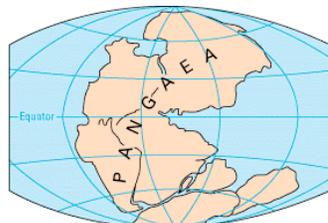


# Transition periods of surrealism

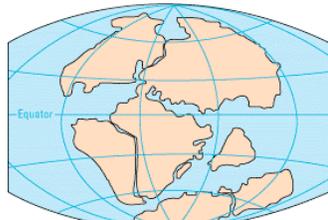
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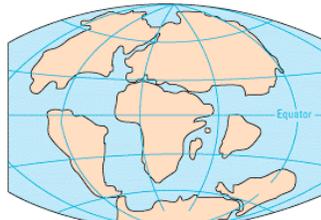
PERMIAN  
225 million years ago



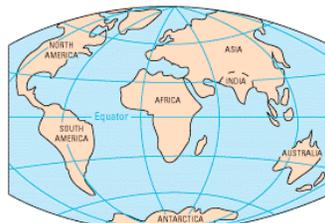
TRIASSIC  
200 million years ago



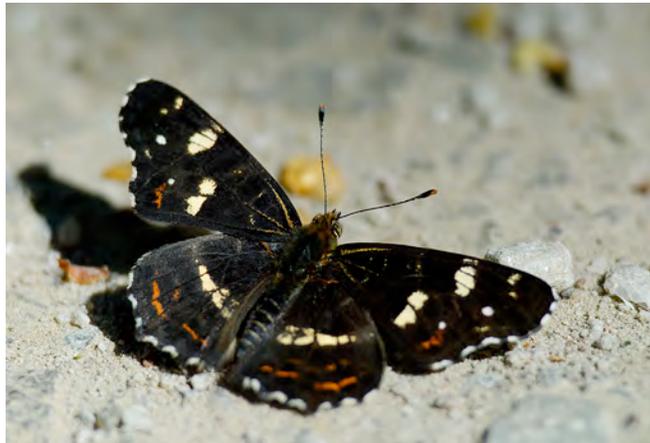
JURASSIC  
135 million years ago



CRETACEOUS  
65 million years ago



PRESENT DAY



### **Three eras of surrealism**

The history of surrealism remains a source of inspiration and a battleground. While the quality of much of academic surrealismology has certainly been rising the past decades, it is still very often the old traded misunderstandings and simple errors that reach wide circulation in exhibitions, newspaper criticism and popular books, and other areas of historiography; and in many cases even those who are attracted by surrealism and take part in it swallow much of their general knowledge of the movement's history through such popular sources – in the cases where they do not have a special interest in history, thus impatiently striving to put it into practice rather than caring for historical detail. It must be admitted at this point that the official internal traded version of the history of the movement may hold some flaws and some dangerous simplifications: a few decades ago, back in the days of reigning poor surrealismology, it was safe to say that generally surrealists were far better "experts" in surrealism than the experts in surrealism were (whatever it would actually mean to be an expert in surrealism, we're not going into this here), but this is sometimes not the case anymore. Not only are several of the academics now quite careful and well-read, it is also the case that very many surrealists see little meaning in taking up the competition over knowledge of historical detail with them who are getting payed for dealing with it but who will always miss an important dimension due to the lack of own experience and therefore integrated sense of a whole surrealist perspective. But then, it becomes quite crucial which sources the active surrealists utilise as their standard references for historical information.

So, in order to make the various small points of surrealist historiography and its consequences for surrealist strategy and organisation that is one of the more prominent themes on the Icecrawler blog, I find it necessary to lay down some basic terms.

It seems to be of crucial importance for understanding the conditions of surrealist activity at different points in time to see that this is something which had clearly changed its objective character in history. (Many surrealists themselves will deny that for polemical reasons, instead emphasising the exemplary continuity, as if historical

change would seriously threaten their legitimacy.) Now for any particular historiographical project, one will have to assess periodisations depending on the factors relevant for these particular questions. Obviously the surrealist movement has gone through all kinds of changes depending on the failures and successes of organisational initiatives, on events in the world such as wars, crises, repression, radical upsurges, etc. What I'm suggesting here is just that the sense of being a movement has fundamentally changed twice.

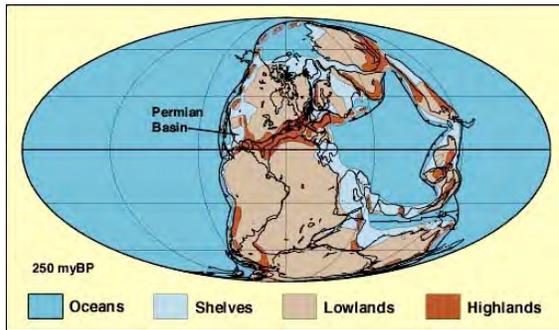
Surrealism remains one and continuous, and in order to stay one and stay in history it has twice rejuvenated itself in fire. Thus three times (the inception and the two reinceptions), surrealism has been in a fluid state in the midst of a dramatic favorable wind, and come out with a different face, for some less recognisable, or actively denied. According to this there has been three different eras, three different basic historical modes. It is not very important for me to pinpoint any exact dates for change (especially since the overlaps are huge, and the objective characteristics of several periods are manifested simultaneously) nor to suggest fancy terms for the periods, what I am emphasising is the importance of recognising that such major shifts in historical focus have occurred. I don't think it will be that controversial, even though I do loan myself to some simplifications in matters that will surely prove more complex under careful thinking and careful historic study.

a) Classic surrealism from the inception of the group under the new term and in the new direction of experimentation in 1922, throughout historical changes of the 30s and the hardships of war (internationalisation was an early consequence of the inner dynamics, 1929 was not a major direction shift, the war outbreak was also not a major direction shift but only general circumstances made more difficult). This might also be called 1st generation surrealism. Surrealism slowly gave itself its shape through its temporary historical decisions, and had no heritage to be concerned about (except the freely chosen one which spread far, widely and prehensilely backwards), and kept developing and going forward through new discoveries, abandoned areas of experimentation, strategic decisions, etc.

b) Late-classic surrealism from the reorganisation of surrealism in the late 40s. This might also be called post-war surrealism or 2nd generation surrealism. Organised surrealism cared much about keeping the tradition alive to hand it over to the future. It made less inventions, and no overall changes as its concerns about itself emphasised continuity, inclusivity and integrity to the point of reintegrating abandoned or conflicting viewpoints and strategies and thereby creating a sense of timeless surrealism. While the more impatient, vanguardist or ultraradical currents typically budded off into new para-surrealist movements. Indeed most of the surrealist advances on the theoretical, artistic and political levels were made outside the surrealist movement in the most narrow sense, yet it was there that they were reintegrated. After the few years in the late 40s that had a great favorable wind, the quantitative summit of the surrealist movement, and a dramatic situation of fruitful uncertainty, the 50s and early 60s were an all-time low, when more or less all groups outside the Paris group stepped over into various varieties of para-surrealism or simply ceased activity.

c) Post-classic surrealism from the refounding of surrealism in a new paradigm of popular radicalism in the 60s. This might also be called post-breton surrealism or 3rd

generation surrealism. Throughout the decade (and partly still!) a rather unresolved tension surfaced between new groups that were based in the new radicalism and old groups which had difficulties relating to the new radicalism even though they indeed had heralded and inspired it. In the Paris group, these difficulties were added to the difficulties naturally following Breton's death, expressed in the partial and ineffective participation in the '68 movement, and finally triumphed in the dissolution of the group. In the new situation, the surrealist movement found itself being far more underground, without the mass media's or art world's attention, a more democratic network structure, and in all kinds of ways finding a new relevance based in the new paradigm for all of surrealism's traditional themes and methods.



(The only terminological issue that may be important is a minor one. "Postsurrealism" is a common and fitting term for an eclectic abandoning of surrealism, especially in the art world - let it remain that and don't ever accept any attempts to confusionally and derogatorily apply the term to active post-classic surrealism.)

Now I would say that for most historical questions, this division into three periods suggests something of the different framework for dealing with various questions and ideas throughout surrealist history. But from a historical viewpoint, what I consider very crucial to surrealism is to look closer at these periods of transition, to see what the options were and what were the factors that decided the routes to follow. This is of course of great strategical importance to the surrealist movement, and while I am not surprised that the academic historians have usually failed to see the crucial relevance of these transitional periods (or merely seen them as chaotic accumulation of anecdotes of contradictions), I think it is important for us as surrealists to grapple with them.

\* \* \*

## Untimely

I am intrigued by the exciting situations that surrealism faced in the 40s and then in the 60s, when surrealism seemed to be somehow - involuntarily - in line with the times, but it wasn't obvious at all in which direction to set off, large numbers of people were

attracted by the movement, people in it had been doing very different experiences, the field of possibilities was wide open, paths needed to be chosen. This relates to what Michaël Löwy emphasises in *Morning star* (\*) as the "untimely" character of surrealism, because it feels like at every point one of the latent main issues for surrealism is to find the point of non-contradiction between staying at history's edge and dismissing the contemporary in its entirety. I think that the sublation/solution of this is present in surrealism, but it is one of the several things present in surrealism which we often fail to rationalise, and very often get ourselves stuck in rather lame explanations and contradictions that don't quite live up to the synthetic potential inherent in surrealism. In the 40s, in the 60s, and to a lesser but quite visible sense in the present, some people emphasise the role of being "keepers of the flame", on embodying the tradition, and others emphasise the need of radical abandonments and explorations, as if either made any sense without the other...

I will keep talking about those particular dynamic historical situations elsewhere, so let's go back to the sense of dialectical edge. Of course, ignoring the contemporary and focus on that which – in an untimely way – is of inner necessity, is one way of expressing a latent content of the times, one which represent a potentiality and a possible future. But there are many untimely things which are just nostalgic or clueless too, and many which have a great potential without ever finding their connections. Only some possibilities find the paths of associating with other countercurrents, and communicating with people who are looking for change, for negation, for dynamics; suggesting frameworks and imagery for a latent desire for freedom. It is in this sense that I mean surrealism appears to have been timely in its untimeliness in the 40s and 60s.



I am also speculating that surrealism could very well have been similarly timely in its untimeliness in a similar way in the 80s and around 2000, but the movement was too small to make much impact in and through the movements of the times. In the 80s, it was obviously quite problematical, since what I am referring to as the timely current where surrealism could hang on, is that period's transgressive aestheticism, the taste for incomprehensibility, hedonism, black humor and sadomasochism, the resurrections of Sade, Bataille, Artaud, Blanchot as fashionable points of reference, etc, which took place now mostly under the aegis of poststructuralism, cynicism and individualism and can be associated with some senses of postmodernism and neoliberalism. To partake in and be able to twist back the objective direction of such a twisted current would indeed have

required not only an immense integrity but also a considerable strength! And then around 2000, it was perhaps a minor repetition of the 60s on its way in the sense that a new footing, a new framework for radicalism was being forged, in an even more heterodox way but still remaining a sharp anticapitalist focus – surrealism did take part in this, but never became one of its more visible currents, and then the movement faded.

(\*) Great book which fairly recently came in an english translation, with a strangely twisted subtitle. The original's "surréalisme et marxisme" had been openmindedly changed by the editors into "surrealism, marxism, anarchism, situationism, utopia" – not only removing the relational preposition emphasising the unified theme of the book, now suggesting it to be a loose collection of essays about this and that not necessarily considering things in relation to each other, but also violating the broad and unorthodox sense of marxism the author employs by separately adding these various other brands of radicalism which the author makes a point of not separating from marxism in his notion of it.



\* \* \*

## Initial suspension

Of the several periods within the history of surrealism when the direction ahead has been uncertain, perhaps the most crucial was the earliest one.

Automatic writing and most of the immediate sources of surrealism had been discovered already in 1919, but only in 1922 when Dada had risen and declined in Paris, these themes were made a rallying point for the radical poetic circles, and only during the second half of 1924 they were launched to the general public (with Aragon's manifesto "Une vague des Rêves", Breton's surrealist manifesto and the "Poisson soluble"

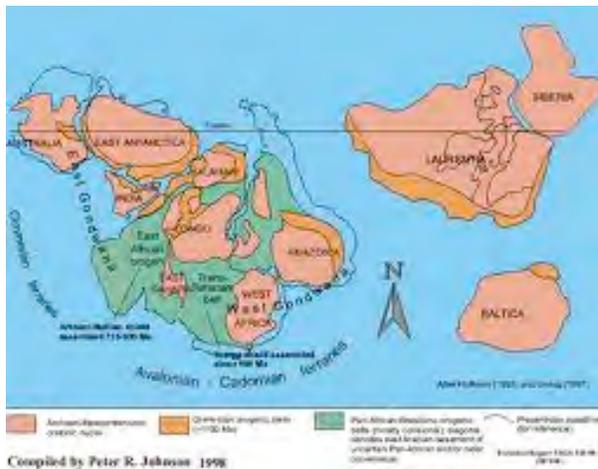
collection of automatic texts, the opening of the Bureau of Surrealist Research, and finally the journal *La Révolution surréaliste*).

But even at this point the group was very heterogenous and the direction somewhat scuttling. In fact very soon after the public launch, already in 1925, activities were becoming poorly held together, and the future was uncertain, Breton stayed at home and thought about quitting, all kinds of revellings and jokes were suggested to be among the central activities, personal contradictions thrived. While the last bonds of collegiality with the cultural circles were finally thrown aside in the huge scandal of the Saint-Pol-Roux banquet in the summer of 1925 (where famously a quarrel over nationalism at a cultural dinner lead to fistfighting and wrecking furniture), there was at the same time an open conflict between three animators in the group trying to pull it each in their own direction.

There was at the time a kind of "constructive opposition" taking shape through the politisation of the group. Most people were radicalised by the revolt in Marocco; Breton, Masson and others started reading Marx and Trotsky; certain individuals joined the Communist Party. This politisation also lead to finding new allies, foremostly the *Clarté* group of communists, but also the young philosophers of *Philosophies*, and some old dadas, and with the emerging Belgian and Serbian surrealist circles, and several other individuals; all of these collaborated on the manifesto supporting the Maroccan Rif rebellion in august 1925. The collaboration with *Clarté* and *Philosophies* was formalised, for a short while almost to the point of fusion, which was one of the things breaking up internal continuity in the surrealist group. Visavis this collaboration and visavis the revolutionary movement in general, the sense of autonomy of the surrealist group was vividly discussed among its members, and very differing strong opinions were represented. Also many other fundamental questions were heatedly debated. Including art, where Naville claimed that it is self-evident that there is no such thing as surrealist painting (and Morise had said something similar before), but soon thereafter the Galerie Surréaliste was opened and Breton started writing *Surrealism and Painting*.

The three alternatives can be discerned as follows: On one hand the seductive pessimism, maximalistic, individualistic, voluntarist on the spiritual level, foremostly animated - and given a very gnostic tinge - by the personal demonism of Antonin Artaud, very effective in formulating and fuelling radical opposition to not only society on the whole but the human condition in general - in early 1925 this seemed to be the dominant mode of the group, and very obviously productive. Secondly, the more methodical moralism, collectivistic, intellectual, voluntarist on the moral and organisational level, leaning towards a conditional collective involvement in politics, and based in the growing but not yet solid personal dignity, reliability and trust of Breton. Finally, a directly political voluntarism was slowly taking shape, based in consistent revolutionary defeatism, claiming that only proletarian revolution can create a surrealist revolution and make real the movement's demands and desires, therefore that political activism must be prior to surrealist activity from a surrealist viewpoint - this direction was energised probably more by general polarising dynamics of the times than by its major proponent, the not all that charismatic Pierre Naville. (It is too simplifying, and too eager to legitimate the winning alternative, to suggest that "artaudism" was only about spiritual revolution, "navillism" only about material revolution, and "bretonism" about combining the two - it tends for all three to obscure their main point and attraction - neither of those two alternatives nor their simple combination can be regarded as specifically *surrealist*!) Now if many other members wanted to moderate or

combine these three paths, nevertheless these three characters insisted and eventually ended up in an implacable opposition towards each other (all three threatened to withdraw from the group at some point!). For one year it was quite uncertain which direction the group would take, and also whether it would actually survive this inner conflict.



But the outcome of the tug of war soon cleared. Breton had grabbed the editorship of *La Révolution surréaliste* already in 1925 explicitly to counter the "artaudian" negativist dynamics. Politics became a major interest for a large part of the group. Artaud left the group in 1926, at around the same period as a couple of literary figures uninterested in politics (like Soupault & Vitrac). Somewhat later several leading surrealist announced their individual and critical adherence to the communist party, (where they got constantly harassed by the stalinist officials of course). Politisation was still held up as an active problem, and Naville's book *La Révolution et les Intellectuelles* (1926) was appreciated and remained under discussion, but the surrealist group had become more of a coherent collective with a distinct direction, with a distinct mode of collectivity, and, with Breton as the undisputed central figure. Finally, Naville left the group to become a leading Trotskyist. During these years in the late 20s, surrealist painting was explored and surrealism largely stepped back from its claims to be able to replace the entirety of the forms in bourgeois culture with automatic texts, dream accounts and games, while the internationalisation of surrealism continued.

In 1929, Breton's new manifesto was published launching some new themes or strategies for surrealism, and a lot of people left the group, but it is not the turning point that most historians have wanted to make of it. A widespread misunderstanding is that everybody who didn't want to get into politics were expelled in 1929 with the appearance of the second manifesto. In fact, most of the apolitical members had already left long before (Soupault, Vitrac, Artaud, Delteil etc), and most of those who went in 1929 - before the second manifesto was published - were communists, or curious about communism, just like most of those who remained. One factor that has been held forth recently is that Breton's marriage collapsed at the time, causing some close friends of Simone Breton to leave the group in sympathy with her (at least Morise and Queneau). But it clearly seems like most of those who left were just inconvenient with the eagerness to regroup with larger coherence, with a sense of occultation and without vanguardism, with full moral commitment to an integrative poetic revolutionary project. It was people

who wanted to be able to remain half-time surrealists, or couldn't accept other's critique of immoral and despicable activities under the excuse "to make a living", or were still hoping for literary, journalistic or political careers. And since there were new members approaching, this indeed came to a dramatic decantation - a quick headcount of members of the surrealist group (the headcount cannot be anything but quick, because otherwise we'd need either to decide on particular criteria on whom to count this time, or to debate a large number of uncertain cases at length) says there were almost 40 members in the group in the beginning of 1929, but 22 in the end of the year, and with an overlap of only 11 persons. A dramatic decantation, but not a major course shift, rather a final realisation of the nature of the commitment demanded by this project at this moment in time.

\* \* \*

(I will address the decisive transition of ca 1947 first by reutilising an obituary of Sarane Alexandrian, first posted as a part of "Experiment and failure revisited" at the Icecrawler, and then addressing the question of accumulation of themes. In fact, it seems that this transition is so crucial and still so largely unexplored that I won't be able to draw many conclusions about this period without a lot more empirical research anyway.)



### Sarane Alexandrian im memoriam

Alexandrian, born in Iraq in 1927, was one of the large gang of "dandy surrealists" who were one of several circles bringing new energy into the reconstituted French surrealist group in 1946 after the war. This circle believed strongly in the epistemological priority of poetry, the need for rigorous metaphysical experimentation, and the lack of need for involvement in politics; in parts coinciding with the classical "dissident" surrealist viewpoint of the *Le grand Jeu* group. Nevertheless, in 1946, this group was in the midst of "official" surrealism; it was specifically the clique forming the first editorial group of the

French group's journal *Neon* in 1948, and they were very active in the organisation of the famous international surrealist exhibition in Paris 1947.

In 1948, most of them were collectively kicked out. At that time, Breton insisted that the group would exclude Matta, for still partly obscure reasons; the reason given was that Matta would have contributed to Gorky's recent suicide by having an affair with Gorky's wife. Large numbers of surrealists opposed or doubted this, friends of Matta, or firmly believing that Matta still represented a spearhead in furthering surrealist research in art, or just questioning the validity of the grounds for the exclusion. The "dandy surrealists" gang were seeing each other a lot in the home of their mentor, Victor Brauner, and were not showing up daily at the regular meetings. For this, they too were suddenly excluded from the group "for factional activity". As the surrealist group was very large at the time, while there were still a lot of different experiences drawn from the war represented and long-term strategies were not at all agreed upon, there were many contradictions around, of which several are not very transparent to us 60 years later.

Alexandrian had also been a member of Cause, the international secretariat founded in the French group to facilitate discussion between surrealist groups in other parts of the world and to inventory and coordinate the various assessments of the historical situation - unfortunately the group was shortlived and another one of its animators, Henri Pastoureau, wrote later in life with withheld bitterness that "it was obvious that the movement preferred to embark in a less systematic direction".

Many of the outcast surrealists of the purge 1948 and the following, even more obscure one, in 1951, remained in various ways true to the surrealist spirit while working in other forums or mostly in personal isolation combined with a mediocre literary, artistic or scholarly career. Alexandrian became a decent historian of modern art, writing a series of sympathetic but not exciting books about surrealist art and similar (some of which were even translated into English) - note for example *Le Surréalisme et le Rêve* - but also a novels and books about utopianism, occultism, etc.

(It is indeed one of the remaining big tasks of surrealist history to shed light on the actual processes involved in these particular purges - a tentative attempt in Richardson's and Fijalkowski's *Surrealism against the current* must be noted - where the internal surrealist tradition has made it a myth (about irreducible and unexplainable historical necessity) which has not performed too well in competition with the hostile myth of academic historiography that they would be simply the expressions of Breton's arbitrary (unexplained and ultimately unexplainable even within their system) "dictatorial whims".)

Then rather suddenly in recent years, Alexandrian returned to a more active role, as the founder and director of the journal *Supérieur inconnu* (from 1995) and the centerpoint of the collective around it. This was the respectable midpoint of a minor resurgence of surrealist occultism, maintaining the exploration of poetry in categories clearly not subsuming the perspectives of hermeticism, alchemy, mysterious correspondences, hidden traditions and magic under those of modern science or philosophy. In a certain sense, this is a basic position of surrealism, but there was also something very provocative about it. Also in the very slickness and intelligence with which it was done. Alexandrian himself wrote primary about art. Associated with the journal were other, more picturesque characters like the twoheaded Fabrice Pascaud, who is the surrealist astrologer as well as a trusted orthodox surrealist polemicist (maintaining the rich website "Arcane 17" and the weird surrealist gnostic publicist Paul Sanda.

This reborn surrealist occultism (which is more obviously firmly rooted in tradi-

tional surrealism for its French exponents than for, i e the English-language contemporary surrealist satanists like ORB editions in Wales or Tenebraeology in New York) is an important reminder of the width of the sources and practices of the surrealist perspective. Especially since the emphasis and priorities applied on this webpage are often taking a very much other direction, it can be interesting to consider the extent to which the experimentation and concerns for poetic phenomenology retain a shared core throughout different routes in the surrealist project.

And as I don't have too detailed information of the direction of the *Supérieur inconnu* collective, I am utilising this as a way to reach back to the discussion in the Stockholm surrealist group, where there are different persons defending (at times or consistently) skepticist-rationalist views, rigid-scientofilic views, subjective-sensible views, rigid-marxist views, cynic-ultraradical views, pragmatismal-philosophical views, and meta-physical-largesyntheses views - leading to some harsh discussions but still without problems to agree about fundamentals including the need for dismissal of faith, for explicit epistemology, tireless experimentation, devotion to the unknown, methodological concerns, poetic sensibility, in a insistent collective, ludic, critical, subversive, creative context; which is surrealism (insisting on the continuous relevance of the concerns and maintained activities of historical surrealism, rather than any arbitrary modernisation of it into some individual-eclectic art label or faith).

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### **Accumulation and subtractions**

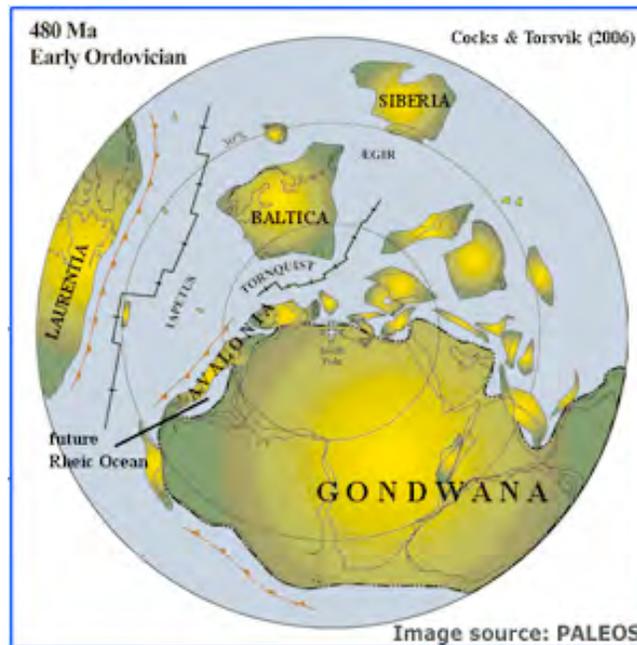
The appearance of surrealism changes. Themes are added and subtracted, some themes are constant, some keep changing and look very different under different circumstances, some are integrated only in some surrealist activities, some become part of the wider thing.

### **Non-vanguardism**

So, surrealism is importantly subject to historical change, and maintains an active relationship with its contemporary historical situation. Still, it takes caution to remain untimely, and pride in being so, and has no ambition whatsoever to justify itself by claiming a particular shortterm historical mission. The latter in fact means that it is not a vanguardism. It will not contribute to development, it is not allied with the forefront of current change, it does not despise that which is old. In that sense it is also not a modernism, if we employ the term in the sense that many, for example Michaël Löwy in his books about romantic anticapitalism, does. There are other senses of the word

modernism, several of which will fit surrealism though. As long as we remember that it lacks the often central aspect of being a vanguardism.

However, we cannot say that surrealism "is not and has never been" a vanguardism. During its early years, it was one to the extent that it felt that its remarkable discoveries might be just what was needed to replace art, literature, aesthetics, entertainment and to fuse poetry and everyday life in a large and historically determinant scale. From 1925 on, doubts were surfacing. It was recognised in Breton's "Surrealism and Painting" that the surrealist aspect of pictorial arts probably was certain tendencies already present rather than something which should be made up *de novo* after a *tabula rasa* with the past; it was recognised that the category "poems" was not obsolete and it took its place in the journal beside the "purely" surrealist forms of texts, namely automatic texts and dream accounts; it was recognised that political action was not something to reinvent as a pure expression of surrealism, but perhaps political organisation and activism was rather a necessity on the side, a practical-historical, subjective and objective alliance, with imperatives and forms that could be very different from surrealism's own and yet still relevant to it. All of these concerns undermine the vanguardist claims, and the final expression of this "retreat" came in the the second manifesto, of 1929. In that text, the untimely character of the movement was emphasised, as well as the need to relate in specific ways to the historical circumstances yet still escape the public eye and (for the moment) stay in the shade, as well as keeping up experimenting without sticking to certain forms as if they were solutions.



So, after 1929 surrealism is not a vanguardism, even though many of its sympathisers and participants, especially in peripheral countries, still believed it to be one. And with the revolutionary upheavals and the rapid dispersion of surrealist concerns in art in the 30s, it still appeared like it might, allied with the most radical forces of the time, have stood amidst the forefront of historical change - until the defeat of the spanish revolution, and the general abandonment of hope and critical thinking in

rallying to either side of the world war in its manifest slaughter, barbarity and cretinism with unrestrained nationalist, chauvinist and rationalist ideologies. Therefore the surrealism that reorganised itself after the war was objectively something different again; something that had lost a cause. And even though it had a very favorable wind in the immediate postwar years, it was without the particular historical hope, it was a bit more like a worthwhile personal way and meaningful pastime among likeminded. Nevertheless, it refused to summarise and evaluate this experience.

### **Accumulation the 1947 way**

Several have noted that there were two major tracks in the surrealists' experience of the war. Those who spent it in nazi-occupied or otherwise openly fascist parts of Europe (such as France, Belgium, Denmark, Czechoslovakia & Romania) represent one track: to maintain or even sharpen some of the ingredients characteristic of mid- and late 30s surrealism: hegelianism, marxism, political organising and intervention, interest in natural science, bachelardism, gestural automatism in art, an almost cynical ideology criticism, etc (this complex of themes was famously emphasised in Fauré's history of the La Main à Plume group, but probably others had noted it before).

Those who spent the war west of that, far from war scenes and/or in bourgeois democracies, regardless of whether as exiles or natives, (UK, Mexico, the Caribbean, USA) typically downplayed these currents and emphasised others, that were there in surrealism too, but mostly had been far more of subcurrents during the 30s: hermeticism, mythology, politics as removed from concrete intervention (utopianism and eternal anarchism), ethnography, an antiscientific stand, romanticism, naive or mediumistic mythology themes in art, etc. (As usual, it is necessary to take caution; both paths contained local variations and contradictions of course.)

In this situation, and with a far larger number of surrealists around than ever before, it was a delicate task to reorganise the surrealist movement. Some wanted to confront and evaluate. This tendency was associated with "Cause", the new office for coordinating international and external surrealist relationships; where, it seems, some of more systemally minded french surrealists were trying to improve organisational forms together with the more theoretically impatient currents in other countries, like the Czech surrealists, English dissidents, Egyptian and Romanian hotheads. But what happened was that there was a major accumulation instead of confrontation, that the western war experiences were made the main focus in a broad integrative way that did not actually deny any aspect of whatever surrealism had once been. It was decided to focus on arranging a big impressive exhibition on a mythological theme displaying breadth and continuity to the public. The ideas to gather an international meeting to discuss experiences, directions and differences internally were turned down, and Cause soon closed down.

The nazi war experiences, or the differences in war experiences, were not subtracted nor openly denied, but they were not given a special place as a crucial theme or topic. At that point, surrealism suddenly became not just untimely but in a sense timeless, climbing up from its actual place in history to some imaginary vantage point in thin air. And still, by doing so at that particular time, it was of course also fulfilling a particular historical function by negating, in an untimely way, the post-war optimism, consumerism and faith in progress, dismissing all of capitalism, nationalism, stalinism and americanism alike. And of course, many of the surrealists of nazi war experiences,

and newcomers during the war, were estranged in this situation, some of them turning out as isolated dissidents, but many making the remarkable mistakes of rallying back to stalinist communist parties, or launching new minuscule avantgarde movements, or both.

All themes were accepted into the group, and indeed the different subgroups that had joined together in 1946-47 or had emerged in the crowd there had quite different special interests and perhaps not so much common ground except a general commitment. The "La Revolution la nuit" group had joined as a unit, but the circles around other recent rallying points like the "Clair de Terre" and "Troisième convoi" and especially the main wartime nexus the "La Main à Plume" group were only partially absorbed; the "dandy surrealists" emerged; there were philosophers, bataillans, occultists, architects, cineasts and jazzfans; people returning from exiles in the US, Latin America, the UK; old seasoned activists, antifascists, trotskyists, syndicalists; groupuscules of recently arrived exiles from Czechoslovakia, Romania, Egypt; etc. Perhaps there was a similarity to the situation in 1925 in that no obvious direction was to be discerned, especially not since the option of assuming one had been actively turned down in favour of a unified broad manifestation? Obviously it wasn't enough to focus on some rather nearby enemy, such as the soon emerging coalition of surrealists of nazi war experience that weirdly tried to return to the fold of the stalinist Communist Parties, or the fashionable existentialists, eager to replace surrealism as a trend, while the surrealists didn't give them much attention at all back. The series of purgings taking place 1948-51 still seem strange, hardly warranted by the reasons given, and it has been suggested (Richardson & Fijalkowski) that they were in fact consciously or unconsciously a ritual fire bath to create a new sense of tribal cohesion in the new period with the new people (almost all prewar members were thrown out in the purgings).

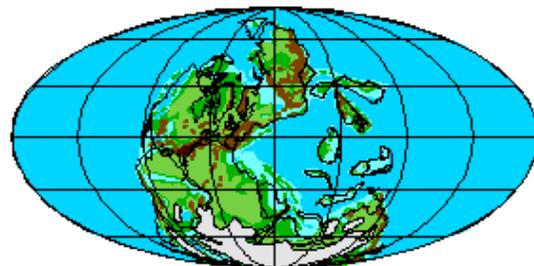
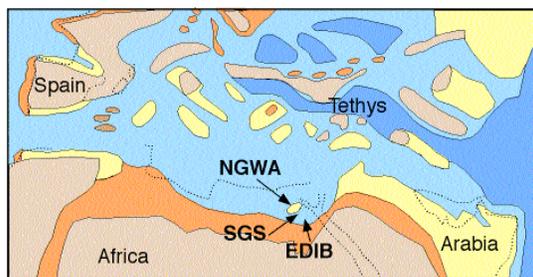
An apparent historical nivellation of surrealism's perspectives and themes, which turns out to be instead merely a clean sweep with the plethora of available contradictions and personal varieties and reservations, is that what it is? Which indeed guaranteed surrealism's survival throughout the low tide of the postwar decades, among other things by making it something of a secret society, which had a mission on the eternal level which it would usually not put to test against petty situations and contradictions in such unimportant times? An ark, simply put? (famously, the "second ark" was the title of Breton's catalog preface when the 1947 exhibition moved to Prague). It was quite obvious how the beloved ark metaphor became very fitting for the Czech group with the repression and censorship they were facing, but in France? At least it is not strange that a lot of surrealists or would-be-surrealists were unsatisfied, or disappointed, or pissed off, when they wanted to act on the basis of their own war experiences, and when they wanted to apply tools of pre-war surrealism in particular strategic ways on post-war situations, or just keep the level of immediate subversion relatively high; and found no support for it. It is not strange that the emergence of the new popular movements in the 60s created an unbearable tension which seemed to demand a rebirth of surrealism.

### **Accumulation the 60s way**

It was quite another thing for the new groups emerging in the 60s. When thus reinventing a movement it seems necessary to assume the right to the freedom of picking up any themes from the past that might fill a new relevance in the new context.

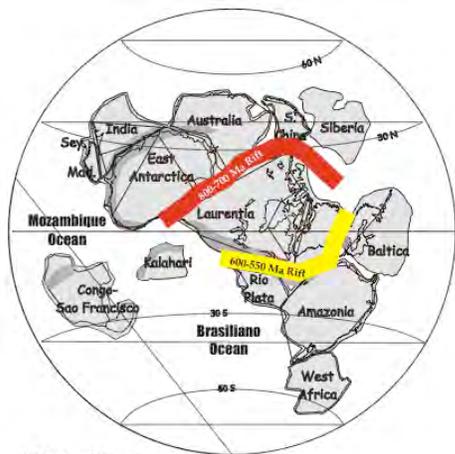
It might be necessary of course to understand the steps, abandonments and departures made throughout history up to then, but it is not necessary to defend the victorious or the orthodox part in each such contradiction. All of these old fights and positionings were necessary in order to take us where we are today as an inclusive collective and a real movement, but it is not always necessary now to take sides – and especially not to take the side that won – in conflicts that already have had their historical effect. Some decisive turns may be reconsidered, and understood as strategic mistakes or expressions of historical necessities of very limited extension.

When starting a new activity it is about trying to find the angles and attack points of surrealism's many-faceted body that seems most relevant to one's own historical situation (often by potentially negating the immediate expectations in that situation) and to one's own subjective desires (often by replacing known wishes with unknown wishes and wishes for the unknown); in that sense, surrealism is confusingly rich and the options are numerous. Yet not arbitrary or wide open. Any version of surrealism concocted must have an inner coherence and make enough sense in relation to other points of contact within the surrealist movement, be they recent, old or very old, to allow for joint experimenting and investigating, and eventually for mutual confrontation of directions.



Thus, the new activities arriving in and reinventing surrealism in the 60s based in the new radicalism paradigm of the day, was just like the 1947 historical compromise on one level a timeless-like smorgasbord of surrealism's entire width of themes and standpoints. And yet they were not all represented there. One of the main points was to pick up and combine the radical aspects of marxism, anarchism, psychoanalysis, anthropology, hegelianism, hermeticism and popular culture – and not just to pick up and combine them, but also to emphasise that some constellation of that general kind is necessary for each to develop its emancipatory content, and to emphasise the very political edge of them at the same time as the imaginative potential, and the aspect of humour. This is most easily seen in the Chicago group (and emphasised as such in for example Ron Sakolsky's *Surrealist subversions*) but something similar was present in some form in all of the new activities of that time.

Thus, we see that these two historical cases (1947 and 60s) of reinventions of accumulated or timeless surrealisms, constructions of a surrealism beside time, did not create arbitrary selections nor a neutral nivellated smorgasbord of themes, but instead were specific responses to particular historical demands on the organisational level. The 1960s one appear fairly unproblematic, but the 1947 one was controversial and still remains so.



1: Meert and Torsvik.



### Attempted subtractions

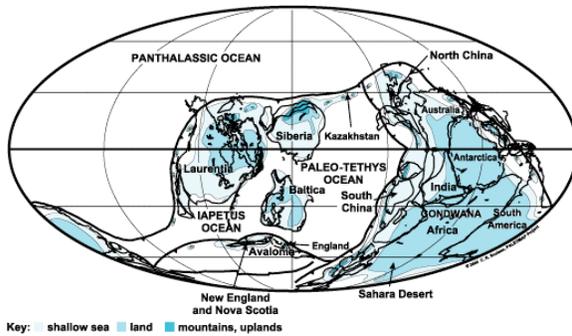
Let's, on the other hand, take a quick look at some subtractions popularly attempted. Many try to subtract politics; especially people in the process of making careers, or hoping to attain such by appearing to be in line with current trends. Many try to subtract the historical break with purely aesthetic concerns, or the historical *change of arena* from the high society and careers of art, literature and academia. Some even try to subtract the historical break with christianity. Some try to subtract collectivity, feeling content to do their little experimenting alone, or shy. Some try to subtract hermeticism, somehow constricting the "open rationalism" central to surrealism into a more or less narrow rationalism, as a clumsy overexaggeration of the combat against the misconception of surrealism as an irrationalism, and against current religious horrors. Some try to subtract artistic creation, as a clumsy overexaggeration of the combat against artistic careerism and spectacular functioning of images in society in general.

Obviously, subtracting either of these particular big parts makes such a big difference that it may become very difficult to be solidaric with the history and experience of the movement, and perhaps difficult to attain any coherence of the project that is not just personal-eclectic or short-term instrumental. Of course, it remains open to give each of these aspects more or less emphasis in one's own activity, but to actually subtract them appears to create a platform which may perhaps no longer be surrealism.

What's your favourite subtraction? In fact, many subtractions are possible without a fatal effect. Indeed, with most of surrealism's classic positionings and classic sources, it remains healthy and partly exciting to reinterrogate, reevaluate and scrutinise them.

If some want to subtract the pictorial world of 30s surrealism, this is obviously not a problem since it was a particular field of investigation. If some want to subtract automatism, this is obviously not a problem since it is a method among others for exploring the poetic world; or rather, an attitude or disposition that takes expression in certain methods, so that it will possibly always find expression in the field of surrealist experimentation, voluntarily or not. If many people want to subtract say communism, this is not a big issue because communism as such was never an essential part of the surrealist project, it was, and in fact repeatedly turns out to be again, just one reasonable political application/alliance of surrealism's essential revolutionary and emancipatory

quest. So subtracting communism is strictly speaking in a sense not possible, when communism as such has never there been as a basic component part to start with. Some of those who want to subtract communism are perhaps convinced anarchists, who want to reinterpret the eternal sympathy and undeniable similarities between surrealism and anarchism as something which also would mean a necessary association on that level of practical political alliances, thus violating the more fundamental surrealist attitude that such alliances are necessarily conditional and temporary. Others who claim to want to subtract communism, seem to be those who in fact rather would like to subtract active politics, practical solidarity outside a chosen circle, constructive applications of nonconformism, ardent anticapitalism, and revolutionary aims in general, and that, that is a bearing balk which cannot be subtracted without fatal consequences, but on the other hand always will need reinvention as particular implimentations proper to the specific historical circumstances.



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### Surrealism's phoenix act in the 60s

In the 60s the tension grew, when the traditional basis for surrealism had shrunk back into being a rather self-contained (untimely indeed) small circle of radical intellectuals passing on the tradition, a sort of secret doctrine (in fact exactly like waning anarchism at the same time!), while at the same time there was a completely new paradigm of radicalism emerging, partly more integrative and experimental and easily congruent with surrealism already to start with. The surrealist groupings that were surfacing at

this time (Chicago group, TransformaCtion in the UK, BRSB in the Netherlands, the new Bruxelles group, etc) appear to have been so much more unproblematically based in the new paradigm, with everyday politics, counterculture identity, direct democracy, psychedelia, reinvented anarchism, youth culture and youth revolt, situationism and other modernist-ultraradical currents, etc (and were perhaps partly lacking the background), while the Paris group seems to have been emphasising the heritage, the ark function, adapting to the new ideas only slowly and as something external.



I keep reading the old issues of *l'Archibras* and the *Bulletin de Liaison surréaliste*, and Joubert's revealing book *Le Mouvement des Surréalistes, ou le fin mot de l'Histoire* as being to a rather large extent about the problematic inception of new radicalism into french surrealism. It has been said many times that the dissolution of the french group in 1969 was an effect of the demoralisation following Breton's death and the failure to engage immediately, collectively, effectively and organically in the '68 movement which instead appeared like a sudden external confirmation of much of surrealism out of the blue. Some people have emphasised, and it is clearly demonstrated in Joubert's book, that this is to a large extent due to mistakes, irrelevant ambitions, blind spots and erroneous priorities of the leadership of the french group at the time (Schuster et cie). However, what is also dramatically striking in Joubert's book is the lack of democratic structure in the french group in the 60s, the immense damage a faulty leader could do simply because everybody followed him or else they were isolated. In that sense, it was not only the case that the things going on in society leading up to '68 was ignored because a leader didn't know where to look, but also the very fact that everybody was following a leader was itself a symptom of the ignorance of the currents of the time.

Now of course this polarisation is not clearcut, with each real surrealist activity comprising certain elements of both paradigms. And especially Prague appears to have had an ambiguous role, resurfacing apparently part of a new broad movement, yet with most of their critical edge and impact due to a strong traditional approach. Indeed the czech had been carrying the torch through decades of darkness and clandestinity, taking

great care not to allow any compromise of the doctrine, yet still when they reemerged czech surrealism had a distinct flavor of new radicalism, new everyday politics and psychedelia, while clearly demarcating itself against (though of course not necessarily denouncing) much of such more "popular" forms of resistance. In the *Bulletin de Liaison surréaliste* - the organ of the French "antiliquidationists" but also very much devoted to expressing the international movement and especially being an organ of the czech almost as much as of the french (this was in stark contrast to other french post-war surrealist journals, that were purely french journals with individual contributors from abroad and occasional letters or notes reporting about there being surrealist activities in other countries) - the new approaches are in focus, but still rather much in a classical framework, and much of the content is still about keeping the old flame alive in the face of official liquidationism. This tendency is far more dominating in the subsequent anthology *La Civilisation surréaliste*, clearly represent a hermetic approach, caring for the secrets, establishing a hidden place for the eternal flame, keeping the voice down, focusing on an irreducible epistemology and endless problematisations, refusing all simplifications - all in a very clear methodological opposition to the ultraradicalism, pedagogic and propagandist simplifications, quick alliancemakings and proud orthodoxy of especially american surrealism at the time (but, it must be noted, not at all in polemics or antagonism towards that current; instead they were the two fraternal poles of the field of postclassic surrealist activity against the liquidationists).

(Another issue where this image/categorisation seems compelling to me is in various recent bickering between the Madrid and Stockholm groups - with both being partly troublesome mavericks of the surrealist movement one might expect Madrid and Stockholm to have a lot in common. Yet I think there might be some explanatory power in regarding Madrid as founded in a very classical surrealism and moving along the path of ultraradicalism and iconoclasm, while Stockholm is founded in the "modern" paradigm and recently moving into focusing on a defense of surrealism; setting out from opposite directions, Madrid and Stockholm meet at the open sea at night, without really sharing a critical language, exchanging some fireworks in a thick mist...)

So what was born in this specific transition was modern-day surrealism, post-classic surrealism, 3rd generation surrealism, or post-bretonian surrealism. Something completely different than, yet exactly the contemporary manifestation of, classic surrealism. Far more democratic, even more internationalist, even further removed from within-artistic concerns and art world, more underground, even more activist, just as nonconformist and uncompromising and antiutilist and non-pragmatic and hermetic and traditionalist, far more interested and versed in popular culture and new popular forms of resistance, even more insisting on collectivity and game-playing... here we are.

Mattias Forshage