activities into the unconscious and (and by way of) automatism. Secondly, it provides visible *evidence* of their success (or at least, their efforts).

On the cover of this very same first issue a specific photo was reproduced, together with two others, namely that of a sleeping session restaged at the premises of the BRS (image 3). [The photo](#) shows Desnos speaking in trance, while a large group of surrealists huddle around Simone Breton-Kahn (1897-1980) at a typewriter. It functions, interestingly, not only as a historical document of this session, which in itself is already a re-enactment of the actual sessions from 1922-3; it also shows us Surrealism publicly being performed. That Surrealism was positioned as a serious, investigative undertaking geared towards obtaining results from closely monitored experiments with the subliminal is made clear by the intensely concentrated focus upon Desnos’ spoken words and the simultaneous transcription of that ‘magical dictation.’ What is further highlighted are the ‘researchers’ *themselves*. Their *présence* in the journal is already quite tangible

⁵⁵ ‘La femme est l’être qui projette la plus grande ombre ou la plus grande lumière dans nos rêves.’ *LRS* 1 (1927), 17; taken from Baudelaire’s preface to *Artificial Paradises* and cited in Eburne, Jonathan P., *Surrealism and the Art of the Crime* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 93.

⁵⁶ *LRS* 1 (1924), 2-6, 7-18, 21.

because we are reading their dreams, their automatic texts, looking at their drawings — in other words, the reader is being spoken to by the voices of each surrealist's unconscious. Alongside that, the surrealists are visibly manifested as a collective on the cover of the very journal documenting their efforts, even as they are caught in the act of surrealist psychic research. Although the experiments with lucid dreaming ended in violence and misfortune, perhaps, they can hardly be said to have failed; besides being the impetus for Surrealism being positioned even more seriously as para-scientific research including a journal, and resulting in a series of creative products as such, the sessions furthermore bound the group even tighter together socially, and thereby proved their worth for the true formation of the surrealist collective.

Finally, the sessions proved definitively that the subliminal as filtered through the dream state, i.e. the actual content of dreams and the structure of dream logic, were very fertile ground. Dream descriptions and dream narratives formed the core of regularly published surrealist writing for several years. Indeed, several automatically written novels and narratives were published immediately after the time of slumbers, testifying to the fact that the sessions not only provided new source material but also boosted authors' individual sessions of automatic writing. These include Breton's *Soluble Fish* (1924), many of Péret's stories collected in *The Leg of Lamb* (only first published in 1957), and works by Robert Desnos, such as *Mourning for Mourning* and *Liberty or Love!* (both 1924).⁵⁷ As Surrealism continued to grow and develop over the next decades, dreams still continued to be an inspiration. Indeed, bringing the dream itself into one's conscious life and experience remained one of Surrealism's main objectives. In *Communicating Vessels* of 1932, Breton noted that dreams form 'a conduction wire between the far too distant worlds of waking and sleep, exterior and interior reality, reason and madness, the assurance of knowledge and of love, of life for life and the revolution, and so on.'⁵⁸ One should live a dreamed life, even. In 1937 Breton edited an anthology of dream tales and narrated dreams, *Trajectoire du Rêve* (1938). He invited Freud to contribute a dream as well, who answered that he did not see why he should, as he considered the 'superficial' aspect of dreams

⁵⁷ Breton's *Soluble Fish* is included in the *Manifestoes*. Péret, Benjamin, *The Leg of Lamb: Its Life and Works*, Lowenthal, Marc (trans.) (Cambridge: Wakefield Press, 2011); on the dating of his stories see Lowenthal, Marc, 'Translator's Introduction', in Péret, Benjamin, *The Leg of Lamb: Its Life and Works*, Lowenthal, Marc (trans.) (Cambridge: Wakefield Press, 2011): ix-xxiv, xiii. Desnos, Robert, *Liberty or Love! and Mourning for Mourning* (London: Atlas Press, 2013).

⁵⁸ Breton, André, *Communicating Vessels*, Caws, Mary Ann (ed.), Idem, and Geoffrey T. Harris (trans.) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 86.

(that is, their retelling and positioning as a literary product) uninteresting.⁵⁹ For Freud, dreams serve only to be interpreted. For the surrealists, interpretation and analysis only serves bourgeois morals; rather, the dream should be narrated as a creative product in itself and, ideally, it should be *lived*. The difference between their two positions could not be more pronounced.

⁵⁹ Letter from Freud to Breton, 6 December 1937, Breton, André, *Trajectoire du rêve* (Paris: G.L.M., 1938), 127. Freud wrote that ‘a collection of dreams without association does not tell me anything...’ and ‘it is hard for me to imagine what it can mean to anyone else.’ This is only the continuation of a relation that was unfortunate from the outset. Breton visited Freud twice, each visit being a considerable disappointment. Breton, *The Lost Steps*, 70-1; and *Communicating Vessels*, appendix.

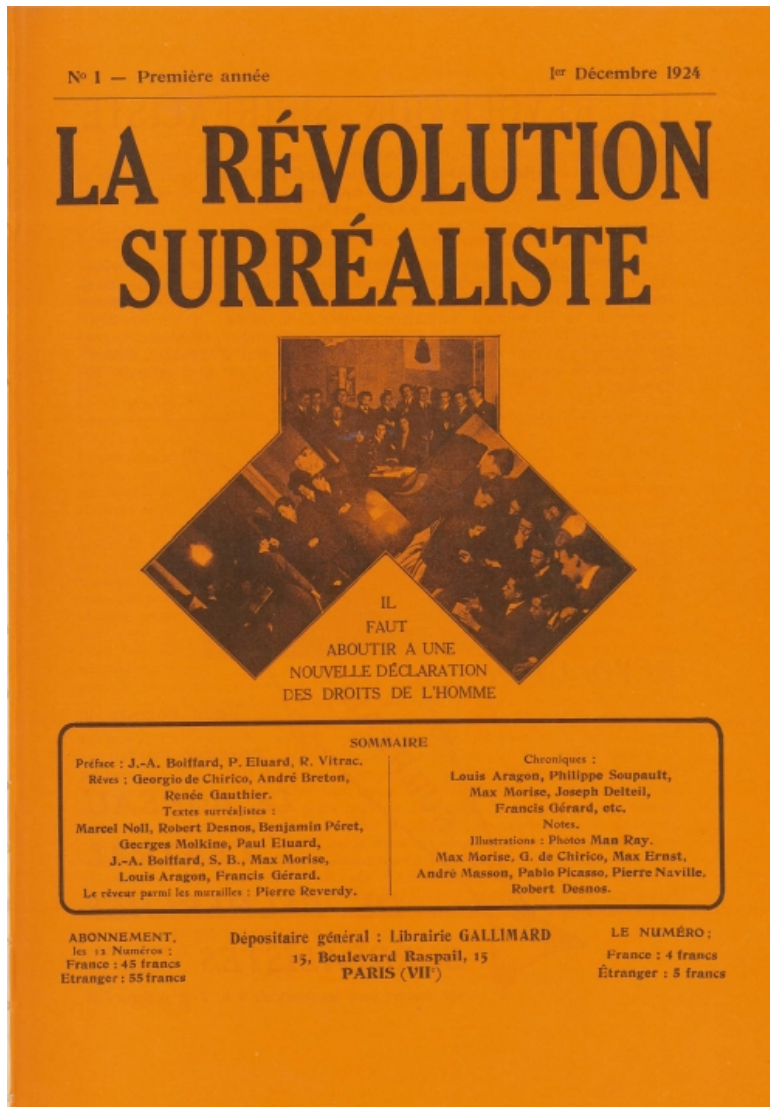


Figure 3. *La Révolution Surréaliste* 1 (1924), cover.

3. Neglected associations: automatism in the visual arts, mediums, and the future

During the sleeping sessions the group experimented among other things with automatic drawing. In this case, the success-misfortune story runs the other way around: deemed a failure at the start, it was eventually considered and proven to be a great success.

In 1925 Pierre Naville (1904-1993) stated in *La révolution surréaliste* that ‘there [was] no such thing as surrealist painting.’⁶⁰ The familiar obstacle of speed would get in the way here too: the risk of not keeping up with unimpeded thought already being significant in automatic writing, the process of painting was assumed to be several bridges too far, involving just too many conscious decisions (regarding composition, colour and similar matters). Paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, for instance, were considered to be surrealist in *image*, but not in *expression*.

However, as soon as one takes ‘painting’ to include visual arts-practices more generally, the picture changes (and Naville’s essay appearing in *LRS*, which had been illustrated from the journal’s first issue, partly belies his claim too). Desnos had been drawing automatically during the sleeping sessions. Masson had been steadily building his oeuvre of automatic drawings since 1923. Early Surrealism’s psychiatric background further makes it probable that several surrealists knew that some patients and mediums, both within and outside of medical institutionalised settings, had been making automatic drawings already since the late nineteenth century.⁶¹

During the second half of the 1920s several visual arts-techniques were experimented with and developed in Surrealism, with the express objective to introduce elements of chance, and to facilitate automatism and free association in the creation process. These include, besides automatic drawing, sand-painting, decalomania or ink-blotting, *frottage* or rubbing of a textured surface, *grattage* or scraping of paper or canvas, and *fumage* or smoke-staining. The practice of collage is often included in this list as well, but although it is an artistic technique taken to new heights in Surrealism, particularly in the work of Ernst, I find it questionable how much automatism is involved in putting surrealist collages together. In the case of Ernst I find it more fruitful to use concepts such as dissociation and free association in any case; he would use *frottage* of wood grains and strings, for instance, sometimes combining that with ink blotting or *grattage*, to create initial forms. These he would subsequently embellish or fill in, as it were, by means of free association. In 1925 — immediately after Naville’s statement that ‘there’s no surrealist painting’ — Ernst started experimenting with *frottage*. Where automatic drawing is very similar to automatic writing (quick,

⁶⁰ Naville, Pierre, ‘Beaux-Arts,’ *La Révolution Surréaliste* 3 (April 1925): 27.

⁶¹ As discussed by Will-Levaillant, Françoise, ‘L’analyse des dessins d’aliénés et de médiums en France avant le Surréalisme,’ *Revue de l’Art* 50 (1980): 24-39. More on Surrealism’s encounter with outsider art of patients in Röske, Thomas, ‘Inspiration and Unreachable Paradigm: L’Art des Fous and Surrealism,’ in Beyme, Ingrid von, and Thomas Röske (eds.), *Surrealismus und Wahnsinn/Surrealism and Madness* (Heidelberg: Sammlung Prinzhorn, 2009): 10-18.

easy, no training required) in that the pen or pencil moves about the paper quickly, without apparent thought and hardly leaving the paper's surface, *frottage* is even simpler as no words or shapes need to be formed. Rubbing a pencil over paper laid upon a table with heavy wood-grain, for instance, already immediately provides results in the form of patterns. Some extra lines might be added, or some colour, parts might be erased afterwards. The simplicity and ease of material and manner and possibility of quick execution led Ernst to create hundreds of frottage images over the course of several months. He published a selection in 1926 as *Histoire Naturelle*.⁶² In the early 1930s Ernst created series of works depicting cities and forests by means of frottage, experimenting further with the technique's possibilities with regards to various mediums, as well as to such issues as style and abstraction, and iconography. Even as automatic writing seemed seriously on the wane after 1933, automatic visual arts-techniques were proving very successful in unlocking new heights of creativity — and also, in acquiring large public recognition for Surrealism, thereby hastening its *embourgeoisement* (certainly a misfortune, for an avant-garde movement), and firmly entrenching it in public opinion as a visual arts movement, regardless of its decidedly literary origins. Ernst would use all the mentioned techniques throughout his career, and many of his works that are considered 'masterpieces' incorporate them prominently. For instance, *Europe after the Rain II* (1940-1942), created by means of decalcomania. As an aside, many of Ernst's works exemplify an essential and insurmountable paradox of surrealist automatic techniques: while proclaimed as easy and available to all, it is in fact the (trained) artists and writers of Surrealism who turn them into an artistic, not to say aesthetic, successes.

Without a doubt Breton considered the expression of automatism in visual art forms by 1933 as successful as, if not more so than, in writing. His essay 'The Automatic Message' (1933), in which he deplors the continuing misfortune of automatic writing, is notably richly *illustrated*.⁶³ Note, however, that rather than works by surrealists, the overwhelming majority of illustrations are drawings and paintings made by mediums. In other words, works that Breton and his fellow surrealists would consider to have been automatically made. In this essay, as he and others had done elsewhere and earlier already, Breton conflates patients of mental institutes and hospitals (or *aliénés*), spiritist mediums, and outsider (or 'naïve') artists into one category; while not explicitly named as such, they are all *automatists*. This very understanding of patients and mediums, extended to

⁶² Legge, Elizabeth, 'Zeuxis's Grapes, Novalis's Fossils, Freud's Flowers: Max Ernst's Natural History,' *Art History* 16, 1 (1993): 147-172, 147-9.

⁶³ Note, too, the quite obvious reference in the essay's title to Myers and his theory detailing the various automatisms by means of which the subliminal sends messages (see above).

include clairvoyants as well, as automatists, allowed him and other surrealists to refer frequently to them, their practice, writings, and artistic works in a general way. Surrealism's understanding here overlaps entirely with that of dynamic psychiatry: all automatic communications originate only from one's hidden, subliminal mind. This means that, whether it be because of illness, beliefs, delusions, particularly developed faculties of mind, weakness of character, or of their being female in general, hysterics, *aliénés* and (self-claimed) mediums and clairvoyants were able to enter altered states of mind, were perhaps even continuously in such states, and hence, they were *automatists*. From a surrealist point of view, patients and mediums occupied a position similar to children, the 'naïve,' and the so-called 'primitives,' or tribal peoples, all of whose assumed childishness, lack of education, of civility, and of the ability for rational reasoning, and whose irrational mind, insanity, or innate excess of femininity, meant that their mind worked differently than that of the rational, educated, sane, bourgeois (French) man. Collectively, they are the West's Others: externally and exotically so in the case of the group traditionally labelled 'primitives;' internal Other to Western society in the case of children, patients, and mediums.

Primitive of mind, and therefore automatists, they were however not surrealists and could never be. Their words were considered automatically generated. All automatic text is surrealist text, and hence their texts (and drawings, etc.) potentially were too. Yet to be not just an automatist but indeed a surrealist requires something more: will, sanity, and the mental facility to re-produce or simulate, as I will argue further below.

Breton and co. admired mediums and patients for their automatic writing and drawing, but certainly also, and perhaps initially even more so, for their irrational associations. The logic of the claims and predictions of mediums and clairvoyants was thought to operate in a manner similar to dream narratives: irrational, strange, absurd and marvellous, and adhering to an *inner* logic that lies outside of accepted (bourgeois) boundaries of rationality and coherence but may be experienced as logical all the same. An example will serve to explain. During the 1920s Breton, Ernst and others visited the parlour of a clairvoyant, a certain Mme Sacco, to have, among other things, their futures foretold. Breton's future included leadership of a political party, living in China for twenty years, a drastic change around 1931, and death — and his dying and Chinese travels were forecast to occur around the same time.⁶⁴ Enthusiastically he addressed the clairvoyant and others like her: 'I do not think that it must be one way or the other [i.e., dying or China]. I have faith in everything you have told me. I would not try

⁶⁴ Polizzotti, Mark, *Revolution of the Mind* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 244.

to resist the temptation you have aroused in me, let's say to wait for myself in China, for anything in the world. For thanks to you, *I am already there.*'⁶⁵

The clairvoyant's prediction led to Breton considering going to China in his imagination—in other words, it caused him to go there in thought.⁶⁶ And in Surrealism *thought is real*. One of Surrealism's most cherished and important dogmas is the belief in the superiority of the mind and supremacy of thought. This in part based upon Freud's view that nothing in the mind is arbitrary. In Louis Aragon's words: 'once something has been thought, it exists.'⁶⁷ Aragon preceded this sentence with a rhetorical question: 'Is simulating something any different than thinking it?' As he wrote this in 'A Wave of Dreams,' his essay about the sleeping sessions, he is clearly referring to — and undermining — the allegations of fraud made during the later stages of the time of slumbers. As Man Ray also pointed out when discussing Desnos' performances then, even *if* certain events during the sessions had been 'previously practiced and memorised,' they were 'miraculous' still.⁶⁸ Simulation, too, still requires thought, and once something has been thought, it has become real.

Just as dreams blur the boundaries between 'distant worlds of waking and sleep, *exterior* and *interior* reality,' clairvoyant predictions blur what is and what might be, reality and imagination, the possible, probable and factual. 'It is your role, Mesdames,' Breton addressed mediums and clairvoyants in his 1925 'Letter to Seers,' 'to make us confuse *the accomplishable fact* and *the accomplished fact.*'⁶⁹ The resulting confusion in the mind is superior, and sur-real. As indicated in the 1924 *Manifesto*, 'Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations.'⁷⁰ Mediums were appreciated in Surrealism for many things, not least for the effect of their predictions, stories and other automatism upon the mind of the surrealist, where unusual and particular associations could suddenly be sparked: 'Everything that is revealed to me [Breton] about the future falls in a marvellous field which is nothing other than that of absolute possibility.'⁷¹ Such marvelousness of absolute possibility is very probably also one of the reasons why the questions that were asked during the sleeping sessions were frequently future-related.

⁶⁵ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 201.

⁶⁶ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 201.

⁶⁷ Aragon, 'A Wave of Dreams,' 7.

⁶⁸ Cited in Conley, Katherine, *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* (Lincoln [etc.]: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 21.

⁶⁹ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 201 (my emphasis).

⁷⁰ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 26.

⁷¹ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 200.

There is mention of the mediums' misfortunes or even 'disgrace:' the cases of fraud they had — apparently — let themselves be caught in.⁷² Those ostensible instances of fraud did not bother Breton much, who instead took the medical-academic establishment to task for applying unsuitable methods to the 'mediums, whom people immediately wanted to submit to the observation of doctors, "scholars", and other illiterates.'⁷³ We encounter here another side of the typically, and originally, surrealist reinterpretation and repositioning of concepts from dynamic psychiatry and science. Just Surrealism foregrounds the subliminal's expressions as creative and discards pathology, diagnosis, and interpretation and analysis, it also does away with veracity claims and truth-determining methods. Those are irrelevant. That which occurs in the mind (i.e., has been thought, even if that was with the intention to simulate or feign), is always real and superior, and always marvellous. Breton's quite critical assessment of the medical-psychiatric establishment shines through clearly ('doctors, "scholars" and other illiterates'). It is indicative of Surrealism's ambiguous attitude towards medicine and science, and its unapologetic poaching of their methods and concepts. Finally, it is also why despite its scientific pretensions Surrealism essentially was and remained a literary and arts movement and not another branch of dynamic psychiatry.

The belief in neglected associations, in the creative versatility and potential of automatic writing, and the principle that simulation is also thought, remained strong. In 1930 Breton, now in partnership with Paul Éluard, undertook a new experiment in automatic writing. In parallel to *The Magnetic Fields* (1919), *The Immaculate Conception* (1930) too was written during a very brief and intense period, with the two authors feeding off each other creatively. Still, as Chénieux-Gendron has argued, the automatic writing of 1930 differs from that of 1919. The authors had already chosen chapter titles before they actually starting the process of writing, and those titles may well have induced automatism or channelled it in some way.⁷⁴ Each author would write a separate sheet, which would then be combined under the relevant title; less of a dialogue between the two authors than in *The Magnetic Fields*. Where Aragon described *Fields* as

⁷² Breton, *Manifestoes*, 199, 202.

⁷³ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 199.

⁷⁴ Chénieux-Gendron, Jacqueline, 'Towards a New Definition of Automatism: L'Immaculée Conception', *Dada/Surrealism* 17 (1988): 74-90. See also Melville, Anthony, 'Introduction to The Immaculate Conception', in Breton, André, Paul Éluard, and Philippe Soupault, *The Automatic Message - The Magnetic Fields - The Immaculate Conception*, Gascoyne, David and Anthony Melville (eds.), Idem, and Jon Graham (trans.) (London: Atlas, 1997): 150-157, 150.

having been written by ‘one author with two heads,’⁷⁵ *Conception* is perhaps a case of two authors aiming to share one head; or rather and more to the point, one very particular and defined mind state. *The Immaculate Conception* consist of two sections, ‘Man’ and ‘The possessions,’ and it is the second I am concerned with here.⁷⁶ During the writing process, the authors simulated a slew of mental illnesses (as indicated in the titles), current in the psychiatry of the day: ‘mental debility,’ ‘acute mania,’ ‘general paralysis,’ ‘interpretive delirium’ and ‘dementia praecox.’ This constitutes another important difference from *Fields*: psychiatry’s more tangible presence in the text. The authors only had to consult their psychiatric handbooks to find diagnoses of these illnesses and the mental proclivities associated with them. The overall section-title ‘possessions’ is key here. Generally, and in particular within the discourse of dynamic psychiatry, ‘possession’ was considered to be experienced passively by mediums and others. They were *possessed by* their subliminal.⁷⁷ In the case of Breton and Éluard, however, the two poets were the *possessors*, in an active sense. Surrealists practiced *active* ‘poetical possession’, another mechanism to turn pathological phenomena into a creative, potentially aesthetic, expression. Here we come to the core of the difference between automatists (such as mediums) and surrealists. The authors considered that they had proven that

the mind of a normal person when poetically primed is capable of reproducing the main features of the most paradoxical and eccentric verbal expressions and that it is possible for such a mind to assume at will the characteristic ideas of delirium without suffering any lasting disturbance [...].⁷⁸

⁷⁵ As cited in Soupault, *Vingt mille*, 65.

⁷⁶ Breton, André, and Paul Éluard, ‘The Immaculate Conception,’ Graham, Jon (trans.), Melville, Anthony (intr.), in Breton, André, Paul Éluard, and Philippe Soupault, *The Automatic Message - The Magnetic Fields - The Immaculate Conception*, Gascoyne, David, and Anthony Melville (eds.). Idem, and Jon Graham (trans.) (London: Atlas, 1997): 147-221. Chénieux-Gendron, ‘Towards a New Definition.’

⁷⁷ See also Shamdasani, ‘Encountering Hélène,’ xvii. James had defined ‘[m]ediumistic *possession*’ as ‘a perfectly natural special type of alternate personality’ (my emphasis, see also above).

⁷⁸ Breton & Éluard, ‘The Immaculate Conception,’ 175; and see also Melville, ‘Introduction,’ 152. Chénieux-Gendron, ‘Towards a New Definition,’ 85; furthermore Rabaté, ‘Loving Freud Madly,’ 65.

Most noteworthy here is the adjective *normal* to person: minds of those who are not ‘normal’ *will* suffer disturbances. Having worked with ‘male hysterics’ in psych wards during the First World War, that is to say with shell-shocked soldiers,⁷⁹ Breton knew very well the ravages that the mind could inflict, and could be inflicted upon it, in those who were *not* ‘normal,’ that is sane by the medical standards of the time. Female hysterics, mediums, and *aliénés* were also not seen as ‘normal’ persons possessing properly functioning minds. Indeed, Surrealism fully internalised the normative medical predisposition of positioning the observer himself, the doctor, the researcher, the investigator, as *normal* and *sane*. This ‘normality’ of mind is both a prerequisite — for being a surrealist as such — and the obstacle to be temporarily overcome by psychic automatism, if only because of the ‘associations’ that such a normal mind ‘neglects.’ The surrealist poet, in contrast to the medical or mediumistic automatist, is therefore normal of mind – albeit not necessarily in the meaning of having an ordinary mind; after all, surrealist minds are *poetically primed*.

In his seminal and in Surrealism much appreciated study of the art of patients, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn (1886-1933) stressed that however similar on the surface contemporary artists’ desired mental alienation may be to the madman’s ‘innate primeval process of configuration,’ the first ‘involves *conscious and rational decisions*’ — and that, he emphasised, is something asylum patients clearly lack.⁸⁰ The assumption that volition and intention — in other words, *will* — distinguish the artist from the madman, with its subtext about insanity and creativity, was dominant throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the discourses of both art and medicine. Surrealism unmistakably conformed to it. *Their* thought was disinterested. *They* were not ‘mesmerised’ by the works they were making and getting lost in the process itself; they kept the end goal in mind.

Finally, note too the authors’ use of the term ‘reproducing.’ It is the surrealists’ volition and their normality of mind that allows them to possess the mind states of automatists for surrealist ends, and to discard them again afterwards. In line with the point about simulation, made earlier, the mental states temporarily re-produced by the authors for *The Immaculate Conception* (compare ‘re-create’ in case of the writing of *Fields*) are, apparently, genuine enough to yield unrestrained subliminal creativity.⁸¹ For the surrealists, temporary insanity or the simulation of mental illness functioned as a mind state fruitful to automatic

⁷⁹ On ‘male’ hysteria, see Micale, Mark S., *Hysterical Men: the Hidden History of Male Nervous Illness* (Cambridge [etc.]: Harvard University Press), 2008.

⁸⁰ Prinzhorn, Hans, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill: A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration* (Vienna: Springer, 1995), 271 (my emphasis).

⁸¹ Compare Chénieux’s point on pastiches, in ‘Towards a New Definition,’ 85-7.

writing, just as the state of almost-falling-asleep was to *The Magnetic Fields* and other automatic writing, hysteria was to bodily automatism, or the sessions of lucid dreaming to many surrealists and their dream-inspired works.

In conclusion: instrumentation and the misfortunes of psychic automatism

Although the *Manifesto*-definition may suggest automatism to be an end, it was throughout the first two decades of Surrealism predominantly employed as a means:

Psychic automatism ... has never constituted an end in itself for Surrealism, and to claim the contrary is to show bad faith. ... It was a question of foiling, foiling forever, the coalition of forces that seek to make the unconscious incapable of any sort of violent eruption... . The technical procedures that Surrealism has developed for that purpose could, of course, have value in its eyes only as a sounding-line... [W]e persist in maintaining that they are within the reach of everyone and that once they have been defined, anyone who cares to can trace on paper and elsewhere... [that which] has been called, by contrast to the *ego*, the *id*, meaning thereby all the psychic elements in which the ego (which is conscious by definition) is prolonged... I do know that art... cannot help but be eager to explore the immense and almost virgin territory of the *id* in all its directions.⁸²

Within dynamic psychiatry, automatism was both a method and a treatment. In Surrealism, psychic automatism was a poetic technique – or more properly, an overarching label designating several techniques, including automatic writing, automatic drawing, and dream narration. The surrealist, as we have seen, should be like a device and aim for the talentless objectivity and neutrality of an instrument. Such a judgement of the surrealist-as-device refers clearly to the graphical recording instruments that had been becoming increasingly more popular in science from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards; in particular in medical psychiatry, which was aiming to establish itself as a serious and empirical science by means of visual measuring machines. As medical students, Breton, Aragon, and others would have been quite familiar with such

⁸² Breton, *Manifestoes*, 231-2 ('Political Position of Today's Art,' Prague lecture of 1935).

devices. In the on-going effort in early Surrealism to stake out position as a scientifically informed endeavour making use of objective experimentation, such references to tracing machines and measuring devices would speak to the public's association of them with science, thereby bolstering Surrealism's experimental image as well as its bold claim to investigate the unconscious.⁸³

Yet before graphical devices were connected to humans to measure seizures, pulses, etc., there had already been machines in human form that could write or draw: the automata. First widely popular during the Enlightenment, interest in such automata was rekindled in the nineteenth century, and again around the *fin-de-siècle*, what with the prominence of automatism and hypnosis in medical practice. Among the surrealist group there was considerable interest in such mechanical automata too, evinced for instance in an article by Benjamin Péret on automata in surrealist journal *Minotaure* 3-4 (1933). It was liberally illustrated with images from the monumental *Le Monde des automates* by Edouard Gélis and Alfred Chapuis, which had been published a few years earlier (1928).⁸⁴ It is certainly no coincidence that this essay appears in the same issue as Breton's 'The Automatic Message,' making that entire issue of *Minotaure* a commentary upon the successes and failures of many forms of automatism.

In significant contrast to the mechanical automaton, and automatists such as patients or mediums, firstly, the surrealist is his *own* device. In his writing, drawing, or speaking he employed neither actual technical apparatus (like a *planchette*), nor an instrumentalised human (a medium or patient) as Flournoy and others did. Just as important, moreover, is that surrealist automatism is a creative expression in itself instead of an *indication* of one. Despite Breton's use of the phrase 'tracing' and the resonances of tracing and charting that recording devices carry, it is not the case that surrealist automatic text traces a surrealist's unconscious. A graphical machine is more than a tool; both in its own activity and its results, like pages of lines, it functions metaphorically, as it makes visible what cannot normally be discerned and what is moreover essentially not visible. More than just a visibility machine, it is a translation device — translating pulses, muscle contractions, fluctuations of energy, movements of the earth, etc., all things not perceptible with normal human senses, into a visual form that can be perceived and read. Even one's repressed desires and dreams require the interpretation and thereby diagnostic *translation* of a Freudian psychoanalyst. Not so in Surrealism. The lines of an automatic drawing by Masson do not function as

⁸³ Lomas, David, 'Becoming Machine: Surrealist Automatism and Some Contemporary Instances', *Tate Papers* 18, published [online](#) 8-11-2012 (accessed 9-12-2014). As well, Lomas, David, 'Modest Recording Instruments': Science, Surrealism and Visuality,' *Art History* 27, 4: 627-650.

⁸⁴ Péret, Benjamin, 'Au Paradis des Fantômes,' *Minotaure* 3-4 (1933): 29-35.

analogies of the (invisible) activity of his unconscious. His unconscious is not traced; on the contrary, I argue, his unconscious *traces*. The drawing functions as an actual creative product as such, rather than as a visual metaphor for something else. For all the emphasis upon the techniques of psychic automatism in Surrealism, it is about the product as generated by the process. The surrealists are not mesmerised by what they are writing or drawing, as we have seen. The communication is understood to be direct, unmediated (as near as possible), and real. It is that which it is – a creative expression. There is no need for interpretation or analysis. Psychic automatism does not need to be translated. Rather than a metaphor, an analogy of the unconscious, rather than a *simile*, it is a *fact*. Thus the dream is manifested directly and in all its omnipotence. Thus are previously neglected associations reshaped anew in all their superior reality. Thus is the marvelousness of thought displayed in all its talentless disinterest.

Surrealist psychic automatism hardly ended in misfortune, despite Breton's dramatic lamentation. Rather, it was immensely successful. Yet the automation of the surrealist poet, his becoming a device, courted misfortune — among which, not least, the violence erupting near the end of the time of slumbers, or the psychic problems that arose from long-term practicing of forms of automatism. In a series of interviews given late in life, Breton spoke about issues of 'mental hygiene' that prompted him not only to end the sleeping sessions (i.e., the mental hygiene of others), but also that of himself when it came to automatic writing. Being in the required slumber-state and writing automatically for long periods of time ('my immoderate use') led to 'a worrisome tendency towards hallucinations.'⁸⁵ Hallucinations, too, are among the list of passive sensory automatism delineated by Myers, and apparently Breton was averse enough to them to limit his own experiments with automatic writing. Probably, I think, we find here an indication of the rationale behind the surrealist turn towards increasingly more active forms of automatism, including on the one hand active and temporary possession of mind states by poets, and on the other, visual techniques such as *frottage*, *grattage*, and decalcomania.

Automatism never truly failed or disappeared in Surrealism. Ernst continued to use *frottage* and similar techniques; Masson kept on drawing automatically in addition to experimenting with other associative techniques; Péret and Breton continued to write automatically. Near the end of his life Breton published *Le La*, composed in the 1950s. It consists of a few enigmatic sentences of automatic writing, generated during evenings of near-slumber — fittingly enough connecting this work composed near the end of his life to *The Magnetic*

⁸⁵ Breton, *Conversations*, 69.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Aragon, Louis. 'A Wave of Dreams.' De Muth, Susan (trans.). [*Papers of Surrealism 1*](#) (2010; original translation 2003; accessed 10 June, 2014)

Aragon, Louis, and André Breton. 'The Fiftieth Anniversary of Hysteria.' Breton, André. *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*. Rosemont, Franklin (ed.). London: Pluto Press, 1978: 320-321.

Breton, André. 'The Automatic Message.' Melville, Anthony (trans.). Breton, André, Paul Éluard, and Philippe Soupault. *The Automatic Message - The Magnetic Fields - The Immaculate Conception*. Gascoyne, David, and Anthony Melville (eds.). Idem, and Jon Graham (trans.). London: Atlas, 1997: 11-36.

Breton, André. *The Lost Steps*. Polizzotti, Mark (ed.). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

Breton, André. *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*. Polizzotti, Mark (ed. & trans.). New York: Marlowe & Company, 1993.

Breton, André. *Communicating Vessels*. Caws, Mary Ann (ed.). Idem, and Geoffrey T. Harris (trans.). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.

Breton, André. *Œuvres complètes I*. Bonnet, Marguerite, Philippe Bernier, et al. (eds.) Paris: Gallimard, 1988.

Breton, André. *Manifestoes*. Seaver, Richard and Helen R. Lane (trans.). USA: University of Michigan Press, 1972 (1969).

Breton, André. *Trajectoire du rêve*. Paris: G.L.M., 1938.

Breton, André, and Paul Éluard. 'The Immaculate Conception.' Graham, Jon (trans.). Melville, Anthony (intr.). Breton, André, Paul Éluard, and Philippe Soupault. *The Automatic Message - The Magnetic Fields - The Immaculate Conception*. Gascoyne, David, and Anthony Melville (eds.). Idem, and Jon Graham (trans.). London: Atlas, 1997: 147-221.

Breton, André, and Philippe Soupault. 'The Magnetic Fields.' Gascoyne, David (trans. & intr.). Breton, André, Paul Éluard, and Philippe Soupault. *The Automatic Message - The Magnetic Fields - The Immaculate Conception*. Gascoyne, David and Anthony Melville (eds.). Idem, and Jon Graham (trans.). London: Atlas, 1997: 37-145.

Naville, Pierre. 'Beaux-Arts'. *La Révolution Surréaliste* 3 (April 1925): 27.

Péret, Benjamin. *The Leg of Lamb: Its Life and Works*. Lowenthal, Marc (trans.). Cambridge: Wakefield Press, 2011.

Péret, Benjamin. 'Au Paradis des Fantômes.' *Minotaure* 3-4 (1933): 29-35.

Soupault, Philippe. *Vingt mille et un jours. Entretien avec Serge Faucherau*. Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1980.

Secondary sources

Ades, Dawn. 'Between Dada and Surrealism: Painting in the Mouvement Flou.' Neff, Terry Ann R. (ed.). *In the Mind's Eye: Dada and Surrealism*. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986: 23-41.

Bacopoulos-Viau, Alexandra. 'Automatism, Surrealism and the making of French psychopathy: the case of Pierre Janet.' *History of Psychiatry* 23, 3 (2012): 259-276.

Bauduin, Tessel M. *Surrealism and the Occult. Surrealism and Occultism in the Work and Movement of André Breton*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014.

Bauduin, Tessel M. *The Occultation of Surrealism: A Study of the Relationship between Bretonian Surrealism and Western Esotericism*. PhD dissertation, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2012 (available [online](#)).

Carr, Adrian N., and Lisa A. Zanetti. 'The Emergence of a Surrealist Movement and its Vital
'Estrangement-effect' in Organization Studies.' *Human Relations* 53, 7 (2000): 891-921.

Caws, Mary Ann. *Surrealism*. New York: Phaidon Press, 2004.

Chénieux-Gendron, Jacqueline. 'Towards a New Definition of Automatism: L'Immaculée Conception.' *Dada/Surrealism* 17 (1988): 74-90.

Chevrier, Alain. 'André Breton et les sources psychiatriques du surréalisme.' Béhar, Henri (ed.). *Mélusine XXVII: Le Surréalisme et la Science*. Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 2007: 53-76.

Conley, Katherine. *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life*. Lincoln [etc.]: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.

Crabtree, Adam. "'Automatism" and the emergence of dynamic psychiatry.' *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 39, 1 (2003): 51-70.

Crabtree, Adam. *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing*. New Haven [etc.]: Yale University Press, 1993.

Didi-Huberman, Georges, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Alisa Hartz. *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*. Cambridge [etc.]: The MIT Press, 2003.

Eburne, Jonathan P. *Surrealism and the Art of the Crime*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.

Ellenberger, Henri F. *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*. London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1970.

Gascoyne, David. 'Introduction.' Breton, André, Paul Éluard, and Philippe Soupault. *The Automatic Message - The Magnetic Fields - The Immaculate Conception*. Gascoyne, David and Anthony Melville (eds.). Idem, and Jon Graham (trans.). London: Atlas, 1997: 39-54.

Gee, Malcolm. 'Max Ernst, God, and the Revolution by Night.' *Arts Magazine* 55, 7 (1981): 85-91.

Haan, Joost, Peter J. Koehler and Julien Bugousslavsky. 'Neurology and Surrealism: André Breton and Joseph Babinski.' *Brain* 135 (2012): 3830-3838.

Hacking, Ian. 'Automatisme Ambulatoire: Fugue, Hysteria, and Gender at the Turn of the Century.' *Modernism/Modernity* 3, 2 (1996): 31-43.

Hulak, Fabienne (ed.). *Folie et Psychanalyse dans l'Expérience Surréaliste*. Nice: Z'éditions, 1992.

Hutchinson, Ben. *Modernism and Style*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Jean, Marcel (ed.). *The Autobiography of Surrealism*. New York: The Viking Press, 1980.

- Lachapelle, Sophie. *Investigating the Supernatural: From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychological Research and Metaphysics in France, 1853-1931*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011.
- Legge, Elizabeth. 'Zeuxis's Grapes, Novalis's Fossils, Freud's Flowers: Max Ernst's Natural History.' *Art History* 16, 1 (1993): 147-172.
- Lomas, David. 'Becoming Machine: Surrealist Automatism and Some Contemporary Instances.' *Tate Papers* 18, published [online](#) 8-11-2012 (accessed 9-12-2014).
- Lomas, David. "'Modest Recording Instruments': Science, Surrealism and Visuality.' *Art History* 27, 4: 627-650.
- Lowenthal, Marc. 'Translator's Introduction.' Péret, Benjamin. *The Leg of Lamb: Its Life and Works*. Lowenthal, Marc (trans.). Cambridge: Wakefield Press, 2011: ix-xxiv.
- Matthews, John Herbert. *The Surrealist Mind*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1991.
- Matthews, John Herbert. *Surrealism, Insanity, and Poetry*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982.
- Méheust, Bertrand. *Somnambulisme et médiumnité*. 2 vols. *I: Le défi du magnétisme*. *II: Le choc des sciences psychiques*. Le Plessis-Robinson: Institut Synthélabo pour le Progrès de la Connaissance, 1998, 1999.
- Melville, Anthony. 'Introduction to The Immaculate Conception.' Breton, André, Paul Éluard,
and Philippe Soupault. *The Automatic Message - The Magnetic Fields - The Immaculate Conception*. Gascoyne, David and Anthony Melville (eds.). Idem, and Jon Graham (trans.). London: Atlas, 1997: 150-157.

Micale, Mark S. *Hysterical Men: the Hidden History of Male Nervous Illness*. Cambridge [etc.]: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Micale, Mark S. 'The Modernist Mind: A Map.' Idem (ed.). *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004: 1-19.

Monroe, John W. *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in France*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2008.

Frederic William Henry. *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death, Part I*. New York: Longmans, Green &co, 1954.

Polizzotti, Mark. 'Preface: Steps Meandering and Guided.' Breton, André. *The Lost Steps*. Polizzotti, Mark (ed.). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996: xi-xxi.

Polizzotti, Mark. *Revolution of the Mind*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1995.

Prinzhorn, Hans. *Artistry of the Mentally Ill: A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*, Vienna: Springer, 1995.

Rabaté, Jean-Michel. 'Loving Freud Madly: Surrealism between Hysterical and Paranoid Modernism'. *Journal of Modern Literature* 25, 3/4 (2002): 58-74.

Röske, Thomas. 'Inspiration and Unreachable Paradigm: L'Art des Fous and Surrealism.' Beyme, Ingrid von, and Thomas Röske (eds.). *Surrealismus und Wahnsinn/Surrealism and Madness*. Heidelberg: Sammlung Prinzhorn, 2009: 10-18.

Roudinesco, Elisabeth. *Jacques Lacan & Co: A History of psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Shamdasani, Sonu. 'Encountering Hélène: Théodore Flournoy and the Genesis of Subliminal

Psychology.' Flournoy, Théodore. *From India to the Planet Mars: A Case of Multiple Personality with Imaginary Languages*. Shamdasani, Sonu (ed.). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994: xi-li.

Starobinski, Jean. 'Freud, Breton, Myers.' Idem. *L'Oeil Vivant II: La Relation Critique*. Paris:

Gallimard, 2001: 381-403.

Thévenin, Paule (ed.). *Bureau de recherches surréalistes: cahier de la permanence, octobre 1924-avril 1925*. Archives du surréalisme 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1988.

Warlick, M.E. *Max Ernst and Alchemy*. Austin: University of Texas, 2001.

Will-Levaillant, Françoise. 'L'analyse des dessins d'aliénés et de médiums en France avant le

Surréalisme.' *Revue de l'Art* 50 (1980): 24-39.

Images

1. 'Les attitudes passionelles', 1928. Aragon & Breton, 'Le Cinquantenaire de l'hystérie, 1878-1928', *La Révolution Surréaliste* 11 (1928): 20-2. Photographs originally from Bourneville & Regnard under de direction of Charcot, *Iconographie Photographique*, vol. II., 1877-1880.
2. *La femme est l'être...*, 1924. *La Révolution Surréaliste* 1 (1924): 17. Photomontage of photographs of various surrealists and others arranged around a portrait of Germaine Berton, 293 x 40 mm.
3. *La Révolution Surréaliste* 1 (1924), cover. Photographs originally by Man Ray. 293 x 205 mm.