

Surrealism: A Global Cultural Movement with Local Political Agency

Lauren Walden, Coventry University, UK

The IAFOR International Conference on Global Studies 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Surrealism is a cosmopolitan cultural movement that transcends the very notion of a nation-state. Notwithstanding, it has been canonised as Paris-centric, which belies its global expanse. Whilst surrealism's cultural impact remains globally untrammelled, it empirically mustered political dissent in the local politics of Haiti, Martinique and Mexico. I postulate that Surrealism's political impact was greater locally since it misaligned with the internationalist dogma of Marxism. Furthermore, Surrealism successfully subsumed the cooperation of local intellectuals who wrote under the auspices of Breton. In Martinique, Breton collaborates on a journal called *Tropiques* edited by Aime Césaire in which tacit denunciations of the Vichyssoise authorities occur. Césaire would later become a deputy in the French parliament representing his local constituency of Martinique, safeguarding surrealist political endeavors by founding the Martinican progressive party. In Haiti, Andre Breton delivered an inaugural lecture in front of their President Lescot in which he elaborated an alternative to his repressive regime. Subsequently, an anti-government journal, *La Ruche*, dedicated an issue to Breton for which they were later arrested. Ultimately, Lescot was overthrown. In Mexico, Breton was invited as French Culture attaché. He met with Octavio Paz who was himself cultural attaché to the Mexican embassy, concurrently imbricated in surrealist politics. Again, this fomented localised political penetration of surrealism through culture. Negotiating the interstices between politics and culture, surrealism played a bilateral, localised diplomatic role in aiding 'peripheral' countries to acquire a greater presence in international relations whilst promoting their autonomous artistic output in copious journals.

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Surrealism: A global cultural movement with local political agency

Surrealism is a cosmopolitan cultural movement that transcends the very notion of a nation-state. Notwithstanding, it has been canonised as Paris-centric, which belies its global expanse. Whilst surrealism's cultural impact remains globally untrammelled, it empirically mustered political dissent in the local politics of Haiti, Martinique and Mexico. Undoubtedly, Surrealism's political impact was greater locally since it could not align with the internationalist dogma of Marxism and the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Surrealism successfully subsumed the cooperation of local intellectuals who wrote under the auspices of its founder Andre Breton. In Martinique, Breton collaborates on a journal called *Tropiques* edited by Martiniquais intellectuals Aimé and Suzanne Césaire in which tacit denunciations of the Vichysoise authorities occur. Césaire would later become a deputy in the French parliament representing his local constituency of Martinique, safeguarding surrealist political endeavours by founding the Martiniquais progressive party. In Haiti, Andre Breton delivered an inaugural lecture in front of the nation's dictatorial President Lescot in which he elaborated a surrealist alternative to his repressive regime. In Haiti surrealism is viewed as a political ideology for the first time. Less than a month later, an anti-government journal dedicated an entire issue to Breton for which they were subsequently arrested. Notwithstanding, Lescot was ultimately overthrown. In Mexico, Breton was invited as French Cultural Attaché. In Paris, He first met with Octavio Paz who was cultural attaché to the Mexican embassy whilst imbricated in surrealist politics, again fomenting localised political penetration of surrealism. The diplomatic role of Andre Breton, the founder of surrealism, is wholly unexplored. I wish to argue that by negotiating the interstices between politics and culture, surrealism played a bilateral, localized diplomatic role in aiding 'peripheral' countries to acquire a greater role in international relations whilst promoting their autonomous artistic output in copious journals.

Very briefly, surrealism is defined by Breton as 'Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express...the actual functioning of thought...in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.' (1969:26) Despite this psychological preoccupation, a key current of its thought was anti-colonial. This is perhaps why surrealists had a brief allegiance to the french communist party before differences became irreconcilable due to the freedom of expression inherent in surrealist practice of psychic automatism. Concomitantly , the surrealists attempted to commingle the philosophies of Marx and Freud and communism and subjective psychology did not go hand in hand. Therefore ,I hope to prove surrealist political engagement read outside of metropolitan french circles is in keeping with cosmopolitan ideals, especially after their cessation with the communists in 1933. In other words it is through a cosmopolitan prism that the global success story of surrealism can be sufficiently explained.

Surrealism had its greatest political impact in turbulent island communities. First of all I turn to Martinique in the Caribbean. During world war two Breton fled to this Outremer Island on his way to New York to escape France's Vichy regime, although the island itself was under Vichy control. One would thus have expected Breton and his disciples to take copious photographs during their stay on the island in order to testify to the horror induced by Nazi collaboration. Having set a precedent for photo-literary works in *Nadja* and *L'amour Fou*, Breton comments in the Preface to

Martinique Snake Charmer (2008) that 'If photographic images were to be taken of this sort of Andre Masson and myself and published in Fort-de-France they would without a doubt reveal contradicting expressions, intolerable malaise on the one hand and radiance on the other.' (39) I feel that Breton is hinting here at the censorship of the Vichy regime but also at the impossibility to convey a unified vision of Martinique through the photographic medium known for its verisimilitude. Given that photography was the most accessible medium to promote a cosmopolitan image due to its indexical relation to the real, it would appear they did not wish to give the collaborationist Vichy regime the fame and glory that it sought. Instead, an exotic elegy to Martinique is deemed more appropriate.

Indeed, Andre Masson took to drawing illustrations of the island of its peoples ensconced in tropes of forestry and totems (see Ikoku: 2015). In respect to autochthones inhabitants these images as less sexually explicit than standard surrealist fare whereby a muse is photographed in a ludic, intellectual manner. The global surrealist movement here adapts to local circumstance. When he reached his final exile in the US, the Antilles continued to inspire Masson. His eponymous painting series shows the contours of the female body figuratively drenched in a cornucopia of colour, vibrancy and movement. Again, this is a much more detached and restrained perspective than much surrealist photography which perhaps shows that in the case of Martinique, surrealism was taken very seriously. For instance, Aimé Césaire wife Suzanne Césaire is praised literarily and not depicted aesthetically. All the Martiniquais surrealists engaged on literary terms, I believe Breton adapted his travelogue to suit the cultural predilections of Martiniquais surrealists. Indeed back in 1933 a group of Martiniquais students published a one issue journal called *Légitime Défense* aligning themselves with the surrealists and propounding greater rights for black peoples resident in France. The authorities later censored the journal. It would seem that vis a vis race-relations, discourse was the ultimate form of expression, over-reliance on aesthetics would perhaps be seen to depict an island paradise instead of grapple with social issues, reminiscent of the paintings of Martinique by Paul Gauguin in which the island resembles a plentiful Cockaigne.

Aimé Césaire, who founded the transnational negritude movement, was a poet and the pride of Martinique. His wife Suzanne Césaire wrote the article 1943: surrealism and us in their journal *Tropiques*. She commensurately aligns the psychic and political goals of surrealism commenting: "Surrealism has evolved...when Breton created surrealism, the most urgent task was to liberate the mind from the shackles of absurd logic and so-called reason. But in 1943, when liberty itself is threatened throughout the world, surrealism can be summed up with a single magic word: liberty." (Césaire :1943) Naturally, Aimé Césaire was aware that surrealism had ceased to adhere to the French Communist Party. This did not stop his hagiographic praise of Breton. Ultimately, the only tenet of communism that really attracted Césaire was its anti-colonialism. When explaining his reasons for adherence, he states: 'J'ai adhéré au Parti communiste parce que, dans le monde mal guéri du racisme où persiste l'exploitation féroce des populations coloniales, le Parti communiste incarne la volonté de travailler effectivement à l'avènement du seul ordre social et politique que nous puissions accepter - parce que fondé sur le droit à la dignité de tous les hommes sans distinction d'origine, de religion et de couleur. (Cheymol: 2010:194) If we analyse the word 'seul' closely here perhaps Césaire is hinting that communism is simply the lesser evil given that it appears the only regime that could offer equality to

the oppressed. Notwithstanding, Césaire used surrealist tactics to lobby on behalf of his peoples: he granted parity to politics and culture. He profoundly states ‘C'est dire qu'écraser le sujet, c'est écraser la culture.’ (ibid) The subject or the individual is something communist dogma left no room for and this was something Césaire could no longer justify. His newly founded progressive party towed equilibrium between Martiniquais concerns and the plight of the wider world, the ultimate form of local-global governance. Ultimately, Aimé Césaire wielded more political power than André Breton could dream of and acted as a diplomatic intermediary between the French metropole and his own Martiniquais people to attenuate the yoke of France.

We now travel to another island-nation, Haiti, where we see Breton at his most influential. In 1945 he delivered an inaugural lecture to Haitian society including the erstwhile president himself. This was arranged by French Cultural Attaché Pierre Mabille, a fellow surrealist and psychiatrist. Facilitated by governmental links, Breton recasts surrealism as a revolutionary program and conceives the genesis of the movement as such. In his speech he viscerally invokes the poverty of the Haitian people commenting ‘la condition de l'homme est ici forte différente de ce qu'elle est dans les pays plus économiquement évolués. (Breton : 1999) He renders the material dialectic an ontological condition that defines men. In other words, man is defined by what he possesses. Furthermore, he cites the revolutionary past of the Haitian people as the first autonomous black nation as further impetus to rise up against injustice. Breton appeals both to popular instincts for dissent and to a more intellectual coterie. He briefly summarises ‘toute la démarche de la pensée moderne, cette pensée qui est venue normalement a Marx par Hegel comme est venue normalement a Hegel par maître Eckhart et par Kant.’ (Breton: 1999) Tracing the origins of modern thought back to Kant requires tracing the origins of modern thought back to the cosmopolitan dream elaborated by Kant of a federation of nation states. Furthermore, Kant comments in his idea for a cosmopolitan right that cosmopolitanism is ‘a principle of humanity as and end in itself.’ (Rorty: 2009:86) If we predicate these comments on the materialist ontology identified by Breton, man's material wealth should be determined on a worldwide basis instead of one bound to nation-states and borders. This is however, not akin to Marxism whereby the stare withers away, but a Kantian cosmopolitanism encouraging cooperation between countries. In this spirit, Breton links Haiti's situation to the global commenting ‘ il est peu des signes qui permettent d'augurer d'un prochain nivellement des besoins et des ressources a l'échelle internationale.’ (Breton: 1999)

After Andre Breton's speech a Haitian journal entitled *La Ruche* published his lecture, which spread dissent amongst the Haitian youth. That said, Breton assumes a form of diplomatic immunity by which he rescinds the possibility of any revolutionary role. In his second lecture he comments ‘vous comprenez certainement que les conditions définies pour celles de mon séjour a Haïti m'interdisent de formuler une appréciation sur les évènements qui se sont déroulés la semaine dernière dans votre pays.’ (Breton: 1999) The lectures turn more towards cultural topics. His second lecture charts the origins of ‘activité créatrice’ predominantly from a literary standpoint and his third does the same with painting. It appears that when imbricated in the historical domain Breton is only versed in eurocentrism and does not elaborate a non-hegemonic cultural history, which could be read as cosmopolitan. A brief discussion of world art is discussed in the 5th lecture as a ‘parenthèse.’ This is in stark contrast to his admiration of Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite. Geis (2015) cites a comment left by

Breton in the visitor's book of the Centre d'Art in Port au Prince: Haitian painting will drink the blood of the phoenix. And, with the epaulets of [Jean-Jacques] Dessalines, it will ventilate the world. 'This is indeed a thinly veiled clarion-call to arms by Breton. Dessalines being of course the first Haitian revolutionary declaring the country independent of France in 1804. Indeed, we can intuit the revolutionary fervor of Hyppolite's paintings aligning with the surrealist practice of objective chance in a painting purchased by Andre Breton called *Oguon Ferraille*, depicting a voodoo god juggling the syncretic demands of the world from Christianity to weapons of war like a game of cards. Sexuality and the malleability of form coexist alongside more belligerent works as in global surrealist practice. Following a recommendation by Breton, Hyppolite's works were shown to an international audience at the UNESCO exhibiton in Paris of 1947. It would seem then that Breton was the *eminence grise* of 1940's French cultural diplomacy, creating a cosmopolitan agenda for an international cultural organization, revising the age-old Eurocentric canon. For Breton, revolution was both cultural and political.

This element of cultural diplomacy brings me on to my final case study of Mexico. In this instance, Breton is venerated with a formal diplomatic role; That of French Cultural Attaché. Fortuitously, he had previously made the acquaintance of Octavio Paz in Paris when he worked for the Mexican embassy. Breton's former allies the PCF tried to sabotage Breton's visit by collaborating with their Mexican counterparts (Brad: 1996) Despite this, Octavio Paz signaled the movements broad reach, its interdisciplinarity commensurate with its cosmopolitan intent. Paz comments *el surrealismo es un movimiento de liberación total, no una escuela poética*. Paz was both a poet and a diplomat enabling him to enjoy multiple spheres of influence both on a popular and esoteric level around the world. For all the boycotting of Breton's pursuits the international exhibition of surrealism was held in Mexico further to its predecessors in London and Paris.

Breton was hosted by revolutionary Mexican mural artist Diego Riviera who facilitated Breton's meeting with Trotsky. Together they wrote Manifesto for an independent revolutionary art.' Although Trotsky preferred it to be signed by Riviera as he was himself an artist. Together they state 'Artistic opposition is right now one of the forces that can effectively help to discredit and overthrow the regimes that are stifling the rights of the exploited class to aspire to a better world along with all the sense of human greatness or even dignity.' Invoking Marx's writings on the freedom of the press, the duo call for a 'complete freedom of art.' Although this maxim could be dismissed as utopian and unachievable, surrealist cultural diplomacy has managed to navigate avenues that would be unavailable to Breton through untrammelled political statements. Mexico is ruled militarily at the time and publishing an overtly political work with Trotsky would have indeed been incendiary. Cosmopolitan cultural connections are able to impregnate boundaries much more effectively than purely political endeavours. That said, the goal of the manifesto in both of their own words is the following 'When a preliminary international contact has been established through the press and by correspondence, we will proceed to the organisation of local and national congresses on a modest scale. The next step will be to convene a world congress that will officially mark the foundation of the international federation.' Indeed, this would be the cultural equivalent of the Kantian federation of states. After world war two, Breton and Trotsky's ambitions could be said to have been realised in the founding of UNESCO .It is interesting to presage the advent of this international,

cosmopolitan organisation through the prism of left-wing radicalism. It would of course, take the deaths of millions to grant liberty to culture, not just an Avant-garde chimera however *avant la lettre* it may be. Whilst many view Breton as somewhat of an anti-authoritarian figure, I believe he skilfully manipulated his cosmopolitan contacts to gain political agency on the world stage. Indeed, it would seem that Breton was completely in support of UNESCO's politics, having donated paintings by Hyppolite for them to exhibit and promoting French culture in a governmental post.

Upon his return to France, Breton became more overtly critical of the Mexican government. He included photographs of Manuel Alvarez Bravo with the publication of his own article 'souvenir of Mexico' in the surrealist journal *Minotaure*. *Striking worker murdered* explicitly shows the brutality of the military junta, which co-exists with pre-Colombian Mexican rituals such as the day of the dead shown on the right. It would seem then that Mexico is a land ensconced in the death-throes of its own creation. Indeed, Breton once again appeals to revolutionary fervour by citing previous Mexican revolutions in his article. He poetically refers to the 'wind in 1810, 1910.' Indeed this is the political technique he would go on to use in Haiti as I previously mentioned. His piece reads like a poetic sociology, whereby the 'mythological past' of Mexico is contrasted with raw data. Breton notes that 'the infant mortality rate in Mexico is 75 per cent.' Furthermore, Breton cites photographs of the revolutionary period as 'exalting', a technique he adopts himself in the article and elsewhere in surrealist texts fomenting the power of photography's indexical relation to the real. Despite this, Breton's direct influence in Mexico is minimal although he did influence home-grown Mexican intellectuals such as Octavio Paz who would later rebel from their government's stance and resign. It would appear as Breton himself states that "great uprisings seem to be a thing of the past."

By way of conclusion, it would seem then that a cosmopolitan surrealism involves the commingling of east and west, politics and culture, official and non-official. The blurring of these lines is, however, often problematic. That said, the fruit of interdisciplinary endeavours and a cosmopolitan network of local contacts grants surrealism a surreptitious political agency on a worldwide scale that has yet to be explored. I feel that we can view the surrealists through the prism of cultural diplomacy not as Joseph Nye's seminal elaboration of 'Soft Power', which aims at coercive cooperation between states, but as a back door to inciting localised revolt through global engagement. Undoubtedly, Surrealism was most politically powerful in the Caribbean. The surrealists worked within the machinations of multilateral diplomacy to propagate their cosmopolitan message. Whilst Surrealism influenced governmental figures in Mexico, Martinique and Haiti, the surrealists probably had the least political agency in their entity of origin, Metropolitan France.

References

Anon (1931) 'Légitime défense.'. *Légitime défense*.

Bradou, Fabienne, (2012) *André Breton En México*.

Breton, André,, (1969) *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

Breton, André,, Parmentier, Michel,, Amboise, Jacqueline d',, (1995) *Free Rein = La Clé Des Champs*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press

Breton, André,, Hubert, Étienne-Alain., (1999) *Oeuvres complètes 3*. [Paris]: Gallimard

Breton, André,, Masson, André,, (2008) *Martinique : Snake Charmer*. Austin: University of Texas Press

Cheymol, Marc,, Ollé-Laprune, Philippe., Arnold, A. James, (ed.) (2010) . 'Aimé Césaire à l'Œuvre : Actes Du Colloque International'. Paris: Agence universitaire de la francophonie : ITEM : Éditions des archives contemporaines

Geis, T., (2015) 'Myth, History and Repetition: André Breton and Vodou in Haiti'. *Scr South Central Review* 32 (1), 56-75

Ikoku, A. A., (2015) 'Forêts Del Sur and the Pretexts of Glissant's Tout-Monde'. *Small Axe* 19 (2 47), 1-28

Ménil, René., Césaire, Aimé., *Tropiques*. Paris

Rorty, Amélie., Schmidt, James., (2009) *Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim : A Critical Guide*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge