

Answer to a surrealist inquiry – 2017-01-25

I am afraid that the following might lead to a few enmities. It does not matter, I have - like many others - a certain habit of it¹. And I also know that it will strengthen some more silent friendships as I have often enough perceived here and there.

But what is of course much more important to me here is to contribute to the health of a movement in which it is not within my reach to cease to belong – as each one of us intimately knows as much as I do, just as it would not be within the reach of anyone to drive me out of it.

Having said this, I have no illusions and no hope. I simply and rather desperately do what I think must be done. That's all.

I do not therefore intend either to provoke or even to respond to any "new" polemic, knowing enough how much the arguments used will have neither the advantage of freshness nor the flavor of the novelty.

Beyond the duty of criticizing² that has been the responsibility of men since the dawn of the species, I shall obviously answer only what will show some concern for the implementation of the proposals I have made or others that may be similar.

Pierre Petiot – ppetiot2@free.fr

How would you situate yourself in relation to the history of surrealism?

The history of surrealism – or more precisely the *content* of the surrealist corpus -- "historical" or not – taken as a whole, can and must be a source of inspiration for experimentation and thought. Moreover, this corpus keeps our hearts warm in times of indifference or, more exactly, of despair that assail us – or should. That is a fact.

But it is also true that in the recent "movement"³, the history of surrealism is often a kind of derivative, if not an escape, from experimental activities, that in the course of 20 years of common activity I felt the most often – as well as many others -- as weak, repetitive⁴ and the adventurous content of which was too often virtually non-existent. In short, if surrealism feeds on almost anything, it seems to me that it somewhat abuses of a kind of drug that, from the abysses of my absence of culture, I perceive as not very far from History of Art.

On the other hand, the theoretical activity of the movement seems to me to be equally reduced, repetitive - I dare not say non-existent here, but I think so - as its experimental, and even more simply sensual and perceptive activities. It is obviously

1 . "The fact that you are paranoid does not mean they are not after you" :-D

2 . *Criticism, according to Nietzsche, is the service one owes to friends.*

3 . Which is largely -- as we all know very well, an *absence* of movement. A general observation made during the 1999 exhibition in Prague, of which this survey provides additional evidence.

4 . or even obsessive

not too surprising that the emptiness of experimentation and perception may lead to the emptiness of thought and vice versa.

As everyone can find out from the sad list given on page 252 of the book **Surrealism** by René Passeron⁵, the exhibition *L'Écart Absolu* was at a minimum the symptom, but in my opinion the evidence, of the collapse of almost any form of *autonomous* surrealist thought and hence the root of the notable subsequent abdications.

Let us judge of it: " heavy texts by Breton, J-F. Revel (against the media), Audoin (against technocracy), Legrand (against the interplanetary adventure), Raymond Borde (against galloping demography), Robert Benayoun (against automation) Audoin (Against and for the sacred) , Jean Schuster (against advertising), José Pierre ("Changing the Woman"), Robert Lagarde (against sport⁶), Georges Sebbag (against cretinising jobs⁷) ... All these against are neither very merry nor very innovative and even less specific to surrealism. And the impression given by this exhibition, that came back to the traditional presentation of art galleries, was that surrealism suffered from a gap, if not absolute, let us say historical with itself ”.

As a teenager during this period, and while I still had the naivety and folly of reading the press⁸, I still find it hard to imagine how a more complete potpourri could have been drawn out of the journalistic clichés of the time. Surrealism, in short, was supplying itself in terms of new ideas from the shelves of the Spectacle. If such a list has actually become prophetic, it is because the absence of originality, analysis, thought and of any sense of overcoming that it shows unfortunately have largely remained the hallmark of the movement through after⁹. At this moment was first stated what has since remained essentially the *ideology*¹⁰.of the movement.

Surrealism, which had opened so many exciting and new paths, now contented itself with "being against". Against ... What a good deal! As if declaring yourself "against" had ever sufficed to carry out victoriously any fight whatsoever. It seemed, then, that it was enough to show off with a posture of haughty contempt for almost everything, in order to be freed from the effort which has always been required to oppose anything¹¹.

This very *economic* attitude is still in many cases ours. It still exhales this delicate smell of corpses. And it must be said that just like the American army during the same period, surrealism has won no fight since this sinister exhibition, with this

5 . Éditions Terrail Edigroup - september 2005

6 . What an incredible vision, what an effrontery!

7 . In spite of the helpful intervention of Monsieur de La Palisse in this valiant operation of breaking wide open doors, we are still looking for some public promoters of "cretinizing jobs" even among the neo-cons,

8 . where if I remember well Jean-François Revel was earning his living.

9 . a kind of sickness to which the Situationists temporarily provided some kind of remedy

10 . Whereas surrealism of the time saw a "consumer society" the "denunciation" of which was then very fashionable, Hannah Arendt saw much more rightly a "society of work".

11 . "In the work of the negative, they hate the negative and also the work"

nuance however that unlike the very notable creativity of the US military in matters of wars, surrealism hardly bothered to lead any sort of fight at all.

What makes surrealism relevant to the world in which we live now?

The most striking characteristic of the current period is precisely that of *the absence of surrealism*. For how could those who claim to believe in the power of the imagination, attribute the present state of the world to anything else than *the weakness of their power of enunciation*? What could such people complain of? Yes, *complain*, as we do not cease to do, instead of *imputing to ourselves the responsibility of the present misfortunes* as it should be if we still took the words that we mechanically continue to utter somewhat seriously?

For a large part of the 20th century Surrealism constituted – and I would even dare say has constituted for a long time before – the ridge, the Ariadne's thread and the knife blade of a movement of human emancipation which then did not behave like nuts. The historical absence of surrealism, that is to say, the frightful lack of imagination that the period henceforth throws back into our own faces is *the cause and not the consequence* of the present historical collapse of any effort towards human emancipation. To the little extent that men make their own history, they always and only do so *by means of the spirit*, this very spirit, and this very history of which we have so evidently absented ourselves.

Nobody seems to grieve beyond measure – among other examples – of the fact that religious ideologies – the ugly heirs of Abraham¹², certainly, but not only – and fascists ideologies are spreading faster than surrealist ideas and practices¹³. And above all no one undertakes – neither openly nor even under any mask - against this huge wave of which our lack of vigilance is so clearly the cause...

Everything in our time bears testimony, not of our failure – because in order to *deserve* to fail we should at least have tried – but of how we have not set ourselves in the proper state to fight *with our own weapons* the war which is currently in progress, where, on the contrary, we have given ourselves all the means of disappearing without even striking a single blow.

This absence, this absolute distance where we are from ourselves, will kill us. Will kill us as well as the rest of what we love. And this is certainly not to be understood in a figurative sense.

12 . This ancestor of the Salafists, this man who proposes to murder his son because the voice of a God orders him to do so

13 . Yet it seemed to me that this was supposed to be a surrealist revolution. In other words, "those bacchanals of truth where no one remains sober".

Is the idea of a surrealist *group* still viable?

In a recent period, "surrealist group" practices have most often provided the occasion for not very exciting personal conflicts (yet in the absence of any new thinking, one has to spend time one way or another), but they also provided the foundation for the refusal – or even exclusion – of all forms of ideas and practices that seemed or were somewhat innovative. However above all, in its classical form, the concept of a "group" - may it be surrealist or not – has become obsolete - and quite probably harmful - for now more than 20 years and this for several reasons.

On the one hand, because the www irremediably allows anyone to publish what he has to say – assuming that he has anything to say, which has become a rare thing and not only in Surrealism. The fact that what is said or written may ordinarily be without any consequences is by no means a peculiar feature of the www, and the long litany of surrealist "declarations" that were published on true and real paper has been equally exempt from the slightest practical and intellectual consequence, just like what was expressed more freely on the www.

What has definitely changed is that the appropriation of the means of production by the individuals and groups "leaders" of the "movement" has simply become impracticable. Despite the desperate attempts by some "groups" to defend their *hereditary* privileges of awarding labels of surrealist quality and legitimacy, the result was a fairly good global dispersion of the real movement, as Alain Joubert rightly noted. This has not led to a smaller quantity or even weaker of quality of the associated results if one is to compare them honestly¹⁴ with the results of the activity of the "groups".

Another reason for the collapse of the groups resides – with a few exceptions – in their now notable historical sterility. Again, this is by no means a peculiarity of surrealism, but of a much more general order.

Simply, a group in the sense that the word had in surrealism is *automatically* founded by its own activity -- practical, theoretical and experimental (by theoretical I mean the production of new ideas adequate to the action in the historical period).

There can not be a group - surrealist or not - where nothing happens¹⁵, where little is *produced*, and where for these reasons there *cannot be* any common action.

Nothing may be declarative in such a matter, the spirit has never blown elsewhere than where and when it wanted and it does not lie within the reach of whatsoever group to decide about its own *real* existence, which is never proven elsewhere than in its actions and by the historical efficiency of its activities.

14 . Which is not very probable as long as the "official" group judges are judges as well as parties

15 . « Je cherche l'or du temps » [Breton]. « Ingénieur du temps perdu » [Duchamp] . « Notre patrie est dans le temps » [Les Situationnistes]

To this must be added a noticeable shrinking of our playgrounds, which, gradually have come to look like a Peau-de-Chagrin. Yet they used to include, for instance and rightly, some interests of the ethnographic type, which have disappeared from the spectrum, whereas for a moment they constituted an exciting and productive domain (see Leiris, Péret, Breton, Jean Benoît, etc.).

How can it be that what once had the purpose of *reforming the human understanding* may now have exempted itself of the requirement to *understand* the minds of other men, may they be distant or marginalized, but certainly not less "definitive dreamers" than we are? Did the journeys suddenly become more difficult than in the 1930s, have the tracks turned muddy, or thicker the jungles? And even so! Who among us had the mere curiosity of walking the paths of a shantytown?

Or would it not rather be that the surrealists who travel now show a certain absence of mind – a quasi-tourist absence of mind – of which our predecessors do not seem to have been as deeply afflicted?

The same applies to the sciences of the mind - on which Surrealism originally used to feed - an area where deep (r)evolutions have taken place without any work - even superficial - to have been undertaken on our side on this subject. Given the magnitude of the task, the number of books to read, the numbers of theories to study, one might have thought that a group effort - quite precisely - would not be excessive. But quite often the effort of the groups consisted, on the contrary, in avoiding undertaking the study of such a sulfurous domain.

On the contrary, esotericism, which in essence - like psychoanalysis, moreover - can hardly be anything other than the transmission of a non-evolving knowledge, of an ahistorical and a de facto anti-historical knowledge, continues to be the object of a sustained attention - or of its Spectacle.

And is it not blind enough too to persevere in an attitude of "occultation" of surrealism - which certainly had its justification in the historical moment when it was pronounced, but that the means implemented by the Spectacle grant us anyway in the strictest rigor, and this without the slightest effort required on our part¹⁶ .

Similarly, no joint effort has been made to investigate what has been established over the past 40 years in the life sciences. Deeply unfaithful to the thought of Sade, standard surrealism intends to speak about Life and to celebrate it without having cared the least for the trouble to understand what Life actually is. "The Republic does not need scientists."

While Marx had recognized the springs of human history in the evolution of the productive forces¹⁷ , of which he had had no difficulty in establishing their scientific

16 A representative of Pataphysics recently noted that the College of Pataphysics is not a secret society, but a discreet society.

17 .No one outside the religious has so far questioned the centrality of science and technology as being the core engine of history as it was highlighted by Marx

and technical roots, standard surrealism now professes to despise them with the height of view authorized by its remarkable and highly voluntarist ignorance in such matters. Here again a collective effort would not have been superfluous¹⁸.

Is it necessary to point out that technical knowledge being what makes it possible *to do* - and hence for sure to do everything as well as just anything, to cultivate contempt regarding technical knowledge, as we have been doing for so long, obviously means to deprive ourselves of all possibilities of action in the real world¹⁹. Is it necessary either to remind that in the word *poiein* which is the root of the word *poetry* might still lie something like a remembrance of *to make* and that history does not care the slightest for the ones who do not care for history.

One last point deals with our obvious *gerontological* disease. If, as Bertrand Schmitt rightly points out, Surrealism may only exist when incarnated, then it is clear that it will likely soon be incarnated only by retirees and within coffins. We urgently need to search for new "surrealizable" minds²⁰. This involves venturing into other places than our usual meeting places and to show ourselves and our activities there with some intelligence. Youth is certainly not a prerogative of age, but *what changes* as the Situationist say. In one case as in the other, it is an understatement to say that we should consider our situation as rather critical.

It may be thought that this recruitment effort should be undertaken in a few areas where we have practically lost all competence - including, for example, science and ethnology, but certainly not only. Experience has shown that it is easier to "surrealize" a scientist - or even a technician - minds than to reconstruct a somewhat *encyclopedic*²¹ culture in many artistic and poetical ones.

We are haunting the same shores again and again without noticing that the sea left the shore long ago and that the faint noise we still perceive is no longer that of the surf but that of a historical babbling that attempts and hopes to find some pride into the dear old cherished awareness of being outdated.

18 . and no. There is no shame for a surrealist to study topics that he yet does not know anything about

19 . A real world where what some persist in naming "the surreal" is of course included

20 . according to the beautiful expression of someone whose name I blush to have forgotten.

21 . with the meaning that the word *Encyclopedie* had in the work of Diderot and d'Alembert