

In the Air: Technology, Colonialism, and the Space Race in Postwar Surrealist Journals

Claire Howard

In the postwar period, Paris-based surrealist journals played a vital role in conveying the group's responses to major cultural developments specific to that era. André Breton alluded to one such topic, the "space race" — an outgrowth of the missile race between the Cold War's American and Soviet superpowers — in his catalogue preface accompanying the 1959 *Exposition internationale du Surréalisme* (EROS). Breton grounded the exhibition's exploration of eroticism in its times, writing, "Rien ne peut faire que l'idée qui l'anime ne soit aujourd'hui 'dans l'air' (si l'expression avait cours, c'est seulement de nos jours qu'elle s'est concrètement, on ne peut plus dramatiquement, chargée de sens)" 'Nothing can alter the fact that the idea behind it is today very much 'in the air' (even though the expression has had currency for some time, it is only in our days that it has become concretely and dramatically pregnant with meaning)' ("Aux exposants" 7; "Introduction" 381-82).¹ Breton's reference to the newfound significance of the phrase "in the air" suggests that recent developments in space exploration, from the 1957 launch of the Sputnik I satellite to the 1959 inauguration of the Luna series of lunar orbiters and landers, were on his mind as the surrealists organized the EROS exhibition. Surrealist journals from the 1950s and 1960s reflect the group's profound misgivings regarding the mounting space race, into which Charles de Gaulle thrust France soon after his return to leadership.

In 1959, as he attempted to bring an end to the Algerian War, de Gaulle announced plans to initiate a French orbital space program that would establish Europe as the "third space power" (Geppert 10). By 1962, de Gaulle had negotiated Algerian independence, concluding the struggle that had consumed France and

¹ Breton's use of the phrase "in the air" evokes Pablo Picasso's *The Scallop Shell* ("Notre avenir est dans l'air") (1912), which reproduced a brochure issued by the Michelin company in support of the French government's aviation program. The pamphlet's tricolor cover suggests the centrality of nationalism to this effort, echoed several decades later in France's entry into the space race. See "Pablo Picasso, *The Scallop Shell*"; Cox 267-68. Breton would purchase a smaller, related work at auction in 1965. See "Notre avenir est dans l'air." I am grateful to Gavin Parkinson for pointing out the connection to Picasso's painting.

Algeria for eight years. The pace of space exploration quickened, however. In journals such as *Le surréalisme, même* (1956-1959), *Bief, jonction surréaliste* (1958-1960), *Front unique* (new series, 1959-1960), and *La brèche, action surréaliste* (1961-1965) the surrealists often discussed space exploration in terms that echo their objections to the Algerian War.² It was not lost on the group that the proposed conquest of outer space coincided with the dismantling of empires on earth. Surrealists saw in the rhetoric of a “race” into space an echo of the larger Gaullist and Cold War cultures of nationalism, competition, and aggression — with potentially disastrous outcomes. For the surrealists, blind faith in the scientific and technological advances that would take people to the moon represented a second coming of positivism that imperiled both individual freedom and inner life, raising the specter of a roboticization of humanity. The surrealists’ campaign against space exploration culminated in an artwork created for *L’écart absolu* (Absolute Deviation), the group’s 1965 exhibition. The *Désordinateur* (Dis-computer) parodied and decried the consumerism and technophilia corrupting imagination and everyday existence, including the role that “cosmonautisme” played in these phenomena. The surrealist discourse around space exploration in their journals thus grew out of their broader concern for liberty on both the personal and political levels. To understand its origins, it is necessary to first examine the terms of surrealism’s opposition to colonialism and historically complicated relationship with science and technology before tracing the surrealist response to specific events in the accelerating space race and their cultural impact.

The Language of Anticolonialism

Jean Schuster summarized the centrality of anticolonialism to the surrealist worldview in a manuscript with edits by Breton, written between 1954 and 1956, early in the Algerian conflict: “L’émancipation absolue des peuples coloniaux et d’une manière plus générale la reprise de conscience des civilisations originales dites ‘de couleurs’ est toujours apparue aux surréalistes comme l’une des nécessités le plus impératives de l’émancipation humaine tout entière” “The absolute emancipation of colonized people and, more generally, the recovery of consciousness of the original so-called ‘colored’ civilizations has always appeared to the surrealists as one of the most imperative necessities of human emancipation

² This contradicts Geppert’s assertion that “[t]ogether with its civilian use, the absence of manned space activities in Western Europe may also help to explain why an organized anti-space movement has never evolved, not even an intermittent, anti-space discourse among the intellectual elites,” particularly considering the widespread protests against atomic power and weapons (10).

as a whole.³ As Carole Reynaud-Paligot observes, the surrealists' opposition to colonialism in the 1920s and '30s predated that of many of their peers, who did not embrace the topic until the postwar period. Surrealists were at the forefront of opposition to the Algerian War as well, joining two of the earliest groups advocating for Algerian independence in late 1954: the Comité pour la libération de Messali Hadj and the Trotskyite and anarchist-aligned Comité de lutte contre la répression coloniale (34-36).⁴ While surrealist agitation against the war peaked with the 1960 "Declaration of the 121," only two months after the 1 November 1954 Algerian uprising that initiated the conflict, a brief editorial "Déclaration" in the January 1955 issue of *Médium: Communication surréaliste* backed members of the Fédération Communiste Libertaire persecuted by the French government for supporting the Algerian insurgency. The Algerian liberation struggle would become a frequent touchstone in the group's subsequent journal, *Le surréalisme, même* (fig. 1).

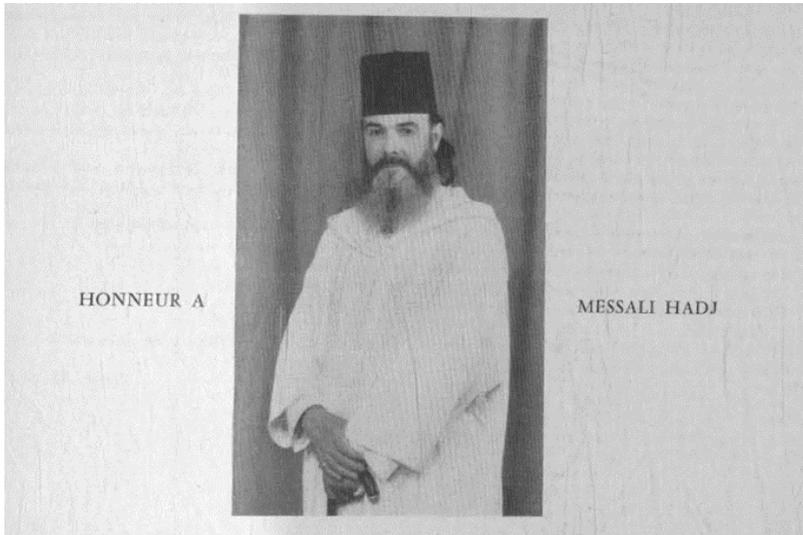


Figure 1: Photograph of Messali Hadj reproduced in *Le surréalisme, même*, no. 2 (Spring 1957). Photographer unknown.

³ Translations are provided by the author unless otherwise noted. Sophie Leclercq examines this and other postwar surrealist manuscripts to demonstrate the centrality of concepts such as legitimacy, insubordination, and intellectual responsibility to postwar discourse around colonialism, noting that the surrealists' use of these terms predates that of their contemporaries.

⁴ Reynaud-Paligot argues that surrealism's alignment with Trotskyite and anarchist groups at the beginning of the 1950s contributed to its "precocious" interest in the Algerian cause (34).

Mobilization against the war did not become a mainstream leftist intellectual cause until the founding of the Comité d'action des intellectuels contre la poursuite de la guerre en Afrique du Nord in November 1955 (Reynaud-Paligot 34-35). In April 1956, Breton addressed a meeting "For the Defense of Liberty" in a speech published in the first issue of *Le surréalisme, même* that enunciated many of surrealism's political critiques of the war. In it, he reminded the audience that the surrealists had been involved in the anticolonial cause since the Rif War of 1925 and encouraged them to join the Comité d'action des intellectuels, hailing the group as upholding the values of the French Resistance which the government had betrayed. He denounced the government's persecution of Hadj and decried the arrest of journalists and censorship of the anarchist newspapers *Le libertaire* (to which he, José Pierre, Jean Schuster, and others had contributed) and *La vérité* for having published anti-war sentiments. He encouraged the gathered intellectuals to turn to Martinican poet Aimé Césaire's "Discourse on Colonialism," which underscores the centrality of racism and violence to colonialism, as "l'arme spirituelle par excellence" 'the spiritual weapon *par excellence*' ("Parlant au meeting" 5).⁵ In the journal's second issue, an editorial statement declared surrealism's unequivocal support for the uprisings in Algeria and Hungary as integral to the movement's revolutionary goals (La Rédaction, "Editorial statement").

The Algerian War eventually ushered in what the surrealists saw as another calamity: de Gaulle's return to office. The various governments of the Fourth Republic had been unable to resolve the Algerian conflict, which threatened to drive France into civil war.⁶ By late April 1958, the French Algerian settlers, who saw de Gaulle as their potential savior, called for his restoration. "The extremely grave national crisis," he had stated, might be "the beginning of a kind of resurrection" (qtd. in Jackson 463). De Gaulle was willing to return to government after twelve years and again be "useful" to his divided country. He assumed office as prime minister on 1 June 1958. De Gaulle's first act was to fly to Algiers, where on 4 June he told a cheering crowd of French soldiers and Europeans, "I have understood you," an apparent statement of solidarity (qtd. in Judt 287). The referendum establishing the Fifth Republic passed in September 1958 and de Gaulle was elected president that December. He took office in January 1959 under a new constitution that vastly expanded executive power. He used this power to work to restore the nation's standing, recalling his famous statement in his *War Memoirs* that "France cannot be France without grandeur" (qtd. in Jackson 566).

⁵ See Eburne, "Antihumanism and Terror," on the discourses of violence in surrealism and postwar anticolonial theory. As Eburne points out, Benjamin Péret saw violence as intrinsic to colonization and therefore a legitimate means of self-defense against colonizers; see Péret, "Assez de tortures!"

⁶ Alyce Mahon and Steven Harris have explored the *EROS* exhibition's focus on eroticism within the context of Gaullist politics and the Algerian War; see Mahon 143-71, and Harris.

This nationalistic striving for greatness would provide the underpinnings of the French space program (McDougall 184).

While *Le quatorze juillet*, the publication that Schuster and Dionys Mascolo launched as an organ of intellectual resistance to Gaullism and fascism in May 1958, lasted only three issues, surrealist journals offered sustained critique of de Gaulle's government and the Algerian War (Durozoi 583-84). In *Bief, jonction surréaliste*, edited by Gérard Legrand with Jean-Claude Silbermann as editorial secretary, and Jean-Jacques Lebel's *Front unique*, authors discussed the war's political aspects but emphasized its corrosive cultural effects. José Pierre argued in *Bief* against the media's treating General Jacques Massu, French hero of the Battle of Algiers, as a sex symbol while it simultaneously decried Brigitte Bardot as an enemy of the conservative family values championed by de Gaulle's administration ("Ne pas confondre" 1).⁷ Likewise, Lebel discussed the intertwining of the valorization of morality with fascism and colonialism ("Devenir" 34-36). One year after de Gaulle's return, Legrand published in *Bief* a message to fellow young surrealists and revolutionaries negotiating "l'imprécise frontière qui sépare le social du moral" 'the imprecise border separating the social and moral,' invoking the specter of war. Legrand urged his readers not to give up on the possibility of social revolution, writing, "Nous entrons sans doute dans une période où il faudra, sur le front idéologique, se comporter en prisonniers du guerre. . . . Il va falloir cesser de partir de la société pour penser la révolution, mais partir de la pensée pour tout changer, y compris — s'il se peut — la société." 'We are undoubtedly entering a period when it will be necessary, on the ideological front, to behave like prisoners of war. . . . We will have to stop starting from society to think about the revolution, but start from thought in order to change everything, including — if possible — society' ("En guise d'anniversaire" 6).

The journal editors also highlighted historical and contemporary voices against colonialism, including those of colonized people. The same issue of *Front unique* reproduced Jean-Paul Marat's 1791 defense of self-governance, "Du droit qu'ont nos colonies de secouer le joug tyrannique de la métropole" (On the Right of Our Colonies to Shake the Tyrannical Yoke of France); Algerian poet Henri Kréa's history of Algerian colonization and the "victoire de l'Esprit" 'victory of the Spirit' represented by the independence movement (19); and the resolutions of the 1959 Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists, where international delegates including Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Sekou Touré outlined their "Politique de la Culture" 'politics of culture' ("Résolution"). The surrealists also underscored the French government's betrayal of its own values through the Algerian War; Breton championed "conscience" over the depreciated notion of "honneur" 'honor' in a speech to conscientious objectors reprinted in *Bief* ("Au Gala des

⁷ See also Pierre, "Un peuple qui se décompose," on the need for French youth to escape the intellectual influence of older generations and figures such as Joan of Arc, Louis XIV, and Napoleon to overcome racism and colonialism.

Objecteurs" 4). Lebel also published a "Message from the surrealists to Polish Intellectuals" written by participants in a 1959 exhibition of Édouard Jaguer's surrealist-aligned Phases group in Poland. In it, Lebel explains, the surrealists sought to disabuse their Polish friends of any notion that France remained faithful to the values of 1789. He underscores the recent failures represented by France's colonial wars, torture and assassinations of Algerian activists, establishment of a police state, and compromise of culture, all under the guise of "la 'politique de grandeur française'" 'the 'politics of French greatness,'" an invocation of de Gaulle's guiding principle ("Avis" 4).

Facing growing international support for Algerian independence and the French public's increasing weariness with the protracted conflict, de Gaulle proposed self-determination for Algeria in September 1959.⁸ In the same year, the French president announced his space program. Given the Cold War's polarization between two superpowers and the realities of France's crumbling empire exemplified by the stalemate in Algeria, de Gaulle turned to science and technology to rebuild France's stature. In a 1968 report on the French space program's political and social implications, Massachusetts Institute of Technology political scientist Judith Ann Tegger writes that the program was, first, a political instrument and, second, a catalyst for economic modernization (1). While the program was intended to assert France's economic and military independence from the Cold War's Great Powers, Tegger points out that France was a smaller, less wealthy nation, "which out of pure political determination and without the real capacity to afford it, embarked upon a space program four years after the United States and the Soviet Union launched their first satellites." She continues, "France, under de Gaulle, has asserted a power frequently felt to be far beyond its real capacities," with such initiatives relying heavily on de Gaulle's personal credibility and strict government control over the economy, as well as nationalism and idealization of French cultural heritage (2). The space program thus aligned with Gaullist goals of restoring France's prestige, domestically and abroad, by placing the nation in direct competition with the US and Soviet Union, the only two countries already in space.⁹

In the context of the Algerian War, it is also notable that the French space program, from its outset utilized, the nation's empire on earth. As with the nuclear experiments conducted in its colonies, France used its empire as the testing ground for space exploration. In 1948, France opened two test sites in Algeria at Colomb

⁸ While de Gaulle and the National Liberation Front (FLN) began peace negotiations in Évian in June 1960, they did not reach an agreement until March 1962.

⁹ The realities of France's size and economic power would require it to collaborate on space exploration with other European nations, as well as with the US and Soviet Union; see Tegger 5. For more on the European space program, see McDougall. For a discussion of national identity's shaping the history of space flight and the importance of including countries outside the Cold War poles in space history, see Siddiqi 425-43.

Béchar and Hammaguir, which became the busiest rocket launch site outside of the US and Soviet Union (McDougall 184). The March 1962 Évian agreement that ended the Algerian War stipulated that France leave the Hammaguir installation on 1 July 1967, and required the nation to build a new launch site near Kourou, French Guiana, which conducted its first launch in 1968.¹⁰

Space conquest thus maintained links with what remained of terrestrial empires while looking to future territories beyond. As Alexander C. T. Geppert writes, while in twentieth-century thought outer space represented a utopian realm, it was also firmly linked to the contestation of earthly spaces: “An entire geography of outer space developed that presented itself as a continuation, if not a logical extension of earlier geographies of imperial expansion and colonial domination” (4). It is therefore not surprising to find denunciations of colonialism and space conquest side by side in surrealist magazines of the 1950s and 1960s. Algeria and the struggle against imperialism conditioned the surrealist response to the space race and the beginning of the French space program under de Gaulle. The conquest of outer space seemed to the surrealists like an extension of nationalist, expansionist policies and other societal ills that had led to the stalemate in North Africa. As we shall see, the same notions of conquest of new territories, confrontation with alien others, and racist ideas of the colonizers’ supposed cultural superiority that defined colonialism reappeared in the discourse of space exploration in the guise of scientific progress, to the surrealists’ alarm.¹¹

Skepticism of Science

In his *EROS* preface, Breton asserts that growing concern with “des nouvelles ambitions nourries par l’homme que de la menace d’anéantissement imminent de son espèce” “the new ambitions nourished by mankind and with the imminent threat of annihilation of the species’ is evident in the “thèse” ‘thesis’ of the erotic novel *Emmanuelle*, published anonymously the same year as the exhibition and immediately censored by de Gaulle’s government: “‘Le seul art qui soit à la mesure de l’homme de l’espace, le seul capable de le conduire plus loin que les étoiles . . . c’est l’érotisme” (“Aux exposants” 7) “‘The only art which measures up to man and space, the only one capable of leading him beyond the stars . . . is eroticism” (“Introduction” 382).¹² His statement reflects both Breton’s faith in eroticism and

¹⁰ On the construction and implications of the space center in French Guiana, see Redfield 111-84.

¹¹ Drawing on Edward Said’s discussion of the colony as spatial alter ego, Mahon writes, “French rationalism, science and technology were innately superior to what French colonialists . . . saw as the innate disorder and mysteriousness of Oriental territories and the fundamental disorganization of life in them” (168).

¹² Eric Losfeld, who frequently faced censorship for the erotic content of his books, published the clandestine first edition of *Emmanuelle*; see Harris 567.

his doubt regarding the ability of science to expand human experience, while underscoring its destructive potential. These reservations were shared by many of his surrealist compatriots and, like their critiques of the Algerian War, were reflected in their journals.

In their publications, the surrealists responded to specific milestones within the space race while remaining focused on the larger cultural context of space exploration. This response was an extension of their skepticism toward technology and the ideology of scientific progress with grave implications in the atomic age. As Gavin Parkinson has discussed, the Cold War-era emphasis on “Big Science” and the growth of nuclear physics ended the surrealists’ interwar enthusiasm for new scientific thinking.¹³ They emphasized the dangerous idealization of science in the nuclear age, the threat to inner life and the spirit posed by this scientism, the essential anthropocentrism of space conquest, the rise of technocracy and its form of neo-positivism, and the spirit of Cold War aggression and competition that tainted the enterprise.

The French space program was an outgrowth of the nuclear defense effort’s missile and rocket development programs and relied on much of the same expertise and facilities that had already been developed for those purposes. In turn, the space program generated increased political and economic support for military efforts (Tegger 2). De Gaulle, who had established the Commissariat à l’énergie atomique in 1945, committed his new administration to the development of a French nuclear weapons program. France exploded its first atomic bomb in the Algerian Sahara Desert in early 1960, and that fall, de Gaulle’s government passed a five-year plan for additional development of weapons and delivery systems (Jackson 575). Launches at Hammaguir, which had begun with the rocket probe Véronique in 1952, accelerated in the 1960s with both missile tests and the “precious stones” series of rockets designed to carry satellites into space.

As Alan J. Levine has argued, “Space travel began when it did, and how it did, as part of a great world conflict. Most of the rockets that made it possible were either modified military missiles or used engines that stemmed ultimately from military programs, and particularly from the intercontinental ballistic missiles [ICBM] whose development was a central and critical event of the Cold War” (vii). The race to put first satellites, then humans, into space was bound to the missile race and nuclear proliferation of the Cold War era, and the surrealists’ commentary on the uses of science and technology in the nuclear age reflects their profound concern for its moral and cultural effects, and the possible destruction of earth. The atomic bomb and astronautics, notes Émilie Frémond, became in surrealist discourse “les symptômes d’un nouveau mal, qu’il s’agit au moins autant de décrypter que de dénoncer” ‘symptoms of a new disease, at least as

¹³ Parkinson documents the surrealists’ engagement with physics in the interwar period and contrasts their protests, beginning in the late 1940s, with Salvador Dalí’s embrace of “nuclear mysticism” in *Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science*.

important to decipher as to denounce' (157). Surrealist alarm at the weaponization and fetishization of science and technology dovetailed with their distrust of space exploration, using many of the same terms.

As early as 1953, Jean-Louis Bédouin had asked in *Médium: Informations surréalistes* whether the recent North Sea flood might be related to the release of energy in atomic experiments: "S'il est impossible d'affirmer qu'il y ait plus qu'une coïncidence entre les expériences atomiques et les perturbations génératrices de la catastrophe, il n'est toutefois pas douteux que le fait de déchaîner les énergies intimes de la matière relève, dans l'état actuel de nos connaissances, de la folie homicide" 'If it is impossible to affirm that there is more than a coincidence between atomic experiments and the disturbances generating the disaster, it is nonetheless without doubt that releasing the inner energies of matter, in our current state of knowledge, is homicidal folly.' Five years later, the surrealists forcefully echoed Bédouin's concerns in the February 1958 tract "Démâchez les physiciens, videz les laboratoires!" ("Expose the Physicists, Empty the Laboratories!").¹⁴ Twenty-eight members of the group signed the statement, charging, "Rien, plus rien aujourd'hui ne distingue la Science d'une menace de mort permanente et généralisée: la querelle est close, de savoir si elle devait assurer le bonheur ou le malheur des hommes, tant il est évident qu'elle a cessé d'être un moyen pour devenir une fin" 'Today nothing, nothing at all distinguishes science from a permanent and generalized threat of death: there is no more argument about whether it should assure mankind's happiness or unhappiness, so much is it evident that it has ceased to be a means and has become an end' ("Démâchez les physiciens" 172; "Expose the Physicists" 164). The surrealists also decried the cultural glorification of these tools of mass destruction, writing, "Si la religion fut longtemps l'opium du peuple, la Science est en bonne place pour prendre le relais. . . . Sus à la théologie de la Bombe!" 'If religion was long the opium of the people, science is well placed to take up the baton. . . . Down with the theology of the Bomb!' (172-73; 165).

General de Gaulle's return in mid-1958 further raised the stakes. In the November 1958 issue of *Bief*, Benjamin Péret rejected calls by groups such as the Situationist International to bring art and poetry into the atomic age by aligning the arts with science.¹⁵ Péret writes, "La fission nucléaire et ses conséquences ne provoqueront jamais un nouveau mode de sentir pas plus qu'elles n'engendreront une poésie originale" 'Nuclear fission and its consequences will never cause a new way of feeling any more than they will generate original poetry' ("La Poésie").

¹⁴ Parkinson notes that the tract's release corresponded exactly to the opening date of Salvador Dalí's exhibition of "Anti-Matter Archangels and Celestial Visions" and other works at M. Knoedler & Co. Gallery in New York (*Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science* 214).

¹⁵ For an account of aesthetic and theoretical responses (often more optimistic than the surrealists') to the space age from elsewhere in the post-World War II European avant-garde, see Petersen.

Rather, he writes, the scientific climate imperils art through limits on freedom. Péret concludes, "Tant que la science ne sera pas placée au service direct et immédiat de l'humanité mais gardera la possibilité d'être employée contre elle, il est impossible d'accorder la moindre confiance à ses desseins" 'As long as science is not placed in the direct and immediate service of humanity, but retains the possibility of being employed against it, it is impossible to place the least confidence in its designs.' The "question of the month" posed two months later in the 15 January 1959 issue of *Bief* echoed Péret's pessimism, asking, "En quoi la certitude d'un anéantissement de l'espèce humaine dans un avenir relativement proche, transformerait-elle votre conception de la vie?" 'In what way would the certainty of the annihilation of the human species in the relatively near future transform your conception of life?' ("Les questions du mois"). Beginning with *Le surréalisme, même*, the group had renewed its use of such surveys. As Legrand and Péret explained in an undated proposal for *Bief*, surveys were intended to inform the public of surrealist concerns regarding the issues of the day and invite (to some extent) their participation in discourse (Legrand and Péret).

The surrealists did occasionally publish contributions that ran counter to their dominant opinions. The group's journals reveal some degree of debate over how the arts in general, or surrealism specifically, could assimilate the scientific advances of the day. Writing from Mauritius, surrealist affiliate Malcolm de Chazal summarizes his beliefs regarding poetry in his July 1960 "Message aux surréalistes," published in the first issue of *La brèche*. Central to his proposal is a new language that could reconcile art and science: "Un langage nouveau doit être utilisé, qui puisant de la science sa rigueur et prenant à la poésie l'analogie, donnerait comme une science poétique seule apte à faire pénétrer à la fois dans le domaine de l'image et dans celui du phénomène, et par cela expliciter la création" 'A new language must be used, which, drawing its rigor from science and taking its analogy from poetry, would yield a poetic science alone fit to penetrate the domain of the image and that of the phenomenon at the same time, and by this explain creation' (39). Likewise, in the December 1959 issue of *Bief*, two brief contributions from Jean-Pierre Lassalle and Pierre Dhainaut offered positive views of the possibilities of science. In a letter to Breton, Lassalle asks if the discovery of anti-matter, which had won Emilio Gino Segrè and Owen Chamberlain the 1959 Nobel Prize in Physics, did not in fact constitute a new myth, for which Breton had called in the 1942 "Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else" ("D'une lettre").¹⁶ On the same page, Dhainaut offers his vision for the use of magnetism to solve traffic congestion and otherwise improve urban life. Thus, while the core of the group remained overwhelmingly suspicious of nuclear experimentation and the missile and space race that grew from it, some peripheral

¹⁶ Lassalle later recalled being concerned at what he perceived as surrealism's total rejection of science; see "Boris Ryback."

surrealists displayed an interest in the imaginative possibilities of the new science. Surrealist journals offered a forum to air these differences.

Their rejection of contemporary scientism led the surrealists to scuffle publicly with two authors (and former surrealist associates), Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, whose book *Le Matin des magiciens* (*The Morning of the Magicians*, 1960) and associated journal, *Planète*, the group felt represented the most superficial form of engagement with “fantastic realism” and the scientific advances of the day. Pauwels and Bergier’s dubious politics, including their fascination with Nazism and signing of a “Manifesto of Intellectuals” denouncing the signatories of the “Declaration of the 121” against the Algerian War, rendered their blind faith in so-called progress dangerously reactionary.¹⁷ The duo became frequent targets of surrealist criticism as promoters of and avatars for a blinkered belief in science that the group felt afflicted society.

The October 1961 surrealist tract “Sauve qui doit” (“Run if you must”) — its title suggestive of a race — is one of the group’s most forceful statements against the cultural infiltration of what they saw as a new religion of science via organs like *Planète*: “Ces dernières années, le consentement presque universel aux chantages atomiques, l’écllosion d’une peinture qui se réclame ouvertement du fascisme clérical en même temps que de la physique nucléaire, et l’admiration générale pour les exploits d’Hector ‘rat français de l’espace’ ou du robot Gagarine nous étaient apparus comme les symptômes concomitants d’un *âge de ténèbres* tout prêt à recueillir la succession des obscurantismes antérieurs, tant religieux que politique” ‘During the last few years, the almost universal consent to atomic blackmail, the birth of an art openly reliant upon clerical fascism as well as nuclear physics, and the general admiration for the exploits of Hector ‘the French space rat’ or the robot Gagarin appeared to us as concomitant symptoms of a *dark age* all set up to collect together past obscurantisms, whether religious or political’ (214; 168). The text alludes to the recent Catholic- and nuclear-inspired art of Salvador Dalí, as well as the popularity of space-faring heroes such as Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, who became the first man in space in April 1961, and Hector, a *ratonaute* who had become the first “Frenchman” in space in February of the same year.¹⁸

The widespread veneration of these symbols, the tract continues, reflects the lack of criticality with which the age embraced science and technology, even for overtly aggressive political purposes. *Planète* and its apologists, the surrealists

¹⁷ Parkinson documents the surrealist conflict with Pauwels and Bergier at length in Chapter 5 of *Futures of Surrealism*.

¹⁸ On Hector, see Varnoteaux 204-06. Dalí’s turn in the 1950s to a fusion of religious iconography and imagery drawn from atomic physics in what he termed “Nuclear Mysticism” seemed to the surrealists to dangerously fetishize nuclear science for the purposes of commercial kitsch. See Parkinson, *Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science*; and Taylor, ed.

charge, lack “la moindre réserve quant à la politique des grandes puissances qui se partagent cette Terre en attendant de se disputer ‘le cosmos’” ‘the slightest uncertainty about the politics of the great powers as they divide up this Earth until they can argue over ‘the cosmos’” (215; 169). Robots are invoked again in the tract’s closing line, “LES ROBOTS NE PASSERONT PAS!” ‘ROBOTS WILL NOT PASS!’ (218; 171), indicating the group’s deep concern for the sacrifice of autonomy and creativity to technology. As their writings make clear, for the surrealists, atomic experimentation and space exploration were simply extensions, in pseudo-utopian guise, of the same military and imperial aims that drove nuclear proliferation and the missile race. The public’s fascination with their possibilities made them even more menacingly ideological.

The Culture of the Space Race

The surrealists appear to have followed closely developments in the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1955, as an extension of the Cold War’s ballistic missile race, the US and Soviet Union had within days of each other announced plans to launch artificial satellites into orbit during the International Geophysical Year, 1957-1958. The Soviet Union won this first stage of the race, launching Sputnik I on 4 October 1957 (Levine 51-56). A critical surrealist appraisal of the Sputnik launch arrived in the form of one of three questions of the month published in the December 1958 issue of *Bief*. The survey states, “On déplore que les vitrines de Noël offrent aux enfants des déguisements militaires et des panoplies. Quel genre d’influence pensez-vous que puissent avoir, sur les mêmes enfants, les vitrines d’un grand magasin entièrement placées sous le signe des ‘Sputnik’ et de la navigation interplanétaire?” ‘We deplore that Christmas window displays offer children military costumes and outfits. What kind of influence do you think a department store window entirely dedicated to Sputnik and interplanetary navigation would have on these same children?’ (“Questions” 1958). In his published reply, actor André S. Labarthe notes “les idées jumelles de conquête et d’agression” ‘the twin ideas of conquest and aggression’ evident in such window displays. Sputnik’s replacement of the Native Americans in typical childhood battles between cowboys and Indians might prompt one to wonder, he writes, “si la notion de *compétition* . . . ne s’est pas pour longtemps substituée à celle de progrès” ‘If the notion of *competition* . . . has not for a long time substituted for that of progress’ (“Réponses aux questions de décembre”). Such competition would become a French governmental priority in 1959, with the de Gaulle administration’s announced intention to rival the US and Soviet Union by putting France in space.¹⁹

¹⁹ While France would enter the space race behind the US and Soviet Union, one of the first engineers to pursue space travel had been a Frenchman, Robert Esnault-Pelterie, who in 1912

The surrealists observed the new French program, as well as those of the US and Soviet Union, and expressed alarm at both the glorification of the technocrat class that arose to administer such efforts, and the greater threat to surrealism's cherished poetic mystery and inner life posed by space exploration. In early 1959, Legrand responded in *Bief* to the start of the Soviet Union's Luna program, which sent a series of spacecraft to the moon, the first of which were designed to transmit photographs back to Earth before crashing into the moon's surface and being destroyed. The first Luna craft missed its mark, and Legrand cites both the right- and left-wing press's obscuring this fact as evidence of its complicity in the propaganda of space exploration, which took on an increasingly spiritual bent, much to his dismay. "Les bigots de la vérité scientifique" "The bigots of scientific truth," Legrand writes, downplay the imperial realities of space exploration to pose travel to other planets as how "l'homme (quel homme?) 'réalisera ses rêves les plus fous'" "man (which man?) "will fulfill his wildest dreams,"" ensured by the "méthodes expéditives" 'expeditious methods' of the de Gaulle government's "politique de grandeur" 'politics of grandeur' ("Ou tout va s'obscurcir").

Legrand takes exception to a recent *Arts* survey in which painter Félix Labisse described the Luna program as "'l'événement mythologique le plus considérable de notre temps'" "the most significant mythological event of our times" and evidence of "'la renaissance glorieuse du surréalisme'" "the glorious renaissance of surrealism." Rejecting the conflation of surrealism's alternative worlds with those of the space race, Legrand replies that lunar exploration is a "factice et pernicieuse mythologie, totalement désaccordée à l'occultation aussi bien qu'à l'exaltation du surréalisme" 'false and pernicious mythology, totally at odds with the occultation as well as the exaltation of surrealism.' Legrand continues to warn against the false form of spirituality found in space exploration, particularly in the context of the new age of technocracy ushered in by the de Gaulle regime: "**L'expansion astronautique marquera le point culminant de la perversion des forces spirituelles** et préparera leur écrasement par le positivisme des technocraties 'humanisées'" '**Astronautical expansion marks the culminating point of the perversion of spiritual forces** and prepares their erasure by the positivism of "humanized" technocrats.²⁰ He closes with a reassertion "que

had presented his theoretical exploration of rocketry, "Considérations sur les résultats d'un allègement indéfini des moteurs" to the Société Française de Physique. Notably, Esnault-Pelterie had envisioned using atomic power to fuel a recoverable space plane after concluding that it would be impossible to power such a vehicle with conventional fuel (Collins 5-6).

²⁰ De Gaulle increased the number of technocrats serving in governmental positions, often through ad hoc commissions made up of experts rather than elected officials. See Jackson 640. Writing in the *L'écart absolu* exhibition catalogue six years later, Robert Benayoun would echo Legrand's sentiments, posing surrealism as a form of resistance to the "prefabricated mentality" of technocracy. See Benayoun, "L'œuf fait nix." The younger surrealists' disdain

l'esprit, dans la totale liberté de ses aspirations et de ses activités, *n'est pas concerné* par cette caricature de l'infini" 'that the mind, in the total freedom of its aspirations and its activities, *is not concerned* with this caricature of infinity.'

In a September 1959 letter to his daughter, Aube, concerning various preparations for the *EROS* exhibition, Breton reflected on the recent contact of the Soviet Luna 2 probe with the Earth's moon. The rocket transmitted data about the Earth's magnetic field and meteorite activity before crashing into the moon's surface, leaving behind a commemorative plaque that announced its mission as a Soviet victory (Collins 7-8). Breton saw the crash as a desecration of the moon's poetic value, and wrote:

Un peu sombre aujourd'hui je suis. Encore sous le coup de cet "alunissage" qui me paraît à tous égards détestable. Rien ne peut faire que ces messieurs n'aient *souillé* d'ores et déjà un des deux grands luminaires (on dit qu'à la lunette on peut apercevoir en noir le point d'impact sur la "mer de la Tranquillité": tout un programme). C'est la poésie tout entière qui est touchée. Un ver qui s'insinue dans les *Hymnes à la Nuit* de Novalis. Auprès de cela, les sinistres pitreries de K. et le discours attendu ce soir de de G., bien qu'ils constituent une abominable farandole sur des cadavres, sont totalement frappés de dérision. ("[Merci de m'avoir fait assister...]")

I am a little gloomy today. Still under the influence of this "moon landing" which seems to me in all respects detestable. Nothing can be done that these gentlemen have already stained one of the two great lights (it is said that with a telescope the point of impact on the "Sea of Tranquility" can be seen in black: an entire program). It is the whole of poetry that is touched. A worm that creeps into the "Hymns to the Night" by Novalis. Next to that, the sinister antics of K. [Khrushchev] and the speech expected tonight from de G. [de Gaulle] — although they constitute a horrible farandole on corpses — are utterly ridiculous.

Breton here anticipates de Gaulle's 16 September 1959 radio and television address in which he presented his plan for Algerian self-determination. De Gaulle proposed a referendum through which the Algerian people could choose whether to remain part of or become independent from France, or find a compromise within the African French Community, stating, "l'avenir des algériens est dans les mains des algériens" 'The future of the Algerians is in the hands of the Algerians.' De Gaulle began this address, however, by describing the state of France's revival under his direction, specifically its efforts in space exploration: "Notre redressement se poursuit. Certes il ne faut pas nous vanter. Dans le domaine technique par exemple, nous n'en sommes pas encore au point de lancer des fusées

was in keeping with the generational resistance to technocracy explored by Theodore Roszak in *The Making of a Counter Culture*.

dans la lune” ‘Our recovery continues. Certainly, we must not boast. In the technical field, for example, we are not yet ready to launch rockets to the moon.’ This juxtaposition suggests that for de Gaulle, as for the surrealists, France’s aspirations toward the conquest of space were linked with the dismantling of its empire on Earth.

The possibility of space colonization increased significantly in 1961, when in April Gagarin became the first man in space, and in May John F. Kennedy proclaimed that the United States intended to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. Later the same year, de Gaulle announced the creation of the Centre National d’Études Spatiales (CNES) as the civilian agency in charge of France’s space program. It grew rapidly: four years after its founding, the CNES 1965 budget was over seven times that of 1961, and its staff grew from fifteen in 1962 to 391 by the end of 1964 (*The French Space Program* 3). The extensive coordination CNES oversaw between government, business, and education increased government control over scientific and technological development, while also allowing it to direct funding to those areas needed for economic modernization (Tegger 2-3). These events prompted the surrealists to reflect on the impact on human thought that space travel would or would not have. They were justifiably pessimistic; as Geppert notes, “The more far-fetched these outlooks [on outer space] have become, the more geocentric they remain” (4).

In April 1961, Breton responded to a survey by *Le Figaro littéraire* on Gagarin’s accomplishment. Breton skeptically asked, “Ainsi seraient définitivement révoqués les mythes d’Icare, de Prométhée?” ‘Thus would the myths of Icarus and Prometheus be definitively revoked?’ He explicitly challenged the notion — shared by the Soviets and Americans alike — that the physical transcendence of spatial limitations would in some way allow an expansion of humankind’s consciousness or inner life. He further objected to the packaging of this so-called “l’événement du siècle” ‘event of the century’ as a propaganda tool pitting socialism against capitalism, and to the newspaper’s attempts to return to “le champ spéculatif [qui] . . . n’exède pas celui de Jules Verne et implique . . . une régression appréciable” ‘the speculative field which . . . does not exceed that of Jules Verne and implies . . . an appreciable regression’ (“Réponse à une enquête” 187-88). Breton’s invocation of Verne in this passage underscores the shift that took place in surrealist attitudes toward space exploration during and after World War II. As Abigail Susik has elucidated, surrealists of Breton’s generation — born in the 1890s — grew up on Verne’s fantastic tales and films inspired by his stories, such as Georges Méliès’s *Le voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*, 1902), which shaped the movement’s early exploratory tendencies. Verne’s writing, Susik argues, appealed to and offered a model for surrealism’s “privileging of the marvellous, its complex relationship to scientific discourse, its fascination with the *au-delà*” (17). In contrast, the younger generation of surrealists born in the 1920s and 1930s, including Legrand and Lebel, came of age during a time when space exploration was increasingly a state-sponsored initiative tied to imperialism, warfare, and

capitalism. The postwar obsession with space conquest became for the surrealists emblematic of a larger cultural crisis.

Breton's disbelief that space travel would expand human consciousness recalls his earlier interest in undoing anthropocentrism. Parkinson has traced the convergence between the rise of science fiction and Breton's attempt to define an anti-anthropocentric "new myth," known as "The Great Invisibles" ("Surrealism, Science Fiction and UFOs" 105-09).²¹ In his 1942 "Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste du surréalisme ou non" ("Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else"), Breton writes:

Une époque comme celle que nous vivons peut supporter, si elles ont pour fin la mise en défiance de toutes les façons convenues de penser . . . tous les départs pour les voyages. . . . L'homme n'est peut-être pas le centre, le *point de mire* de l'univers. On peut se laisser aller à croire qu'il existe au-dessus de lui, dans l'échelle animale, des êtres dont le comportement lui est aussi étranger que le sien peut l'être à l'éphémère ou à la baleine.

An epoch such as ours justifies all journeys for the sake of the journey itself . . . particularly if these journeys constitute a challenge to conventional modes of thinking. . . . Man is perhaps not the centre, the *focus* of the universe. One may go so far as to believe that there exist above him, on the animal level, beings whose behaviour is as alien to him as his own must be to the may-fly or the whale. (349-50; 216)

Breton's reflection on the helplessness of humanity before greater powers suggests not only the wartime context in which he wrote, Parkinson argues, but also the "epistemological space" opened by fantastic literature, which allowed for a more optimistic view of interstellar exploration ("Surrealism, Science Fiction and UFOs" 105). By the end of the 1950s, however, the surrealists confronted the possibility that man's journey to outer space could become a reality and wondered what the impact of such a voyage on thought might be. They posited that society's hyper-focus on discovery of the far reaches of space masked the true need for greater exploration of inner worlds.

²¹ See also Parkinson, *Futures* 15-39. As Parkinson notes, Breton's interest in myth also found visual expression in his picture essay, "De la survivance de certains mythes et de quelques autres mythes en croissance ou en formation" ("On the Survival of Certain Myths and on Some Other Myths in Growth or Formation") in the 1942 *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition catalogue. These myths included "la communication interplanétaire" 'interplanetary communication,' illustrated by medium Hélène Smith's "Martian" handwriting, an extract of Charles Cros's "Sonnet astronomique" (1872), and Max Ernst's untitled 1929 collage depicting Fantômas, Dante, and Jules Verne in a hot-air balloon (21). Abigail Susik explores Ernst's collage in depth in "Surrealism and Jules Verne."

The May 1962 issue of *La brèche* features the extensive results of a survey titled “Le monde à l’envers?” (The World Upside Down?). Significantly longer than the questions of the month and replies printed in *Le surréalisme, même* and *Bief*, “Le monde à l’envers?” poses a series of competing questions:

La possibilité croissante d’un voyage interplanétaire paraît entraîner, aux yeux du plus grand nombre, la possibilité d’appliquer aux “mondes” extra-terrestres le système de références, forcément anthropocentrique, qui fonctionne tant bien que mal ici. Cette conclusion vous semble-t-elle “aller de soi”? Permet-elle notamment de spéculer sur les réactions mentales et les appréciations intellectuelles qui seraient celles des futurs “cosmonautes”? Au cas où un tel voyage (aller et retour) aurait effectivement lieu, serait-il ou non de nature à provoquer une crise incontrôlable de l’entendement, où la notion même de culture deviendrait dérisoire?

The increasing possibility of an interplanetary voyage seems to involve, in the eyes of most, the possibility of applying to extraterrestrial “worlds” *the system of references* — necessarily anthropocentric — which somehow works here. Does this conclusion seem to “go without saying” to you? Notably, does it allow speculation on the mental reactions and intellectual assessments of future “cosmonauts”? If such a journey (back and forth) did indeed take place, would it be likely or not to cause an uncontrollable crisis of understanding, wherein the very notion of culture would become ridiculous? (3)

The survey is illustrated by four pages of unattributed cartoons, captioned in Spanish, which depict the titular upside-down world through a variety of situations in which humans have been demoted: a cat dangling a toy in front of a kneeling woman, a lamb turning a man on a spit, an axe-wielding tree cutting down a man, and a dog taking its master hunting (fig. 2). The questions were put to over thirty thinkers, both surrealist affiliates and those outside the movement, including author and alchemy specialist René Alleau, philosopher Ferdinand Alquie, astrologer André Barbault, writer Jorge-Luis Borges, philosopher Norman O. Brown, Roger Caillois, historians Mircea Eliade and Arnold Toynbee, Gaulish art specialist Lancelot Lengyel, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, journalist and philosopher Jean-François Revel, and mystic R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz.

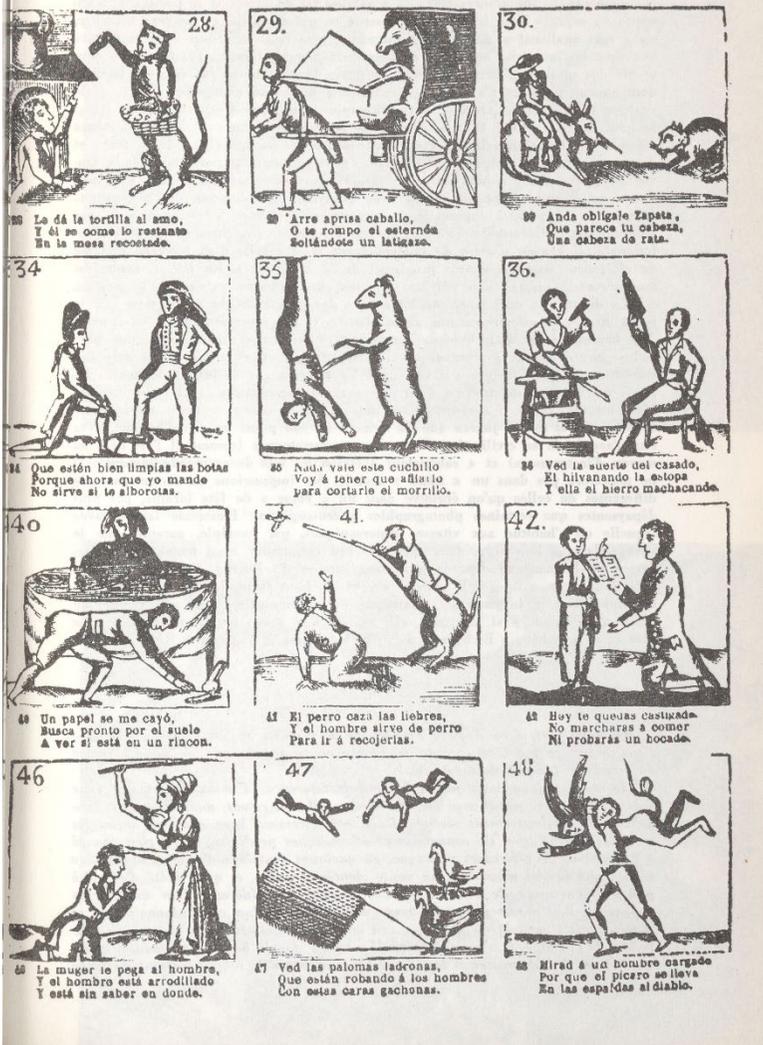


Figure 2: Cartoon, "Le Monde à l'envers?," in *La brèche*, no. 2, May 1962. Photo: Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Legrand offered the group's conclusions from the survey in the subsequent issue, noting the dilemma implicit in the questions, which most respondents pointed out. It is the same false conflict, he writes, that "les admirateurs inconditionnels de la 'science-fiction'" 'the unconditional admirers of science fiction' (which he dismisses as "de la technique alliée aux vertus sportives" 'technology allied to sporting virtues') use to stifle dissent from surrealists and others: to refuse "le saut qualitatif" 'the qualitative leap' of extraterrestrial travel is to lock oneself in anthropocentrism, but to accept it is to sacrifice concerns about the preservation of spirit to the adoration of scientists ("Conclusion" 73-74). Legrand rejects this reasoning; in fact, he notes that the more scientifically grounded replies pose models, such as Lévi-Strauss's codes, that would fit as well within more broadly conceived systems of thought like Barbault's astrology.

Legrand again takes pains to differentiate the freedom of surrealism from the fantasy of space travel. Surrealism, he stresses, does not limit its interest in the mind to a "seul champ rationnel" 'single rational field,' but the appropriation of the irrational by the proponents of planetary exploration as "psychotechnique" 'psychotechnics' risks "plus suffocantes vapeurs de la 'réaction'" 'the most suffocating vapors of 'reaction' (74).²² Legrand therefore mounts an argument that would be reiterated six years later by Philippe Audoin, writing for the surrealist journal *L'archibras* on the occasion of the 21 December 1968 launch of NASA's Apollo 8, the first manned mission to the moon. The surrealist aim, Audoin argues, is the conquest of interior space, not the false progress offered by the colonization of outer space (11).

From Journals to *L'écart absolu*

While surrealists' growing apprehension regarding scientism and the space race is apparent in its magazines' discourse throughout the 1950s and 60s, the group's critique of the cultural cost of this progress crystallized in the 1965 exhibition *L'écart absolu*.²³ While first the Soviet Union, then the US, conducted their inaugural "space walks" that year, 1965 was a landmark for the French space program as well. On November 26, 1965, the French rocket Diamant A launched from Hammaguir, bearing in its nosecone a small test satellite, Astérix, making the country the third to launch a satellite into orbit (*French Space Program* 4).

²² Related concerns about technological mind control and surveillance also recurred in postwar surrealist journals; see Ivšić, "Au Secours"; Benayoun, "Celui qui murmure"; and Schuster, "Au grand tapage nocturne."

²³ The exhibition opened on 7 December, two days after the first round of voting in the presidential election in which de Gaulle would eventually win a second term. De Gaulle failed to win a majority over François Mitterrand in the December 5 election, resulting in a 19 December runoff in which de Gaulle prevailed. The election was the first direct presidential election in France since 1848. See Judt 549-50.

In a tract inserted into the *L'écart absolu* exhibition catalogue, "Tranchons-en" ("Let's Get to the Point"), the surrealists stated their desire to craft an exhibition that, unlike its predecessors' more oblique approach, would engage its times directly, "une Exposition 'de combat,' qui s'en prend *directement* aux aspects les plus intolérables de la société où nous vivons" 'a "combative" exhibition, which *directly* confronts the most intolerable aspects of the society in which we live' (241; 55). The tract itself again targets the editors of *Planète* and others who valorize "le faux grand jour du 'Progrès'" 'the false broad daylight of 'progress'" (243; 57) by contrasting them with the surrealists, who "n'ont jamais cessé d'opposer l'absolu au fonctionnel, l'exaltant au commode, l'idée controversée du bonheur à ses *palliatifs* de plus en plus envahissants" 'have never ceased to oppose the absolute to the functional, the exalting to the convenient, the controversial idea of happiness to its increasingly intrusive *palliatives*.'²⁴ The tract continues:

Tout particulièrement, nous choisissons de dénier tout sens vivant à l'expression "*merveilleux scientifique*" si couramment employée aujourd'hui, jusque pour masquer la meurtrière religion de "l'atome." . . . Oui, n'importe quel merveilleux est beau, mais *pas à n'importe quel prix*: le Merveilleux qui, selon l'inoubliable formule d'Antonin Artaud, "se trouve à la racine de l'Esprit," n'a rien de commun avec le culte de l'aveugle avenir, celui-ci se parât-il des vapeurs rougeoyantes d'un "fantastique" prompt à ranimer les vieilles terreurs et les vieux tabous.

Most especially, we choose to deny any living meaning to the expression "scientific marvelous" which is in such common use today, to the extent of masking the deadly religion of the "atom." . . . Yes, anything marvelous is beautiful, *but not at any price*: the Marvelous which, according to the unforgettable formula of Antonin Artaud, "is found in the depth of the Spirit," has nothing in common with the cult of the blind future, the one which appears in glowing red vapors of a "fantastic" that is quick to revive old terrors and taboos.

L'écart absolu would investigate further the cultural impact of the space race, by then incorporated into the technophilic consumer culture of the Cold War era.

²⁴ See also Parkinson, *Futures of Surrealism* 177-81.

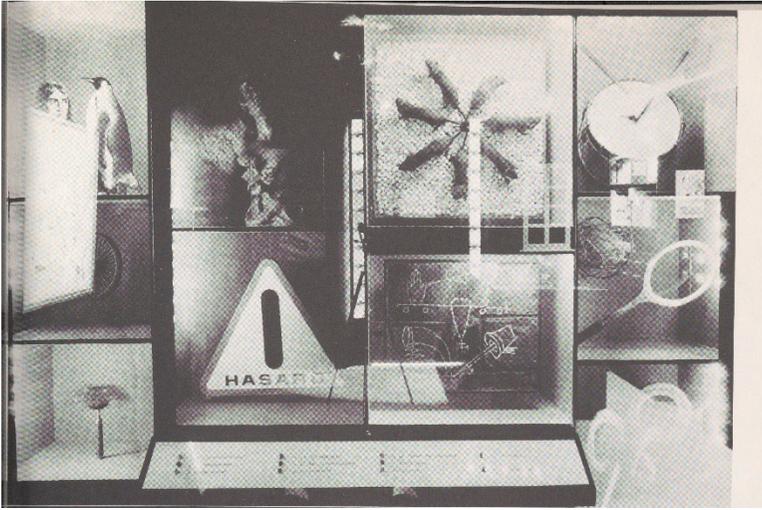


Figure 3: *Le désordinateur*, collective work, installation view, *L'écart absolu*, Galerie de l'Œil, Paris, 1965, with spinning *miroir aux alouettes* at lower left. Published in *L'archibras*, no. 1, Apr. 1967. Photo: Suzy Embo, courtesy of Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. © Suzy Embo.

For the 1965 exhibition, the surrealists constructed a large display case, divided into ten brightly colored compartments behind a one-way mirror, each containing an object or objects illuminated by pressing the corresponding button on a control panel at the case's front (fig. 3).²⁵ The collective work, dubbed the *Désordinateur* (Dis-computer) reflected the surrealists' mistrust of the technology being hailed as key to efficiency in home and work life, particularly the notion that a computer could serve as an "electronic brain" (fig. 4).²⁶ Each compartment's contents

²⁵ Pierre Faucheux and Mimi Parent installed the *Désordinateur*. See Faucheux, documentation related to the *Désordinateur*, including a letter from Faucheux to Parent regarding installation (24 Nov. 1965) and photographs by Suzy Embo showing a man and a woman installing the *Désordinateur*.

²⁶ The neologism plays with a word that had recently acquired additional meaning. As Jacques Vernay describes, the first IBM model 650 computer arrived in Paris in October 1955, when it was exhibited at the International Office Machine Fair and subsequently installed at IBM's "European Scientific Center" in Place Vendôme. Because the phrase "electronic data processing machine" did not translate smoothly, the machine was termed the "ordinateur," a name that IBM initially copyrighted before allowing the protection to lapse. "Ordinateur" soon gained widespread use as the French word for a stored-program computer. The public unveiling of the IBM 704 computer at the European Scientific Center in May 1957 was a high-profile event attended by government representatives and other prominent figures and captured the public imagination; over the next two months, more than 4,000 people visited

symbolized a contemporary societal issue such as natalism, technocracy, neo-spiritualism, or leisure time, often with a punning title, and coordinated with a catalogue essay exploring its theme. The *Désordinateur* evokes Robert Benayoun's report in the Spring 1957 issue of *Le Surréalisme, même* on the invention of a machine that did nothing. Facing the rise of IBM, robots, and corporate and government automation, Benayoun writes, the machine's inventor stated, "J'ai voulu créer . . . un mécanisme qui fût incapable d'accélérer ou de ralentir la vie" 'I wanted to create . . . a mechanism that was incapable of accelerating or slowing life' (Benayoun, "Les paradoxes du ruban" 76). In a catalogue essay introducing the *Désordinateur*, Alain Joubert strikes a more sinister tone, reflecting on the idea of possession by machines through a *fait divers* about a man killed by his own car, and ends with a warning about manipulation by IBM computers: "Les Cartes perforées ne sont pas forcément celles que vous croyez!" 'Perforated cards are not necessarily what you think!' (Joubert).



Figure 4: "Ordinateur IBM type Stretch: console de maintenance" (IBM 31 / 7101) ("Stretch" Supercomputer Central Processing Unit), 1962, Copper, aluminum, steel, plastic, 174 x 163 x 175 cm, [Musée des arts et métiers](https://www.musee-lam.fr/), Paris, Collection Instruments scientifiques © Musée des arts et métiers-Cnam, Paris / photo J-C Wetzel. (<https://phototheque.arts-et-metiers.net/>).

what the press called "the world's most powerful electronic brain" (306). On the need for a "Surrealist theory of cybernetics" and Nora Mitrani's postwar critique of technocracy, see Eburne, "Approximate Life." On consumer electronics and efficiency in the domestic sphere, see Ross 87-89.

In addition to the “machinisme” addressed in Joubert’s essay, the *Désordinateur*’s cultural critique encompassed other areas of society that reflected the same “values” that the surrealists saw underlying the space race.²⁷ Jean Schuster discusses the conquest of public places by advertising as akin to the colonizing impulse of space conquest. As in “la cosmocratie qui s’annonce” ‘the looming cosmocracy,’ he writes, the advertiser seeks to become “*acheteur d’espace*” ‘a buyer of space.’ “L’espace ainsi envahi” ‘Space thus invaded,’ Schuster states. “Naguère s’y plantaient les drapeaux des nations. Aujourd’hui, au paysage immonde, vont les graphismes des marques. L’espace ainsi investi” ‘In the past, the flags of nations were planted there. Today, to the squalid landscape go the graphics of brands. Space thus invested’ (“Raison sociale”). In his essay, “Flammes sur mesure,” Radovan Ivšić reflects on the increasing role of sports in French daily life, thanks to Gaullist government initiatives.²⁸ Sports, Ivšić writes, represent a false form of internationalism that strengthens nationalism and mirrors the organization of modern life based on rivalry and competition. Most sinister, however, was the moralistic and disciplinary role of sports education to curtail personal freedom: “Le stade est la grande porte qui mène dans le monde des robots” ‘The stadium is the great door leading to the world of robots,’ Ivšić writes.

Gérard Legrand’s *Désordinateur* essay, “Une apparence de soupirail” (*soupirail* meaning a small basement window, often with bars), engages directly with the issue of “cosmonautisme” in modern society. While surrealist contemporaries such as *Planète*’s editors or the Situationist International may be satisfied by the pseudo-familial fetishes of the “jumeaux de l’espace” ‘space twins,’ Gagarin and Valentina Tereshkova, and the lost Laika, Legrand bemoans that the sky has been rendered aseptic by state-sponsored scientific control. Moreover, he continues, this science is subject to imperialist economic and military imperatives, as well as advertising strategies, and is therefore equally in thrall to the demands of “l’exploit” ‘the exploit’ and “départ vers l’Inconnu” ‘departure to the unknown’ that form the popular mythology of space travel. Thus, nothing differentiates the two poles of the Cold War space race: “des robots du cap Kennedy” ‘the robots of Cape Kennedy’ and “le primate Gagarine” ‘the primate Gagarin’. Legrand goes on to reflect on the role of art in navigating inner versus outer worlds. He concludes that in the present day, “la navigation interplanétaire fait

²⁷ See notes on the *Désordinateur* and its themes, including a mock-up for an advertisement listing, “1. LE NATALISME, 2. LE FEMME EN UNIFORME, 3. LE SPORT, 4. LA TECHNOCRATIE, 5. LES LOISIRS, 6. LE TRAVAIL, 7. LE MACHINISME, 8. LA PUBLICITÉ, 9. LE NÉO-SPIRITUALISME, 10. LE COSMONAUTISME,” in Fauchaux.

²⁸ Like the French space program, promotion of sports was an initiative of the restored de Gaulle regime. And like both the Algerian War and the space race, the language of sports was steeped in nationalism and the struggle for dominance that the surrealists saw seeping into and corrupting everyday life. Notably, the surrealists invoke robots as symbols of the loss of autonomy when discussing both astronauts and athletes.

partie intégrante de l'entreprise d'éparpillement et de liquéfaction de l'Esprit contre laquelle les poètes se trouvent seuls ou presque à lutter" 'interplanetary navigation makes up an integral part of the enterprise of dissipation and liquefaction of the Spirit against which poets find themselves struggling almost alone' (qtd. and trans. in Parkinson, *Futures of Surrealism* 182).

Legrand's essay on "cosmonautisme" complemented a compartment in the *Désordinateur* presenting a spinning *miroir aux alouettes*, a hunting device used to bait larks, powered by a hidden motor.²⁹ The lark mirror featured a small, bird-shaped piece of wood decorated with mirror fragments on top of a stick, which was spun either by pulling a string or via a motor (Fenech 30-32) (fig. 5). Larks were inexplicably drawn to the device, entranced by their own reflection, glinting light, or the illusion of other birds that it produced. French author Leon Reymond described the birds' attraction to the lure in his 1882 book about lark hunting: "It stretches out its wings and hovers, stupefied, like the Holy Ghost one sees in the paintings drawn by old masters. The noise, the movement, gunfire, nothing can get the lark out of its ecstasy, which often lasts several minutes. Larks are thus easy to kill, and, with some training, one rarely misses" (qtd. and trans. in Fenech 35). This suggestion of self-destructive transfixion may explain the appeal of the *miroir aux alouettes* to the surrealists as a symbol of "cosmonautisme," as does the connotation of entrapment in Legrand's essay title: space travel offered an illusory, and dangerous, appearance of escape or enlightenment.



Figure 5: Lark mirror shaped like a pair of birds' wings. After Fenech, "Lark Mirrors," fig. 2. <https://doi.org/10.1179/flk.2005.44.1.30>.

²⁹ Fauchoux's notes for the *Désordinateur* describe, "1. Miroir aux alouettes/ le Cosmonautisme *hauteur moteur (dissimulé)" His diagram shows the bird-shaped top with round mirror fragments and a motor built into a platform below.

Postwar French surrealist journals functioned as arenas in which to trace the broader, evolving cultural impacts of international social and political issues across high-low boundaries, and, like exhibitions, offered a public forum through which to disseminate surrealist viewpoints on popular culture and contemporary life. Surrealist polemics against developments in the space race — inextricable, in their view, from contemporaneous colonial and scientific issues — demonstrate their overarching concern for the preservation of freedom and inner life in the face of surging technocracy and neo-positivism, and the inherent anthropocentrism and imperialism that a *Voyage dans la lune* now represented. The mustering of space exploration as a component of international war games that threatened the planet's very survival left little room for the interstellar imaginary that had so appealed to surrealism in its earlier years. As demonstrated by the discourse of space travel developed in their journals, in the surrealists' interpretation, society fixated like a lark on the glittering promises of science and technology — particularly in the context of the space race — at its own peril.

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