

Introduction

Surrealism as a concept was being considered as early as World War I and by 1930 centres of academia including Oxford and Cambridge were advocating this new wave of futurist artistic thinking. The 1930 periodical *Transition* published in Paris dedicated a considerable amount of press heralding the significance of the Cambridge avant-garde publication, the *Experiment*, whose contributions were considered invaluable not only not only in terms of strengthening artistic relations between France and England, but also with introducing surrealism into England (Jackaman,1989:26). But it was the French writer and poet Andre Breton who led the Surrealist revolution, believing that rather than take from the external world, art should be dedicated to 'internal representation' and unconscious acts (Levy,1996 :7). Surrealist theory applies the writings of twentieth century protagonists such as Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, relating to the process of personal transformation; to further understand and synthesize areas relating to the conscious and unconscious mind, sanity and madness, dream and reality and past, present and future (Lester,2002 :141).

There has been some debate about the extent to which Surrealism highlighted gender dynamics and the rejection of femininity and female identity (Adamowicz,2006 :71). In male surrealist art female body imagery is often over emphasised by male members of the movement, which is frequently criticised by contemporary feminists. In particular three female artists associated with Surrealist art including the painter Leonora Carrington, the writer Gisele Prassinos and the poet Joyce Mansour are synonymous with reacting against this male dominant expression of female imagery (Caws et al,1991:6).

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This paper will investigate the evidence to suggest that some surrealist theory arguably demonstrates negative gender specific representation, using art, literature and film as the main disciplines to exemplify. In addition the existence of the reactive gender counter-attack led by artists such as Carrington, Prassinos and Mansour will be explored.

Discussion

Women who were characterised within the orbit of surrealist painting at the height of its popularity; mostly wives and girlfriends were often stereotyped as muses, sorceresses or child like women, lacking their own autonomy. They were essentially male idealised representations (Hopkins,2004 :124). *Nadja* was published by Breton in 1928. It is an autobiographical narrative which seeks to illustrate the power of the subconscious mind in Breton's pursuit of an idealised woman (Matthews,2006 :65). Similarly the iconic surrealist painter Salvador Dalí's wife Gala became his lifetime muse, immortalised in the guise of the Virgin Mary in *The Madonna of Port Lligat, 1949* (1) and as St Helena, the mother of the first Christian Emperor of the Roman Empire in *The Ecumenical Council, 1960* (Prose,2003 :209-211).(2)

Surrealist writings and paintings are often synonymous with fragmented or dismembered body parts which has been deemed characteristic of isolation and alienation. It also emphasises the differences between gender in terms of physical attributions. This occurs with most dramatic effect in two of the surrealist writer Antonin Artaud's plays; *Le Jet de sang* and *La Conquete du Mexique*. At the beginning of *Le Jet de sang* (The Spurt of Blood) a young couple declare their love for one another, which is swiftly followed by a hurricane rush and a collision of stars above. A series of dismembered legs, feet, heads and arms then descend upon them and the stage. A similar scene is played out in *La*

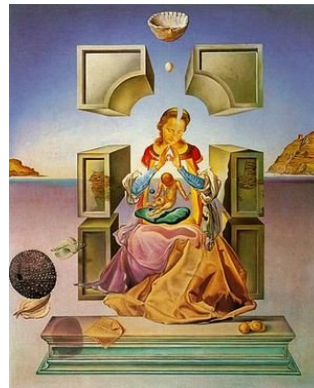
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Conquete du Mexique. (The Conquest of Mexico) where:

'human limbs, cuirasses, heads and bellies fall down from all levels of the stage set, like a hailstorm that bombards the earth with supernatural explosions' (Crombez,2010 :1-2).

This loss of any sense of physical wholeness is particularly prevalent throughout the works of male surrealist artists working in a number of disciplines. Often the female body would be metaphorically dismantled, dismembered,abused and then re-formed to provide the embodiment of male fantasy (Caws et al,1991 :75).

1. *The Madonna of Port Lligat*, Salvador Dali,1949



2. *The Ecumential Council*, Salvador Dali,1960



In many ways this is consistent with Freud's theory regarding the origins of sexual

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difference. Freud understood that this difference was formed in the female child with an attachment to the father that is then redirected by way of an identification with the mother and an acceptance of maternity. The child then becomes a substitute for the penis which in turn signifies masculinity, whilst re-enforcing a woman's inadequacies. Many male surrealists then became interested in the notion of trans-gendering, the most notable of which was Marcel Duchamp, although most artists of the time defined themselves through masculine imagery and expression (Lester, 2002:147-149).

Historically the concept of men dressing as a woman has always been equated with weakness and Marcel Duchamp was one of the first male surrealist artists who challenged these assumptions, frequently transcending into his alter-ego, Rose Selavy on film and in collaboration with Man Ray (Lester,2002: 152). (3) Essentially this gender switch is representative of a method used to de-construct socially accepted gender positions. The photograph Belle Haleine (4) features a bottle of perfume, labelled *eau de voilette* (veil water), together with the face of Duchamp's alter-ego sporting the initials RS; the R written in reverse to create the image of a mirror. The veil of the *eau de voilette* is symbolic of the veil of Duchamp's disguise masking his masculine identity. The existence of Rose Selavy serves to be acting out the inner identity of Duchamp, revealing a feminine side behind the surface masculine exterior (Conley,2003 :27-28).

3. Marcel Duchamp as Rose Selavy, Man Ray, 1921



4. Marcel Duchamp on the cover of a perfume bottle, *Belle Haleine* 1921 as his alter-ego

Rose Selavy



There were as few as around ten women directly involved with surrealism during the 1920s and historically between 1924 and 1933 during the movement's most ascendant period no women were included as official members (Suleiman,1990 :29). However surrealism was a concept that evolved during a period when women were filling the occupations of men made available during the First World War, changing their social position and role in society. Surrealism both embraced this new independence for women, whilst also critically interpreting the radical ideals of femininity within the bourgeois culture of not wishing to remain average, yet lacking the strength with which to fight for their rights and values (Bate,2004 :19).

Joyce Mansour's poetic female imagery often possess an ambiguous gender, which is

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neutralized in some way by age or illness and sexual expression is presented in terms of all its disciplines; heterosexual, homosexual, bestial and so on (Caws et al, 1991 :107). Her representations of women are often brutally frank, in defiance of her attempts to interpret the real and fundamental elements of being a woman; the raw pain of ageing, death, disease and senility. In Mansour's first collection of poems, *Cris (1953)* she proclaims 'J'aime...tes rides tes seins ballants...ta vieilles contre mob corps tendu' [I love...your wrinkles your sagging breasts...your senility against my taut body] (Mansour, 1953:7).

She is able to make the focus personal and emotional from her own female perspective. Unlike many male surrealists she does not aspire to sentimental unions, but rather a liberation that is both spiritual and sexual. Whereas the male surrealist perspective denotes the importance of women as their mirrors, providing an illusion of union, Mansour and her other female contemporaries seek to emphasise that this wholeness assumed by mirroring is rendered incomplete, and that one's own image cannot be viewed any more clearly when seeking reflection in either other men or women (Gingrass,1990:12-15).

Leonora Carrington is often misguidedly written about in history in relation to her association with the German surrealist Max Ernst, despite being an established surrealist painter in her own right. She dis-engaged herself from the traditionally accepted muse of many artists of the day, who became such figures for their husband's benefit. Rather Carrington identified herself through animals, which in the context of much of her work symbolises a reversal of classical beauty. In 1937 she wrote a short story, *La Debutante* in which she convinces a hyena to impersonate her at a ball and rip the face from a maid so that she might disguise herself. She then consumes the face as a symbol of her own

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attempts to destroy herself and reveal a wilder more socially acceptable person. Essentially the tale is an expression of anger raged against society and its generalisations with its expectations of women (Conley,1996 :51). (5)

Carrington was also fascinated with the femme-enfant figures so frequently portrayed in male surrealist art. Dali and Max Ernst were for example preoccupied with Alice in Wonderland, illustrating erotic and incestuous representations of the child-woman enigma. In contrast Carrington's focus centred on the transitional period between child and woman; Victorian manners and the absurdity of propriety (Lusty,2007 :27).

5. *Self Portrait 1*, Leonora Carrington, 1938



Interestingly neither Mansour nor the surrealist protégé of Andre Breton, Gisele Prassinis receive any acknowledgement in the 1980's editions of Surrealist poetry and twentieth century French poetry, leaving a considerable gap across the 1920's and 1930's where female surrealist writers are concerned. Even in the twenty first century much of their work remains out of print. (Suleiman,1990 :212). This is a poignant indictment to the extent to which women were simply not recognised by the surrealist movement until much later in the twentieth century. And a significant argument in the ambiguous discourse pertaining to

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gender significance at this time.

Prassinós surrealist portfolio consisted of five novels, a collection of short stories, ten volumes of poetry and one unclassified work (van Rossum-Guyon, 1990 :92). She was re-christened Alice II by Breton, who took her on as his protégé at the vulnerable age of just fourteen and linking her with the *femme enfant* fantasies of so many of her male contemporaries of the time, a somewhat insulting, chauvinistic and patronising act in itself in terms of gender equality (Heusser, 2005 :199).

Yet Prassinós appeared to be more than prepared to work alongside and tolerate the male orientated world that she entered at such a young age. Her prose poem '*La Naissance*' (Birth) published in 1935 begins '*he wanted a great dead doll to hold in his arms and smother*'. This is a direct attack on the German painter and photographer Hans Bellmer, whose obsession with drawing oversized dismembered pubescent female dolls made him notorious within the surrealist movement. Prassinós goes on to write '*with blond hair...and big open eyes...I will hug her very hard, to kill her blue eyes, to give them a life that's mine*.' In the end the doll lover receives his package, takes hold of it and destroys it. This is a hostile attack on a surrealist artistic practice that at once desires the female body; either dead or inanimate to be destroyed. (Suleiman, 2003:8) It is also indicative of some of the extreme gender impropriety that was masking itself as surrealist art at this time.

The films of Luis Bunuel, a well known surrealist film maker of the twentieth century in some ways contradicts theories regarding the symbolic worshipping of the female. The transcending interpretation of women from mortal to erotic fantasy, by men working within the surrealist movement at this time in painting and literature moves the focus towards

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women as both victims and as rebels of society in Bunuel's films. A total of eight out of the thirty two films that Bunuel made take the title of their protagonist. One such film, *Susana* (1950) depicts the heroine of the story escaping from the shackles of her oppression towards a family that provide her with work and a place to live. Once ensconced in her new environment, Susana seduces all of the male hierarchy, not for her own sexual pleasure, but as a means of usurping power and exposing the corruptibility amongst men (Higginbotham,1989 :1-2). (6)

6. *Susana*, Luis Bunuel



This conflict of attitudes towards the interpretation of women in surrealist art forms is also prevalent in Man Ray's 1924 photograph, *Waking Dream séance*. (7) A group of men eagerly surround the central medium who is female. In one sense she immediately becomes the more powerful figure as the one person who can access the spirit world and therefore leads the séance, in another she is merely seen to be typing up their dreams, having none of her own but able to translate those of her male companions (Caws et al,1991 :19).

7. *Waking Dream séance*, Man Ray,1924

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Notwithstanding the ambivalence with which women are interpreted in surrealist art, serves to make the process of understanding the significance of gender representation a difficult

one. The Hungarian born Surrealist photographer, sculptor and poet Brassi remains one of the most significant artists of the 1930s, basing himself in Paris amongst some of the most notable contemporaries of his day (Warehime,1998 :22-23). In 1933 he produced a controversial and evocative image, simply titled *Nude*. (8)The picture depicts a young woman lying in a such a position as to make her body appear to replicate the shape of a male phallus. The picture is significant in one of two ways, either as a symbolic reflection of the female form and the male organ becoming a sign of the other, or alternatively a rather more anti-feminist reflection of reality, with the female being reduced to a de-based form of male animal pride, representative of the male's fear of castration. By depicting a female nude in the shape of a phallus this can be interpreted as either gender-specific or gender-neutral (Mc Donald, 2001 :160-161).

8. *Nude*, Bressai,1933



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Conclusion

To explore gender in relation to surrealism is both complex and ambiguous. With this new movement of expression, often disdainful of tradition and establishment the portrayal of the body and perceptions of beauty became conflicted around notions of social and historical perceptions of women, opposed to psychoanalytical approaches. Biological and sexual assumptions became entangled with the subconscious emotions involved with the way in which men fundamentally continued to view women. Fundamentally surrealist art and literature is often seen to be addressing men and not women, with women viewed as the means by which men could create their works. The very fact that this was a movement dominated by men also serves to perpetuate many of the stereotypes associated with gender and surrealism. The evidence for surrealist theory is also varied with a strong presence often abundant in literature, painting, film and journalism, making it even more difficult to categorise or generalise about.

Surrealist representations of women are frequently labelled as misogynistic, but a closer examination has determined that often de-familiarization is applied as a means of distorting the female body and therefore such techniques can equally be viewed as liberating.

The relevance of gender in the surrealist movement could simply be interpreted as a public recognition of the masculine unconscious, which can equally be viewed as misogynistic and unrepresentative of women, or just a truthful indictment of the male unconscious psyche.

Therefore leaving the question of gender ambiguity open in terms of its presence within

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the surrealist dynamic.

Equally the women who were writing and painting within this genre up until the mid twentieth century were often adopting their own gender-based metaphors, that provide a more powerful insight into the conflicting representations and expectations of women and their role alongside men during this period.

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