

## CRITICAL THEORY

### Overview

Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse are the key figures of Critical Theory in dialogue with surrealism. For Benjamin, his serious engagement with it is made public in his writings from the 1920s until his death in 1940, whilst with Herbert Marcuse it is first evidenced with the publication of *Eros and Civilization* in 1955 until his death in 1979; it is most concentrated in *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978). For both figures, surrealism played a vital role and offered a model of thought. Until the 1960s, none of the major surrealists around André Breton knew any of the original figures of Critical Theory and did not read their works, which, in any case, were not then available in French. Benjamin did get to know Georges Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, Pierre Missac, and their circle, but this was not until the mid-1930s. It was not this aspect of surrealism's broader culture that had caused Benjamin to experience the shock of recognition which the encounter with surrealism had caused him, as famously described in a letter to Theodor Adorno: "There stands Aragon at the very beginning—*Le Paysan de Paris*, of which I could never read more than two or three pages in bed at night before my heart started to beat so strongly that I had to lay the book aside" (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999: 88). Adorno himself only wrote one extremely slight essay (of negligible value) on surrealism in 1956, but his correspondence with Benjamin in the mid-1930s on the developing *Passagen-Werk* is richly significant for Adorno's critique of Benjamin and for his overdetermined refusal of the surrealist derivation of Benjamin's methodology and comprehension and inflection of historical materialism. From Benjamin to Elisabeth Lenk, his doctoral student of the 1960s, Adorno's thinking at key moments wrestled with surrealism, often deflecting and distorting its ideas, subjecting them to creative distortion. By the 1960s Lenk was living in Paris where she was writing a doctoral dissertation on Breton and through José Pierre would be introduced to Breton and become a member of the group, publishing important articles on Martin Heidegger's Nazism in the surrealist journal *La Brèche*. Marcuse's compelling correspondence with the Chicago surrealists in the 1970s would first appear in a French translation accompanied by extensive response from the surrealists in the *Bulletin de liaison surréaliste* (no. 6, April 1973 and no. 7, December

1973), the journal of the post-dissolution French surrealist group around Vincent Bounoure, whilst the original English-language version of this correspondence would eventually appear prefaced with an insightful essay by Franklin Rosemont in *Arsenal*, the journal of the International Surrealist Movement, in 1989. In this correspondence surrealism exemplifies a confrontation with things and actions "without their exchange value" (Marcuse, 1989: 40). Marcuse's relationship to surrealism and his dialogue with the Chicago surrealists merit a study of its own, but in none of his letters (to the Chicago surrealists) or in his many scattered reflections on surrealism does Marcuse's thought raise any epistemological or methodological insights into the nature or practice of surrealism. Indeed, Franklin Rosemont quite rightly draws attention to the narrowness of Marcuse's reading in surrealism (see Rosemont, 1989: 35). Marcuse approached it for its exemplary validity—a term from Hannah Arendt in her reading of the theory of judgment derived from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Exemplary validity is the individual (artistic) act that is grasped in action and of which, like a work of art, one speaks as if a general principle were derivable from it (see Arendt, 1989: 84). For Marcuse, surrealism allows him to say: Here is what (Left) art and politics is like and could be; Here is an example of what it means to say that imagination challenges the status quo, etc. It is also fair to say that Marcuse, who wrote his thesis on the German Artist Novel (see Kellner, 1984: 13–37), saw in surrealism the modern version of an essentially Romantic, that is, Schillerian, conception of art and the artist.

### Shared paths of derivation

In order to grasp the philosophical dimension of surrealist practice one must see that both Critical Theory and surrealism share common paths of derivation beginning with German Früromantik and French Symbolism—both of which saw art and poetry as a new theoretical practice—the work of Hegel, Marx, the metapsychology of Sigmund Freud, the post-Symbolist modernism of Cubism and Dada and other avant-garde formations, leading to a reflexive concern with the avant-garde as a philosophical phenomenon. As such, both Critical Theory and surrealism are part of larger movements of anti-foundationalism in modern thought, whereby a genre of thought turns upon itself, as manifested in the many claims to be beyond painting, non-music, anti-art,

anti-metaphysics, beyond philosophy. The title of the proto-surrealist journal *Littérature* (1921–4) was suggested, Breton said, by Paul Valéry, by anti-phrase echoing Verlaine's verse "Et tout le reste est littérature." Maurice Blanchot will provide a telling formulation of this mode of thought when speaking of the practice of literature "as its own negation" (Blanchot, 1995: 301). It is thus not an accident that when the surrealists declare "Our allegiance to the principle of historical materialism" (Breton, 1969b: 142) it should also be in the same text, the *Second Manifeste du surréalisme* (1929/30), that Breton declares that as surrealists "We very much intend also to place ourselves in a starting position such that for us philosophy will be *outclassed*" (Breton, 1969: 142), for it is with the emergence of a clear conception of *historical* materialism that Marx comprehends the exit from philosophy, whence in the text by Friedrich Engels—containing "Thèses de Marx sur Feuerbach"—known to Breton in French translation as *Ludwig Feuerbach et la fin de la philosophie classique allemande* (1930), *la fin* (the end) is a translation of the German *Ausgang* (exit), the exit from philosophy, indeed, the *abolition* of philosophy. For the surrealists, the act of going beyond philosophy is a performance that parallels leaving art, that *lamentable expedient* as Breton put it in addressing Picasso in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* (1928). Critical Theory and surrealism are both post-philosophical practices and as such necessarily preoccupied with the status of the philosophical (and concomitantly the political), but no other movement in the art / anti-art mode was as self-consciously saturated with philosophical intelligence as surrealism and for this alone it would have been deeply attractive to the practitioners of Critical Theory.

## Happiness / Revenge

It can be startling for a reader to see the extent to which all the major theorists of Critical Theory are preoccupied with happiness (*Glück*) or the desire for happiness (*Glücksverlangen*), without ever developing a theory of happiness, a theory of the good life or intrinsic value. In *Vases communicants* Breton speaks of a "desire to have done with a world where what is most valuable in it daily becomes more and more incapable of giving its worth [sa mesure]" (Breton, 1990: 122, translation modified); a statement from Max Horkheimer's programmatic essay "Materialism and Metaphysics" (1933) also discloses this disposition: "When the desire for happiness [*Glücksverlangen*], which life from beginning to

end proves illusory, was put aside and hope alone was left, the alteration of those conditions which cause unhappiness could become the goal of materialist thought" (Horkheimer, 1972: 24). Here, materialist thought is Critical Theory understood as a practice of liberation. This emphasis on happiness (*bonheur*) is not to be found in the French surrealists—it isn't absent, but isn't given the status of conceptual work—instead one finds, beginning with the *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924), a practice of attack upon the concept of social *reality*, a revenge (*revanche*) upon or juridical *trial* of reality. surrealism is a "trial of the real world" (Breton, 1969: 47), and in the work of the schizophrenic artist Wölfl, for example, the imaginary is seen as "the means by which he exacts the most stunning *revenge* on reality," and as with historical materialism it is part of the procedures of surrealism "to undertake a *trial* of the concepts of reality and unreality, reason and unreason" (for both surrealism and historical materialism share their paths of derivation from the Hegelian system) (Breton, 1969: 140). The examples can be multiplied but it is clear that the purpose of this revenge or putting on trial is "the alteration of those conditions which cause unhappiness," whence for Breton the assertion of the value of Life itself:

Let it be life rather than these prisms lacking density  
even if the colors are more pure / . . .

Let it be life let it be this rosette on my tombstone  
The life of presence nothing but presence

leading to the identification of Life ("Such is the belief in life," opens the *Manifeste du surréalisme*), imagination ("Imagination is perhaps on the point of retaking its *rights*" (Breton, 1969: 10, translation modified; my emphasis). The sustained use of juridical figures in Breton's language has not found the study it deserves), and Childhood: "Let it be life let it be life venerable Childhood" (Breton, 1988: 176).

## Epistemology: Benjamin, surrealism, Image

Ernst Bloch (1991: 334) recognized *One-way Street* ("a model for a surrealist way of thinking") as the key document in Benjamin's surrealizing practice. If *One-way Street* is the performance—the *revue* form—of philosophy's encounter with surrealism then Convoluted N of the *Passagen-Werk* "Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress" is the working laboratory where surreal-



ism's *terms* enter Benjamin's thinking of *image* and the *experience of thought / experience of truth*, the discursive articulation of which is to be found in Part I of "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" (1937) and the new style of post-surrealist writing embodied in "On the Concept of History" (1940). The account of historical materialism in *Convolute N* is dominated by the role of the image and the forms of temporality—for truth is temporal, linked to a kernel found in both that which is known and that which knows [N3, 2]—as movement *and* thought dialectically conceived. Thus just as history as conceived by the materialist is not homogeneous, linear, or continuous in its movement neither is thought; both are marked by multiplicity, anachrony, interruption, and immobilization (stoppage, freezing, saccadic intervals). Not the past and the present conceived chronologically in terms of traditional historiography, but the bygone with the now is the dialectical relation as image wherein "the bygone encounters the now in a spark in order to form a constellation. In other terms, the image is the dialectic at standstill." [N2a, 3] The cessation of movement will also be seen to be characteristic of thought: "The immobilization of thoughts is as much a part of thinking as their movement. It is when thought becomes immobilized in a constellation saturated with tensions that there appears the dialectical image. It is the caesura in the movement of thought" [N10a, 3] (Thesis XVII in "On the Concept of History" takes up this same passage of *Convolute N* in its critique of homogeneous empty time). This language of multiplicity, anachrony, image, movement, and arrest of movement, the spark (*l'éclair*, also lightning), and the experience of thought is the cornerstone of surrealist experience (*la vérité surréaliste*) (see Breton, 1969b: 29). Breton made his own Pierre Reverdy's definition of the image (as something more than a rhetorical figure) where "the rapprochement of two realities more or less distant" occurs on a common plane (Breton, 1969: 20). The apperception of this approaching new (collage) reality is marked by a "luminous phenomenon" whose surrealist atmosphere is akin to that of a spark (*étincelle*) set off in *rarified gases* producing images which augment the mind's knowledge that Breton figures through paroxysms of light-dark imagery of such intensity that in comparison day would appear night (see Breton, 1969: 37–8). This is the drunkenness won for the revolution by surrealism of which Benjamin famously spoke in his surrealism essay of 1929. The places (*lieux*) of these unlimited expanses accessed through the

(surrealist) image, which in a later formulation Breton will characterize as *logical* expanses (Breton, 1969: 158) where the logical faculty (reasoning) does not operate, are the places of thought where the human being ceases to belong to itself and instead *belongs to us* (Breton, 1969: 162) in a temporality which mobilizes "at every *instant* all the personal past, all the present of the individual" in order to maintain and sustain the desire to have done with this world "where what is most valuable in it daily becomes more and more incapable of giving its worth [sa mesure]" (Breton, 1990: 122, translation modified). Beauty, the sensuous mark of attraction to what in this world gives freely its worth, will track with the multiple temporalities and complex movements and forces of image and thought: "In no way static . . . , scarcely less dynamic . . . : neither dynamic nor static [beauty] is like a train which endlessly leaps in the Lyon train station, a train which I know is not going to leave, which I know has not left. Beauty is made of saccadic movements many of which scarcely have any importance, but which we know are destined to lead to one *saccade*, one glimpse, that does. . . . Beauty, neither dynamic nor static . . . Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be" (Breton, 1960, translation modified) The caesura in movement, in thought: this is the poetics of historical materialism common to Benjamin, Critical Theory, and the surrealist comportment, *a practice bearing its own knowledge*.

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### Further Reading

- Adorno, Theodore W. (2015) "Surrealism Reconsidered," in *The Challenge of Surrealism: The Correspondence of Theodor W. Adorno and Elisabeth Lenk*, edited by Susan H. Gillespie. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Benjamin, Walter (2015) "Surrealism: Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *The Challenge of Surrealism: The Correspondence of Theodore W. Adorno and Elisabeth Lenk*, edited by Susan H. Gillespie. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lenk, Elisabeth (2015a) "Critical Theory and Surreal Practice," in *The Challenge of Surrealism: The Correspondence of Theodore W. Adorno and Elisabeth Lenk*, edited by Susan H. Gillespie. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lenk, Elisabeth (2015b) "The Hidden Being," in *The Surrealism Reader: and anthology of ideas*, edited by Dawn Ades and Michael Richardson. London: Tate Publications.
- Rosemont, Franklin (1989) "Herbert Marcuse and the Surrealist Revolution," *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion*, 4. Chicago: Black Swan Press.