

H-France Review Vol. 4 (October 2004), No. 102

Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xii + 328 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 (hb). ISBN 0-521-82387-0.

Review by Mark S. Micale, University of Illinois.

Several of the most interesting pieces of English-language scholarship on modern French cultural history of the past generation have been written by art historians exploring the larger historical environment and by broad-ranging cultural historians writing about art-historical topics. Debora Silverman's *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-siècle France: Politics, Psyche, and Style* (1989), Kenneth E. Silver's *Espirt de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925* (1989), Mark Antliff's *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (1993), and Romy Golan's *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France between the Wars* (1995) have studied the complex intersection of politics, the visual arts, individual psychology, and the cultural milieu in specific places and times.[1] Steven Harris's new *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche* (2004) is cast in the same mold.

Harris takes as his subject Surrealism's second phase corresponding roughly with the 1930s. He is interested equally in aesthetic theory--expressed in countless Surrealist manifestos, reviews, essays, and utterances--and artistic practice. Within this domain, he concentrates on "the Surrealist object" or the three-dimensional sculptural assemblage. As a result, readers hear little in these pages about many of the best-known Surrealist painters, like Giorgio de Chirico, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, René Magritte, and Paul Delvaux, but much about Salvador Dalí, Juan Miró, and Alberto Giacometti as well as a raft of lesser-known self-styled critics and theorists, such as René Crevel, Tristan Tzara, Roger Caillois, Valentine Hugo, and Claude Cahun. The French literary Surrealists Louis Aragon and André Breton figure prominently, too. The Surrealist object arrays of the 1930s, so indebted to Cubist collages of the previous generation, sought to unite objects or imitations of actual objects in ways that, through their isolation from ordinary settings or their casting in unexpected materials or their combination in irrational ways, became expressively and psychologically interesting. Méret Oppenheim's famous *Fur-lined Teacup, Saucer, and Spoon* of 1936 and Man Ray's pasted engraving illustrating an umbrella and sewing machine on a dissecting table are among the best known examples.

Harris does an excellent job of elucidating the epistemological consciousness underlying Surrealist sculpture. Thirties Surrealists, he explains, rejected alike artistic abstraction and socialist realism, the two most prominent artistic currents of the decade. They sought instead to go "beyond painting" ("au delà de la peinture"), which they believed was less capable than poetry or three-dimensional collage of expressing vital unconscious experience. (Today's postmodernist plea that "painting is dead" and that artists must embrace the allegedly more potent and technologically *au courant* media of film and photography is a later excrescence of this line.) Harris shows that the Surrealists's position is a response to one of several "crises of representation" that marked twentieth-century art as it progressively problematized the long Western aesthetic tradition of representational realism. From Hegel onward, art turns from an account of the visible, external world to an expression of internal consciousness; Hegelian aesthetics, Harris notes, were assiduously studied by the Surrealists. The artists discussed in these pages form a little-appreciated part of the story related a decade-and-a-half ago by Michael Roth in *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France* (1988).[2]

If art is no longer about depicting the natural world on canvas, or about the representation of beauty, then what is its new goal? Here, not Hegel but Freud provided the way forward. Surrealist collage emerges during the decade when Freudian psychoanalysis--still new, bracing, and un-dogmatic--was pervading European culture. To the Surrealists, the individual psyche was the most fundamental level of experience, and, building on the precedents of Romanticism, they sought access to its darker and deeper dimensions in new ways.

For his part, Dalí proudly reported hallucinations since his childhood and labeled his creative strategy “the paranoiac-critical method.” Breton had been a triage nurse during the First World War when he observed shell shocked soldiers. A Surrealist manifesto of 1928 celebrated Jean-Martin Charcot’s “discovery” of hysteria fifty years earlier, and Surrealist ready-mades were allegedly inspired in part by art work made by people interned in mental hospitals. As Harris puts it nicely, Surrealist art was intended “neither as propaganda, nor as expression, nor as autonomy of form, nor as the mirror of nature, but as a form of research into the workings of thought” (p. 3). What complicates their project, as Harris’s language above suggests, was the belief that its methods and goals were properly scientific. By granting concrete, dimensional form to individual mental states, the Surrealist artist, he continues, provided “a scientific investigation of affectivity” (p. 147). Surrealist objects of the 1930s were in effect materializations of psychological reality that captured the “sur-reality” of Surrealism. Turning on its head a thousand-year-old tradition of Western realist and naturalistic aesthetics, this work engaged in a dual process of “a subjectivization of the object in the course of the objectification of subjective thought” (p. 152).

And what specifically was the Surrealist version of French Freud? For the artists Harris examines, the existence of “the psyche” and “the unconscious” was unquestioned, and these entities were believed to be laden with symbolically coded meanings that could be unlocked through various investigative techniques. Dreams, they believed, represent regressions to a more primal, pre-logical realm of psychic experience and therefore a deeper substratum of human creativity and existence than the more calculated, rational forms of mentation. Oneiric imagery, accordingly, pervades Surrealist art work.

Likewise, many of the Surrealist pieces Harris surveys are overtly sensual: Dalí’s *Objet scatologique à fonctionnement symbolique* of 1930, for instance, features a woman’s high heel leather shoe. A glass of warm milk is affixed to the base of the shoe by brown paste resembling excrement. A sugar cube is suspended with string above the shoe with the implication that it will be immersed in the glass of milk, where the sweet substance will dissolve. Metaphoric and metonymic representations of erotic encounters along these lines became common Surrealist fare. So, too, Harris observes was “the sexualization of quotidian objects” and the “transliteration of sexual slang into visual terms” (p. 48). The scenarios represented are alternatively voyeuristic and fetishistic, anticipatory and post-coital. Breton’s 1921 visit to see the psychoanalytic master himself in Vienna, and Dalí’s phantasmagorical drawing of Freud’s head are well-known. There is one key point, however, on which artists and psychologist diverged: for Freud, civilization emerges from the sublimation of human sexual instincts, which get interpreted in the Victorian manner as throwbacks to our animalistic heritage that are continually to be mastered. For Dalí and Miró, the actual and imaginative lives of sexual desire were the wellsprings of creativity to be tapped directly. As Harris writes, Surrealist art making was envisioned as “desublimated” libido.

Historians of modern France are likeliest to be most interested in Harris’s fourth chapter titled “Avant-Garde and Front Populaire.” Needless to say, the 1930s were immensely eventful years with global economic collapse, the consolidation of Stalin’s Soviet Union and Hitler’s Third Reich, and the march toward world war. During these years, the author comments interestingly, “there were various answers to the question of what constituted a revolutionary culture” (p. 137). Given the times, should Surrealists embrace an explicitly politicized art, as the international Communist movement demanded, or perhaps cultivate a militantly antifascist stance, along the lines of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*? Unlike Cubist collage, explicit political references in Surrealist *objets d’arts* are rare. Yet Harris shows that the Surrealists, collectively and individually, struggled to integrate their radical aesthetic project with the drastically altered political environment of the day.

The most immediate challenge came with the formation of the Popular Front in 1935 and its ascent to government power under Léon Blum the following year. With French socialism’s electoral success, much of the revolutionary left went from its historic role as marginalized critic of power to a new and unaccustomed identity as the political establishment. In particular, with the spectacle of fascism encircling the nation on its German, Italian, and Spanish borders, the French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français) had to reinvent itself as the voice of cultural nationalism and the protector of territorial integrity. Embracing Enlightenment values and the democratic tradition of 1789, French socialists and communists, for the first time in history, were entrusted with protecting rather than challenging the Third Republic. As the Popular Front governed, however, Surrealists became increasingly disenchanted with its defensive and accommodationist position against the mounting external threats of the day. The absolute freedom required by the artist required a much more robust and confrontational stance, they believed. Most

Surrealists working in Paris eventually broke with the PCF, a position that reinforced the group's radical self-identity.

Other aspects of Harris's presentation may seem more problematic to historians. The author of this study is at his best in analyzing individual works of art and exploring the philosophical underpinnings of the Surrealist movement. The book's main historiographical context is recent readings of Surrealist aesthetics by other art historians, especially those scholars, such as Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, and Denis Hollier, associated with the journal *October*. Harris engages these in-house debates intelligently. He is less interested in the scholarship of historians, however. For instance, in no place does he draw on the historical literature, from David Cauter to Tony Judt and beyond, dealing with French interwar intellectual communism, of which the Surrealist story is a part.[3] Along similar lines, Harris is superb on the complex ways in which Surrealists Hegelianized Freud and Freudianized Hegel. But readers get little sense of this interplay as part of the larger infatuation with Freud and Hegel among French artists and intellectuals during the 1930s. (Indicatively, Jean-Pierre Mordier's *Les débuts de la psychanalyse en France* does not appear in the ample bibliography.[4]) What was entailed in the Parisian Surrealist community's centering of two Germanic thinkers during the 1930s? Harris also makes the historical mistake of equating avant-garde European psychology exclusively with Freud, when in fact Francophonic writers, painters, and intellectuals of the time read dozens of psychological thinkers, including Janet, Jung, Flournoy, and Dubois. Most startling, Harris's study of Surrealist cultural politics never mentions, even passingly, the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, so important to left-wing artists--and not least to the Catalans Dalí and Miro!

Other omissions concern the art-historical aspects of the subject. Considering that Freud's own *Interpretation of Dreams* makes much of the aesthetic qualities of dreams themselves, I was surprised that Harris did not do more with the pictorial and narrative aspects of Surrealist dream representation. I also felt that his analysis would have been enriched by integrating a discussion of French Surrealist film, which peaked precisely when the Surrealist object emerged in the late twenties and thirties and that also sought to capture the psychology of dreams in a new medium beyond painting. Then there are the sexual politics of Surrealism. Harris's book brims with seventy pages of footnotes, a majority of them dense content notes. He ignores altogether, however, gay and feminist art-historical perspectives. The works he discusses seem to cry out for this sort of explication. Surrealist heterovisuality is based on a regime of absolute male/female difference and an objectification that reduces women to eros and then eros to the sexual consumption of women by male artists and viewers.

Lastly, Harris certainly succeeds in convincing general readers of what professional art scholars doubtless take for granted, that the Surrealist assemblages of the 1930s are a moment in modern Western aesthetic consciousness. He is reluctant, however, to acknowledge how easily the theory of the Surrealist object produced some work that now seems silly, clichéd, or contrived. As critics of Modernism have observed, across the twentieth century theorizations of art come to matter as much as, or more than, the art work itself, a notion that would have been entirely foreign to, say, Peter Paul Rubens, Joseph Turner, and Claude Monet. From Italian Futurism onward, one danger of this dialectic is clear: as creative work becomes evermore interesting theoretically and savvy epistemologically, it also often becomes less compelling visually and powerful artistically. After all, the period of the Surrealist object was short-lived. But perhaps the author feared that to pursue this line of inquiry would diminish the significance of his subject.

NOTES

[1] Debora Leah Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-siècle France: Politics, Psyche, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

[2] Michael Roth, *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

[3] David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals, 1914-1960* (New York: Macmillan, 1964); Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[4] Jean-Pierre Mordier, *Les débuts de la psychanalyse en France, 1895-1926* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1981).

Mark S. Micale
University of Illinois
msmicale@uiuc.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 4 (October 2004), No. 102

ISSN 1553-9172