

# Prismatic Fringes: Periodicals and the Borders of Surrealism

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*and certainly periodicals can form  
the prismatic fringes of a library*

Walter Benjamin

Surrealist journals are often short-lived projects and so their place in the history of surrealism has largely been considered as ephemeral and peripheral. We seek to reframe the conversation by “unpacking” some of the “prismatic fringes” that Walter Benjamin describes in his 1931 essay on book collecting. We embrace the complexity and diversity of these printed materials and hope that as you read, you’ll appreciate the variegation of this prismatic archive on an international scale and from transnational perspectives.

This collaboration started in 2018 when we convened a panel on surrealist periodicals at the first conference of the International Society for the Study of Surrealism (ISSS) at Bucknell University. The idea for a special issue dedicated to surrealist periodicals took shape through continued discussions during the second ISSS conference at the University of Exeter in late summer 2019. We had no idea that such a gathering would not be possible for several more seasons. Therefore, the process of collecting the contributions for this issue has allowed us all to keep conversing through remote work during the pandemic.

As we have worked on this project, a growing interest in the international reach and impact of surrealist periodicals has emerged in recent publications and exhibitions. Therefore, in addition to our contributors and reviewers, we would like to acknowledge some of our primary interlocutors. From Delia Ungureanu’s discussion of *Surrealism as World Literature*, periodicals can be understood “as key elements” to understand the “spread of surrealism” as well as the “dynamism” of different groups and networks within the movement (6). Likewise, the exhibition *Surrealism Beyond Borders*, which was on view at Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Tate Modern in London between October 2021 and August 2022, devoted quite substantial space to rare publications of groups associated

with surrealism, ranging from well-known French periodicals such as *La révolution surréaliste* (1924-1929) and *Minotaure* (1933-1939) to lesser known examples like *Tropiques* from Martinique (1941-1945) and *De schoene zakdoek* from the Netherlands (1941-1944). In our eyes, the “reimagining” of surrealism through journals that Lori Cole prominently suggests in the catalog of the exhibition (44-47) should also be a “reconceptualizing.” This also seems to be an ongoing inquiry in the recently published *Routledge Companion to Surrealism* in which many surrealist activities and group formations as well as transformations and legacies are explained through periodicals.

In our contributions to this ever-expanding discussion, we show how the pages of periodicals have shaped surrealism in numerous ways across decades and continents. Returning again to Benjamin: If we locate periodicals at the “margins” of surrealism, we must take their prismatic function into account. And if we shift our perspective to these prismatic fringes to examine the logic of borders and border transgression, we can approach the question of how surrealism has taken shape through the form and content of little magazines.

Benjamin also describes “the chance, the fate that suffuse the past” as he surrounds himself with the volumes he has acquired over the years and, in some ways, we could apply the same “arbitrary” designation to the process of collecting the essays (60). Recent periodical studies projects, such as Katja Lee and Hannah McGregor’s “Reading the Modern Magazine,” have also embraced approaches that echo Benjamin’s openness in encountering his collection. We can also hear Benjaminian reverberations in Patrick Collier’s “What is Modern Periodical Studies?,” which asks us not to predetermine our methods for analysis and instead embrace the multiplicity of materials in our expansive periodicals archive. You will similarly find multiple *surrealisms* in this collection, demonstrating synchrony in periodical studies and surrealist studies as we consider the play between visual imagery and audience perception, aesthetic and revolutionary scopes, transnational and global reach, as well as transtemporal outlines. These publications challenge assumptions of the singularity of radical genius, undermine the passivity of observers and readers, and deny the exclusivity of modern art spaces. We encourage you to look beyond our collection and continue the collaboration in ways that we have not yet imagined.

For now, though, we’ll share a partial list of connections that you might make among contributions. The four categories that follow are by no means prescriptive but rather provide a place for us to highlight a selection of themes and methods that many of the articles share. We also note here that we have included quotations in their original language and English translation to convey the linguistic variation across contributions. There are countless additional connections to be made between and among the articles — unpack as you wish!

## Intermedia and Reception

Reflecting our initial ISSS panel, we were interested in discussing intermedial phenomena in surrealist periodicals and approaching interstices between texts and images. On the pages of periodicals, verbal genres are juxtaposed and interact with visual material. Thus, written words dialogue with visual artworks, shifting meaning through proximity, and similarly texts recontextualize images and even reshape artworks. Intermedial dynamics provide ways to analyze the formal components of periodicals and materiality alongside theories of reception. Whether in narrative content that confuses fact and fiction, visual imagery that alternately reveals and conceals, or editorial methods that both parody and uphold hegemonic structures, periodicals have contributed to the practice of a poetics and politics of surrealism.

The intermedial strategies involved in the interaction between verbal and visual sources open these publications to interdisciplinary debates. Little magazines further rely on the complicity of their observers and readers: through reader activation and disorientation, bewildering text-image relationships, as well as the play with transparency and opacity, periodicals not only “stage” their aesthetics but also reveal their politics of perception by subverting readers’ habits of seeing and calling on them to question any given reality.

These transgressive strategies emerge from the materiality of the page, as Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron demonstrates in “On the Aesthetics of Surrealist Journals.” In her comparative reading of two New York surrealist periodicals, she argues that *View* (1940-1947), edited by Charles-Henri Ford, is rather oriented towards the consumption of surrealist ideas, whereas *VVV* (1942-1944) is turned into a “surrealist object” that invites readers to participate in haptic games and play with cut-out pages and inserted objects. Thus, *VVV* not only “offers” surrealist ideas its their readers but also makes them “practice” a surrealist vision of revolt. The journal also builds on a poetics of revolt, especially by incorporating the Afro-Caribbean writer Aimé Césaire’s anti-colonial and visionary poetry. *VVV*’s poetics and its materiality correspond to its claim of collective action during the years of World War II. Chénieux-Gendron demonstrates how the editors David Hare as well as the then-exiled André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, and Max Ernst propagate their journal to unfold a “new myth” in relation to a new surrealist “view.” In this context, she highlights Breton’s writings in *VVV* as a performative staging of his own visionary discourse, especially regarding his idea of the “Grands Transparents” ‘Great Transparencies.’ We are very grateful and honored to include this translated article in our collection of essays on surrealist periodicals. It was first published in the French journal *Pleine marge* (no. 20). With its translation into English, we wish to uphold the legacy of Chénieux-Gendron’s outstanding scholarship in the field of surrealism after her passing on 1 September 2022.

In “Close-Up,” Erin McClenathan is concerned with the intermedial effects of moving between transparency and opacity in André Breton’s *La révolution*

*surréaliste* (1924-1929) and Georges Bataille's *Documents* (1929-1931). Analyzing cognitive confusion through reader perception, she demonstrates that both periodicals placed their audiences in similar positions although they were supposedly competing projects. In both journals, she observes the contrast between the apparent straightforwardness of cleanly printed texts and photomechanical images and examples of extreme framing or lack of context that disorient the eye and mind. This is what McClenathan denotes as surrealist "close-up imagery." The periodicals' visual subversions, she argues, prompt observers to interact with both journals as "handheld cinema," as they borrow their forms from motion pictures. Ultimately, this technique beckons spectators to come nearer but keeps the inner workings of the movement in the dark – as is the case of Bataille's mucky *informe* or the ultra-exclusive nether regions of Breton's subconscious.

Chénieux-Gendron's as well as McClenathan's contributions also underline the extensive interdisciplinarity of periodicals such as *Documents* and *VVV* in cataloging archeological and ethnographic studies and relating surrealism to natural history. In "Writing the Ethiopian Minotaur," Andrea Gremels centers her attention on the interlacing of surrealist visions and ethnographic missions by focusing on the second number of *Minotaure*, which was published in 1933 and exclusively dedicated to the "Mission Dakar-Djibouti." Gremels explores how Michel Leiris's ethnographic account "Le tareau de Seyfou Tchenger" (Seyfou Tchenger's Bull) transgresses the supposedly objective report. She analyzes discrepancies between Leiris's depiction of the possession cult of the *zar* in northern Ethiopia and the ethnographic photographs taken by Marcel Griaule, who was the leader of the "Dakar-Djibouti-Mission." In his essay, Leiris testifies to ambivalence towards his roles as ethnographer and writer as he cross-examines the limitations of ethnography as well as the poetic potential of reporting on ritualistic possession and sacrifice, especially with regard to the invisible spirits that are set free. Gremels also frames her argument through a transcultural perspective. In the context of *Minotaure's* surrealist mission, Leiris's destabilizing representation of the Ethiopian bull sacrifice reflects the periodical's founding myth as well as the frequent surrealist maneuver to reveal the latent content of the unconscious hidden underneath any manifestation.

## Missions and Group Formations

Periodicals also convey surrealist missions – whether allied or competing. The collaborative endeavor of surrealist journals is constituted through a specific "cultural group formation," as Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker argue regarding the study of modernist magazines (18). Different surrealisms can thus be envisioned, debated, and reformulated within a single journal issue. Moreover, we can observe competing group formations across surrealist periodicals, with each one defending its surrealist vision as more legitimate or revolutionary than that of the other.

We are thus concerned with the question: how do periodicals in diverse places reflect their affinity with and/or animosity toward surrealism? Declarations, editorial statements, or other genres in the style of a manifesto, mostly placed on the first page of each number of a given publication, often announce the general outline of a periodical's collective activity. Periodicals play a crucial role in reflecting authorship in surrealism, mainly because as collaborative projects they decenter individual authorship by claiming a collective voice and message. Conversely, individual interlocutors sometimes act as role models within surrealist journals but may also serve as the controversial foils of surrealist critiques. Canonical literary texts and artworks can also be appropriated for certain surrealist missions, re-envisioned in unusual ways, or even become the target of attack with the purpose of delineating the group's formation. This is a well-known practice in the manifestoes of surrealism. The contributions of our special issue approach these appropriations, identifications, and demarcations in various surrealist periodicals inside and outside Europe to show how they constituted their missions on different grounds of national literary and artistic traditions.

In "Automatism and Psychoanalysis in the Pages of the *London Bulletin* (1938-1940)," Caterina Caputo examines how journal collaborators formed their mission in response to Sigmund Freud. She analyzes how the *London Bulletin* became the voice of surrealism in England at the dawn of World War II. In solidarity with surrealism's global claim against fascism, the group united to shed "social, political and ethical side-lights" on the situation of the arts in England and the world. But the aim of the periodical, established by Belgian surrealist E. L. T. Mesens and British painter and poet Roland Penrose, also aimed to establish a canon of British modern art associated with surrealism. Caputo especially focuses on Herbert Read and Humphrey Jennings and their role of fostering a surrealist mission in the *London Bulletin* that derived from Freud's psychoanalysis. Read developed his own line of automatism in dialogue with Dada and French surrealism through his specific reception of Freud's ideas – even before Breton discovered them. Caputo also detects Freudian thought and uncanny fantasies elsewhere in the *London Bulletin* in the photographic homage to the father of psychoanalysis but also artistic practices that explored the self in a modern and modernizing world between rationality and the unconscious, as expressed in Jennings's works.

The Australian periodical *Angry Penguins* (1940-1946) dialogues with Herbert Read's ideas on modern poetry and is thus more oriented to British than to French surrealism when it comes to proclaiming its own mission. In "Black Swan of Trespass," Gavin Yates emphasizes that those involved in *Angry Penguins* journal constitute Australia's first collective response to surrealism: a record of the wartime commotion punctuated by conflicting ideologies and experiments in literary and artistic practice. Whereas the broader culture rebuked surrealism for its perceived shallowness and excesses, editor Max Harris and the Angry Penguins group provided the most energetic response to surrealism the country had ever

seen. The journal proved to be so provocative that it elicited – and fell victim to – a remarkable literary hoax in which two anti-modernists created the fictional surrealist poet, Ern Malley, catalyzing the collapse of the burgeoning Australian avant-garde. In his analysis of the periodical's poetics, Yates realigns the role of Ern Malley, from a marionette of traditional values to the genuine surrealist. Ern Malley's fictional and controversial authorship enhances the Angry Penguin group's reflection on its poetry and its place in Australian literary history at a moment when traditional expressions are put into question. Thus, the influence of Malley's fictitious authorship on the *Angry Penguins's* group formation is pivotal for surrealism's development in Australian literary culture.

Melanie Nicholson's article, "From German Romanticism to Surrealism," next shifts us to the development of surrealism in Chilean literary culture. With the example of the periodical *Mandrágora* (1938-1943) Nicholson approaches the tension that arose in late 1930s and 1940s Chile between the avant-garde *nouveau esprit*, which made the journal affiliate with surrealism, and a fascination with traditional occult beliefs fashioned in French and German romanticism. The group of young poets – Braulio Arenas, Enrique Gómez-Correa, Teófilo Cid, and Jorge Cáceres – positioned themselves as innovators and protesters against the literary status quo in Chile. As in the case of British surrealism, Chile's *Mandrágora* drew on Freud's theories of the unconscious as well as on surrealist fascinations with automatism, chance, and dreams. The group's surrealist mission was founded on the myth of the mandrake as well as the concept of *poesía negra*, which was also linked to the romantic tropes of the night, access to forbidden realms, black magic, violence, and madness. Through controversy, the Latin American group contributed to the growing turn toward occultism in surrealism. Nicholson's close readings demonstrate the *Mandrágora* poets' orientation toward esoteric, romantic, and surrealist tropes alongside their poetic debates within a rapidly modernizing, urbanizing, and democratizing Chilean landscape. She argues that the remarkably long afterlife of *Mandrágora* invites us to interrogate the imperative for a change in consciousness promised by the alchemical marriage between timeworn traditions and forward-looking literary experimentation.

## Cross-Cultural and Transnational Networks

Periodicals allow us to examine how surrealist ideas travel across national contexts and cultural situations. Here, we focus on surrealism's transcultural practices and cross-cultural networks given that surrealist magazines have served as ideal spaces for the exchange of ideas across geographies and cultures, media, and languages. These publications not only intermingle various text genres and art forms but also bring together contributors with different cultural backgrounds. In many cases, the "transnational and multidirectional . . . connections and confluences of ideas" (D'Alessandro and Gale 23) that we can observe within and across periodical projects can be traced back to the movements of individual

groups or to artworks that often become intermediaries creating zones of contact between different visions of surrealism. The mobility of individual surrealist writers and artists has often propelled the diversification of surrealist ideas across cultures and geographies (Gremels 213-17). This traveling (in) surrealism can also lead to unexpected *mélanges* and chance encounters in periodicals that constitute their transcultural makeup. Surrealism's transcultural and transnational practices thus correspond to its ethos of creativity through unforeseen connections, unpredictable juxtapositions, and the productivity of transformations.

Lauren Walden shows that surrealism in China was the result of such movements in "Surrealism in Chinese Periodicals." The group around the surrealist-inflected periodical *Liangyou* (*The Young Companion*, 1926-1945) advertised exhibitions and artworks by members of the Storm Society and Chinese Independent Art Association who came into contact with the surrealist movement via study abroad in both Japan and France, where they became acquainted with the works of Dalí, de Chirico, Duchamp, and Picasso. Moreover, prominent authors such as Miguel Covarrubias, associated with the Mexican surrealist movement, visited Shanghai in 1930 and 1933 and impacted many Chinese artists particularly in the area of political caricature. Walden argues that the utilization of surrealism in Chinese periodicals oscillated between a virulent satire of hedonistic lifestyles in Shanghai and a critique of the mounting Japanese aggression given the empire's designs to colonize the entirety of China. Amidst this turbulent social context of the 1930s, periodicals such as *Yishu Xunkan* (L'Art), *Shidai Manhua* (Modern Sketch), and *Yifeng* (Art Winds) transculturally manifested their dreamscapes of surrealism. They adopted techniques such as the photomontage and incongruous juxtapositions to foreshadow the inevitability of war with Japan and disseminated surrealism through translations of key texts, such as the *Manifesto of Surrealism*. Nevertheless, this surrealist heyday would be short-lived as periodicals would be usurped, censored, or banned by Japanese colonizers before communist periodicals turned to Socialist Realism under Mao's newly founded People's Republic in 1949.

In "*Monogram in Front unique*," Gavin Parkinson approaches the relationship between Jean-Jacques Lebel as a traveling writer of surrealism and Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* as a traveling artwork between the US-American and European context. In the 1960s, Lebel was a mediating and translational figure between the artists of the New York School and those of postwar surrealism in France. Parkinson approaches the multidirectional reception of Rauschenberg's *Monogram* through Lebel's promotion in the surrealist periodical *Front Unique*, which the surrealists intended to serve their anticolonial cause regarding Algeria under a punning title – "*front*" 'forehead' – referring at once to individual thought and collective action. In the context of *Front Unique* (no. 2, 1960), the juxtaposed images in Rauschenberg's *Monogram* (1955-1959) appeared charged with intermingled surrealist and political connotations. Parkinson considers the revolutionary dimension of the juxtaposed image in surrealism as an aesthetic

justification to reproduce *Monogram* in *Front unique*. He argues that this reproduction speaks for the bond that existed between Rauschenberg and René Magritte, which was strengthened through the work of the former's Black Mountain College classmate Suzi Gablik. At the fringes of surrealism, Lebel's periodical places Rauschenberg at the limits of postwar surrealism's claim for a revolutionary art as it moves between European and American culture.

In "Snip/snap/and cut," Terri Geis explores the "one man" journal *Dies und Das: Ein Magazin von aktuellem surrealistischem Interesse* (This and That: A Magazine of Contemporary, Surrealist Interest), conceived, edited, and published the 1984 by Ted Joans. The single-issue journal that the African American artist created during his residency in Berlin through the Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst program was envisioned as a tribute to Wifredo Lam who had died two years prior in 1982. Joans's transcultural practice in *Dies und Das* not only implies his poetic and political reveries on the legacies and continued urgency of surrealist imperatives in the waning years of the Cold War but also allows him to take his "runaway scissors to snip/snap/and cut here/there from His/story and mostly Her/story" in order to create his own cross-cultural (his)story of surrealism. Collapsing times, cultures, and collections of surrealism through photocopying, layering, and collaging, Joans questions the role of African art within surrealism through a re-centering of contemporary African politics and Afro-Diasporic cultures like jazz, invokes the anti-colonial activism of historic surrealism to protest contemporary racism in the United States and prioritizes women artists and writers in the ongoing relevance of the surrealist movement. Though the strong influence of André Breton is seen throughout the journal, the publication is also conceived as a defiant call to future action, with Joans addressing younger generations of writers and artists to draw their attention to the "this and that" – *Dies und Das* – of transformation.

## Transhistorical Perspectives and Entanglements

Ted Joans is far from alone in his Janus-like perspective on surrealism. So, finally for now, we turn to periodicals that cross eras and chronologies. The makers of surrealist periodicals frequently reconsider and reformulate their missions with regard to earlier publications. In this fashion, periodicals reflect their position within the history of surrealism but also question the idea of a linear historicity of the avant-gardes. Periodicals thus open to transhistorical perspectives demonstrating surrealism's multidirectionality across time. In more general terms, studying surrealist publications reveals repeated refusals of historicization when groups claim their own version of the avant-garde "renewal" that Martín Kohan has identified. At the same time, surrealism's historical entanglements and transhistorical aesthetics allow us to take into account how surrealist periodicals reacted to pressing socio-political problems and crises of their time. We can observe the ways in which aesthetic, political, and revolutionary missions



transform not only in particular locations but also at points in time. Through the case studies described here and in future research, surrealist periodicals will continue to inscribe themselves in histories in a diversity of disciplines.

True to his title, Austin Hancock's "Periodical Pugilism" addresses the relationship between Dada and surrealism in the 1920s alongside the representation and negotiation of masculinity. However, as Hancock argues, the bout between Francis Picabia and André Breton that occurred on the printed page in the early 1920s mirrors performances of machismo that took place in the boxing ring in the years immediately following World War I. Hancock encourages us to reexamine an entangled selection of visual and verbal attacks from Picabia's final issue of 391 from 1921 to poet-boxer Arthur Craven's self-characterization in his journal *Maintenant* (1912-1915) to a portrait that confuses the image of prize fighter Georges Carpentier with already infamous prankster Marcel Duchamp. As it turns out, the pugilism here has less to do with a dual between artists or avant-garde movements and more to do with the battle between binaristic categories and fluidity – whether in terms of gender, history, or somewhere in between.

Claire Howard's "In the Air" reveals surrealism's transhistorical entanglements with regard to the Cold War era, although it could certainly be read alongside other contributions dealing with transnational networks and crossings. Howard contextualizes the magazines *Le surréalisme, même* (1956-1959), *Bief, jonction surréaliste* (1958-1960), and *La brèche, action surréaliste* (1961-1965) alongside French political maneuvers after the inauguration of Charles de Gaulle in 1958 as well as the 1965 surrealist exhibition *L'écart absolu*, especially the collective work *Le désordinateur*. She brings attention to how the above-mentioned periodicals reacted to contemporary political and cultural issues, such as consumerism and technophilia, by starting campaigns against space exploration and the mass enthusiasm for sports. According to Howard, the post-World War II surrealists addressed a range of topics from the imperiling of individual freedom and inner life to the specter of humanity's robotization. In drawing parallels between how surrealist critiques of sports culture and the space race related to surrealism's objections to the Algerian War (1954-1962), Howard also recalls surrealist anti-colonial efforts that date back to the 1930s.

Finally, in "The Avant-Garde as Repetition," Effie Rentzou contributes a significant transhistorical reading that reaches beyond surrealism. She foregrounds a consideration of repeating avant-garde strategies in the periodicals of Les Réverbères, which have remained understudied in part because of the liminal status of the group within the periodization of French cultural history. In her analysis of two 1940 publications, *Le cheval de 4* and *Deda L-E*, Rentzou calls into question distinctions between dadaist and surrealist histories as well as the categorization of the historical avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. Like the transhistorical scope of Howard's essay and this collection more generally, Rentzou's embrace of what she describes as a "threshold year" allows her to explore the ways in which the otherwise lesser-known publications of the

Réverbères group echo across eras, suggesting the permeability of historical categories.

With this vivid collection of articles across media, cultures, disciplines, regions, and eras, we hope to initiate further scholarly interest in the international study of surrealism through periodicals. Far from trying to present a complete overview of surrealist publications, this special issue aims to offer glimpses on how to unpack the “prismatic fringes of a library” (Benjamin 66) as it draws attention to the – still understudied – role of periodicals in constituting the politics and poetics of surrealism as well as its key concerns and transnational history. We would like to thank the authors of this special issue for enriching the discussion of periodicals and/at the borders of surrealism through their contributions.

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