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Joanna Pawlik

Remade in America: Surrealist Art, Activism, and Politics 1940–1978

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021. 296 pp.; 48 color ill.; 55 b/w ill. Cloth \$65.00 (9780520309043)

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“Qui suis-je?” André Breton asks at the opening of his anti-novel *Nadja* (1928): Who am I? And then, a line down, whom do I haunt? It is a well-known and by now overdetermined couple of lines, which nevertheless, as much as the entire novel itself, have had a considerable impact on generations of writers, poets, and artists around the world since its publication. One deeply impacted group is explored by Joanna Pawlik in the second chapter of her book on the reception of (chiefly French) Surrealism in the United States from the 1940s onward: Beat and San Francisco writers. In “Encountering Surrealism: *Nadja* (1928) and Autobiographical Beat Writing” Pawlik discusses the response of Ted Joans, Philip Lamantia, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Richard Howard, and others to Surrealism and especially the questions and premises of *Nadja*. Brief case studies of a selection of often autobiographical plays, poems, and prose that claim “an affinity with *Nadja*” (98) explore their authors’ positioning vis-à-vis Surrealism and how the latter can be made available to non-Caucasian, queer, and other less mainstream identities.

The chapter in many ways exemplifies both what Pawlik’s book is about—the lesser known, because non-institutional, reception of interwar Bretonian Surrealism in the thought and work of American artists and writers well into the 1970s—and the relevance of this study. It illustrates, by discussing the creative results of that reception, the continuing relevance and vivacity of Surrealism in the US in the face of a general tenor that the movement was well over and done with. Furthermore, this chapter, in particular, also makes clear that a certain Eurocentric, heteronormative, masculinist, white male quality to French Surrealism, ascribed to if not arguably also inherent to it, did not predetermine American Surrealism. Surrealism’s own essential dedication to subversion and heterodoxy allows also for a subverting of itself. In addition, the marginalization of Surrealism in the US, or its “minoritarian status” (11) as Pawlik calls it, allowed for marginalized communities and individuals to identify with Surrealist thought, methods, and work.

Pawlik’s central and novel insight is that the reception and subsequent *remaking* of Surrealism along queer and non-white lines, among other marginalized identities, is predicated upon the perception of its minoritarianism. Also key is the view that Surrealism was alive and well after 1940, indeed that it flourished in several locations around the globe, and that these iterations (not mere afterlives) of the movement deserve careful, situated, and context-sensitive consideration on their own creative merits. Recent studies and exhibitions, including *Surrealism Beyond Borders* (at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and Tate Modern, London, 2021–22), have shown the urgency and validity of this approach. Pawlik’s study is part of this trend.

The first chapter, “Re-Viewing Surrealism: Charles Henri Ford’s *Poem Posters* (1964–65),” starts out with Ford’s periodical *View*. While scholars conventionally acknowledged the importance of *View* for the reception and dissemination of Surrealism in the US in the 1940s, Pawlik shows that its impact extended well into subsequent decades. This is followed by an inspired analysis of Ford’s queer Pop Art-inspired collages from the 1960s that dialogue intensely with (both historical and anachronistic) Surrealism and introduce strong queer overtones. Beat writing is explored in chapter two, as discussed, including Joans’s, who is the main focus of chapter three, “Blackening Surrealism: Ted Joans’s *Ethnographic Surrealist Historiography*.” Pawlik analyzes several works, most prominently his collage novel *The Hipsters* (1961), teasing out references to the Black Power and Black Arts movements as well as Joans’s use of ethnographic modes to question conceptions of ethnicity, also within and in response to (continental) Surrealism.

Chapter four picks up the thread of non-heteronormativity, adding the politics of psychic (and psychedelic) dissidence. “Turning on Surrealism: Queer Psychedelia” discusses the reception of Surrealism in American counterculture of the 1960s. Pawlik analyzes, chiefly, paintings by Marie Wilson and Brion Gysin’s *Dream Machine* art practice, exploring the contingency and context-specificity of automatism in not only the making but also the reception of those works. Culture politics, in particular the politics of class, are continued and expanded in “Hysericizing Surrealism: The Marvelous in Popular Culture.” This final chapter takes the reader well into the 1970s, with a discussion of the Chicago Surrealist Group and analysis of several of their productions, including exhibition installations and catalogs. To summarize, if *Who am I?* was rephrased as *Who are you?*, these distinct but clearly overlapping instances of “postwar North American Surrealist activity” (2) provide five different answers, each teasing out specificity of medium, cultural context, and individual and/or group.

It is refreshing to read more in depth about Surrealist activity outside of New York in the 1940s, namely in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and the Midwest. The ease with which Pawlik moves from visual and textual analysis of word and image collages to literature to poetry to psychedelic art to installation, and from queer theory to race and class politics to feminist interventions, among others, is notable. She covers a lot of terrain, both in terms of media and discipline and in terms of theoretical framing. It does not make for easy reading, but overall Pawlik manages it well and often succeeds impressively in operationalizing the right frame for a particular work of art to expose its distinctive dialogue with or interpretation of Surrealism. Pawlik's approach also does right by the capacity of Surrealism to encompass and activate a wide array of both media and ideologies, which is one of its defining features across time and space.

What Pawlik does not manage is to escape the shadow—or, indeed, the *haunting*—of André Breton in particular and French interwar Surrealism generally, which still loom very large in Surrealist scholarship. Connections with the Paris group, before and after World War II, are frequently noted. Citations of Breton bookend the study, and in each chapter instances of one or more of the chapter's protagonists' meeting with the great man himself, usually in Paris during a visit, are detailed. This is unfortunate, as it somewhat undermines Pawlik's inspiring assertion (7) that the removal of Breton's approval "as guarantor . . . of transnational Surrealist practices" could be "generative of new possibilities for Surrealism," as indeed she shows, especially in chapters one, three, and four. If Surrealism studies is to move beyond its own narrow hegemonic focus on white heteronormative masculinist Paris-centered expressions of Surrealism—an objective to which Pawlik contributes admirably with this book—the reading of, preferably even meeting in person with, Breton should certainly not be the sine qua non for Surrealist practice in other places and times. The "pragmatic" rather than "absolutist" (7) application of Surrealist ideas, texts, politics, and aesthetics is undeniably one of the major characteristics of postwar American Surrealism. Indeed, I think by highlighting the creative fruitfulness of this pragmatic approach, and in underlining the flexibility of both Surrealism and Surrealists around the world, Pawlik provides a key to study other iterations and remakings of Surrealism and Surrealist practice, both elsewhere and at other moments. High time to banish (the ghost of) Breton.

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