

Constituted Reality or Derealization: Blumenberg and the Surrealists on the Relationship Between Modernism and Modernity

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Introduction: Doing Philosophy with Surrealism

In an essay entitled “Nachahmung der Natur” (Imitation of Nature) (1957), Hans Blumenberg conceives of artistic modernism as the apotheosis of modern human reality, which he defines as a human accomplishment, as in some way essentially “man-made” (9; 18). This conception of reality contrasts with the dominant “naturalist” view that sees reality as more or less objectively given, or as what Robert Wallace calls “a result of a good fit between man’s instincts and his environment” (xv). This conceptualization of reality as human-made accords with Blumenberg’s sense of reality as comprised of language, discourse, myth, metaphor, and rhetoric. He cites surrealism in particular, because of its creatively counter-factual quality, as emblematic of this specifically human reality. It is perhaps worth noting that Blumenberg’s claim comes some twenty years before Susan Sontag will identify the “Surrealist takeover of the modern sensibility,” which in her view is carried out by the medium of photography, with its “creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree” (51-52).

The impetus for this essay is that Blumenberg’s conceptualization of surrealism in these terms appears to add a new category to Richard Sheppard’s otherwise seemingly exhaustive analysis of the (nine) different types of response that the various modernisms make in the face of the — to varying degrees nihilistic — experience of modernity. These range from classical modernisms’ turns to mysticism, aestheticism, and nostalgia, to primitivism or the conception of artistic work as allowing ecstatic release, or the aspiration to an ideal socialist future or futurism’s “modernolatory” celebration (Sheppard 34-38). By comparing Blumenberg’s anthropological ontology with the theoretical writings of André Breton, Louis Aragon, and to a lesser extent Pierre Mabille, I will argue in the first section of the essay that Blumenberg’s anthropological conceptualization of reality as human-made and radically divorced from nature has much in common with

surrealist thinking, in which language and imagination are privileged in an essentially mythopoetic ontology.

Doing philosophy with surrealism in this manner is at odds with Aragon's and Breton's occasional statements deprecating philosophy. The former remarks of his own formulations in *Paris Peasant* that "there was no question of succumbing to mere philosophizing. I have always been the enemy of philosophy, or at least of philosophers" (14). Likewise, Breton deplores "scholarly research, pure speculation; we want nothing whatever to do with those . . . who use their minds as they would a savings bank" (*Manifestoes* 129). I will return to this latter gnomic phrase in a moment. But it is also evident that surrealist theory and artistic practice, by virtue of its interrogations of modes of reason, is intensely interested in the nature of reality. Breton for instance disparages those who have no desire to "clarify relations between thought and matter" (*Manifestoes* 141). Walter Benjamin was one of the first to point this out, insisting on the need to understand the "whole literature of the avant-garde . . . whether it is called Futurism, Dadaism, or Surrealism" as "magical experiments with words, not as artistic dabbling" (184). In a similar vein Jacob Taubes thinks that we need to understand modernism not aesthetically but historical-philosophically (139). For Hal Foster this imperative underlies what he sees as a historical neglect of surrealism's philosophical implications, due to "the dual demands of contemporary art and theory" (xiii).

Foster's claim may be true to some extent, but it is also apparent that some commentators in the course of the last fifty years have viewed surrealism as the most fruitful modernist ground for thinking about the nature of reality, whether in the form of ontology or gnoseology (see Altieri and Dell'Aversano), and I will agree: I think that the nature of our grasp of reality was one of the surrealists' primary concerns. Breton for instance describes a "special part of its function" as being "to examine with a critical eye the notions of reality and unreality, reason and irrationality, reflection and impulse, knowledge and 'fatal' ignorance, usefulness and uselessness" (*Manifestoes* 140). For Gerald Mead the various modernisms share "a common conviction that a new age required new definitions for man and his place in the world" (282), and the link with Blumenberg is evident in the fact that this question of humankind's "place in the world" is probably the central issue for philosophical anthropology, emblematic of which is the title of Max Scheler's seminal book, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (*Man's Place in Nature*) (1928).

However, this broad parallel, and the more detailed evidence in the form of their remarks on language, imagination, and myth that I will present below, should not distract us from the marked differences between Blumenberg's attitude and those of the surrealists. In the second section of the essay I will explore, first, the contrasting attitudes that underlie Blumenberg's anthropology and the theoretical texts of classical surrealism. Where the former is essentially pragmatic, the latter valorizes an indeterminacy that is inimical to pragmatism. This anti-pragmatic element in surrealism is alluded to in the terminal couplet in Breton's

series, “usefulness and uselessness,” and its final term in particular. It underlies Breton’s disparaging reference to those “who use their minds as they would a savings bank,” which goes to the heart of surrealism’s rejection of instrumental reason — as well as logic and other modes of reason. Key in this discussion will be Breton’s poetics of disinterest and the surrealists’ more fundamental concern to undermine necessity in all its forms, of which pragmatism is but one variant.

I will argue, second, that surrealism’s concern to expose and undermine necessity gives rise to an aesthetics that is oriented towards strategies of derealization, an attitude that is in crucial ways at odds with Blumenberg’s sense of reality as being self-constituted. Reality and unreality, the first pairing in Breton’s series of couplets cited above, will be seen in this way as the cardinal example of the kind of antinomy that polices the boundaries of reality, framing antinomies which surrealists are seeking to loosen the hold of.

In my closing remarks I will return to the question of doing philosophy with surrealism, in the context of which I speculate that this strategy of derealization underlies the neglect of surrealism’s philosophical implications. In this light the theoretical texts of classical surrealism seem to comprise an anti-philosophy that speaks against those who would second surrealist ideas to a foundationalist ontology such as Blumenberg’s self-constituted reality, or those who discern in surrealism, by virtue of its focus on language and imagination, an underlying idealism, or indeed, by virtue of its subversion of the norms of both, a materialism.

Artifice, Imagination, and Language

Underlying his remarks about modernist art is Blumenberg’s sense that we deal with reality “indirectly,” as well as his notions of man as “radically divorced” from nature and of human reality as being characterized by a thoroughgoing “artifice.” This idea of artifice is a recurrent thread in the anthropological tradition in which his work is located, which has been conceptualized as seeking to account for those aspects of human thought and action that are “nicht mehr Naturkonstante” ‘no longer consistent with nature’ (Pfothenauer 12).¹ As Helmut Plessner pithily puts it in the foreword to *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, “[f]rom nature you do not get the human” (18). In “An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric” Blumenberg insists likewise: “I see no other course for an anthropology except, in an analogous manner, to destroy what is supposedly ‘natural’ and convict it of its artificiality in the functional system of the elementary human accomplishment called ‘life’” (438-39).

This characterization of human reality as in some way distinct from nature, as “something beyond natural life” (Alquié 6), is also common to surrealist writings. Altieri draws attention to this attitude: “Surrealists like Breton preserve this

¹ Except where a published translation is cited, all translations from German are by the author or the general editor.

idealist sense that the value of art resides primarily in its power to show itself remaking nature" (96). And Breton himself remarks about the naming of the movement itself, "[t]o be even fairer, we could probably have taken over the word SUPERNATURALISM . . ." (*Manifestoes* 24-25).

For Jacob Taubes it is specifically the activity of the human imagination in surrealist ideas and practice that marks the "Terminus für das natürliche Leben" "point at which nature ends" (142). This sense of the unavoidable artifice of human imagination suggests an important link between surrealism and German romanticism's "denial of the older naturalistic presuppositions" (Lovejoy 242), in a way that is more clearly philosophical than the — essentially psychological — tendency to associate surrealism with romanticism's explorations of the "'dark side' of the mind" (Hughes 213).

The human capacity for imagination is seen by both Blumenberg and the surrealists as being in large part responsible for generating human reality. Blumenberg characterizes the generation of metaphorical reality as an "imaginative procedure" ("Anthropological Approach" 454), in a way that is contrasted with the notion of reality as in some way objectively given. In "Sprachsituation und immanente Ästhetik" he claims that it is the Word conceived "als Horizont unerfüllter Intentionen" 'as the horizon of unrealized intentions' that "[man] von der alltäglichen Sprachsituation der objektivierten und zu objektivierenden Welt wegwendet auf seine eigene Omnipotenz der Imagination" 'turns [one] away from the everyday language situation of the objective and objectified world toward the omnipotence of one's own imagination' (153).

This privileging of imagination often manifests itself as the (essentially phenomenological) insight that reality is the product of our representations to mind. Aragon, in a section of *Paris Peasant* entitled "Imagination's Discourse on Himself," states that imagination is essential to reality. It has "given us everything: the blue of the sky, the Pyramids, motor cars," even if we try to reckon without it (77). He refers obliquely to Schopenhauer in this regard: "As I said to the German students in 1819, one may expect everything from the mind's potentialities." Earlier in the work Aragon characterizes imagination as primary and all-encompassing, such that even "reason's imagination" is seen to be a product of the creative imagination:

This fear of error . . . , this mania for control, makes man prefer reason's imagination to the imagination of the senses. And yet it is always the imagination alone which is at work. Nothing, neither strict logic nor overwhelming impression, can convince me about reality, can convince me that I am not basing reality on a delirium of interpretation. (23)

Mabille takes a similar view, stating early on in *Mirror of the Marvelous* that "[f]or me, as for the realists of the Middle Ages, there is no fundamental difference between the elements of thought and the phenomena of the world, . . . between the perceptible and the imaginable" (13). These positions presumably underlie

Robert Short's claim that "[t]he consistent aim of Surrealist art has been to show the degree to which the world is porous to the imagination" (307).

There are surrealist artworks that may be interpreted as thematizing this phenomenological reality. Here I am thinking of those works by René Magritte, called various permutations of "The Human Condition," which present paintings of paintings which both depict and conceal the reality that we assume they represent. This overlap renders reality inseparable from its representation, as Robert Hughes puts it: "Thus the play between image and reality suggests that the real world is only a construction of mind" (247). This analysis seems to go some way toward refuting Sontag's verdict that such paintings are merely figurative, a presentation of a "meagerly stocked dream-world" which fails to blur the lines between art and life (51).

The primary vehicle of the imagination that separates us from unmediated, natural reality in both Blumenberg's ideas and surrealist theory and practice is language, particularly in the forms of metaphor and rhetoric. For Blumenberg all of human reality is essentially rhetorical: "The reason there is so little perceptible rhetoric in a surrounding reality that is extremely artificial is that it is already omnipresent" ("Anthropological Approach" 454).

Breton claims that surrealism is interested "first and foremost" in language (*Manifestoes* 151), and language, alongside visual media, is evidently one of surrealism's chief means of experiment and cultural renewal. Of the two Breton prefers language — and poetry in particular — because he sees it as instinctually less compelling than visual media. (However, it is worth registering that he sees the process of "fixing [visual images]" as "the formation of a veritable language" (*Surrealism and Painting* 2).) He cites poetic language's tradition of resistance against habits of meaning and expression, as having "submit[ted] to a permanent and rigorous censorship whatever has constrained it hitherto" (*Surrealism and Painting* 4). This focus on language also suggests considerable common ground between Breton and Bataille, insofar as the latter's *Critical Dictionary*, published in instalments in *Documents* in 1929 and 1930, has language and norms of expression as one of its main themes, which it treats in a thoroughly defamiliarizing fashion. So, for instance, three of the four entries on the eye have a particular focus on linguistic expressions that include that organ (Bataille 43-48), comprising what James Clifford describes as a "disconcerting inventory of rhetorical forms concerning the eye" (132). In this respect the *Critical Dictionary* may be seen to offer in some of its entries at least a playful, subversive anticipation of Blumenberg's metaphorology.

But, as in Blumenberg's formulations, the point is about broader reality than this subversive, counter-cultural dimension. In the entry on metaphor in the *Critical Dictionary* Michael Leiris makes the point that human reality is essentially metaphorical: "Not only language, but the whole of intellectual life is based of transpositions, of symbols, which can be described as metaphorical" (Bataille 61). Leiris insists that anything other than such figurative relation "would necessitate

knowing the very essence of that object, which is impossible, since we can only know phenomena, not things in themselves."

This idea that language is constitutive of human reality is also evident in surrealist writing's oft expressed aim of freeing language from the representational paradigm, whereby language is viewed merely as a means of representing a pre-existing reality. This kind of recasting of language's status is evident for instance in Breton's characterization of social action as, ultimately, a form of human expression: "The problem of social action, I would like to repeat and to stress at this point, is only one of the forms of a more general problem which Surrealism set out to deal with, and that is *the problem of human expression in all its forms*" (*Manifestoes* 151). In a similar vein Aragon in *Paris Peasant* regrets his previous assessment of myth as just a "means of expression" (128). And when relating his attempt to discover the source of a moving, revelatory experience, he describes its nature "neither [as] allegorical," nor as having "the character of a symbol," nor as "manifest[ing] an idea," but rather as "constitut[ing] that very idea" (128).

Presumably at some level all types or modes of language might be taken as evidence of this constitutive power, but the point is that some conceptualizations of reality do their best to conceal this fact. The objectivist or naturalist descriptions of reality that populate everyday thinking as well as scientific discourse are obvious examples of this, as is the restriction of language to a representative function, reflecting a pre-existing and objectively given reality. Conversely, it seems that language's constitutive quality is particularly highlighted in those poetic uses of language — such as Aragon's revelatory experience — which draw attention to qualities of language outside of its purely referential function. The contrast between objectivist and constitutive concepts of language is what Edith Kern is getting at when she describes surrealism as part of a wider poetic movement — she names Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Kafka, and Beckett as well — that overturns the restriction of language to a representative function, which she sees as having taken place around the seventeenth century: "its entire existence being located in its representative role, and limited only to that role" (46). Kern sees surrealism's hermetic aspect as returning to a time when "language existed in its own right" (45).

A case in point here is those instances where mundane written accounts give way to seemingly involuntary, poetic, marvellous moments, reflecting the belief in words — almost *themselves* — as a source of authentic creativity. Breton, for instance, recounts that one evening "a rather strange phrase . . . came to me without any apparent relationship to the events in which . . . I was then involved . . . *which was knocking at the window*. . . something like: 'There is a man cut in two by the window'" (*Manifestoes* 21).

This absence of "any apparent relationship to the events" suggests that this phrase by Breton might be precisely a case of Kern's language operating "in its own right." This aim of experiencing language in its own right, as well as

eschewing language's representative function, seems to be part of surrealism's quest for immediacy, for experience divested of psychological habits or societal norms. Of similar ilk are the various experiments in automatism, which sought to privilege impulse or intuition over more habitual or ordered experience.

The paradox of this claim to immediacy is of course that language is itself presumably a medium, a mode of reality that is essentially mediated. But the ontological point here is that metaphor undermines our ability to distinguish between language that represents reality and language that constitutes reality. And it is this gap that surrealism seems to exploit. While it is nonsensical to suggest that language ever could be immediate, that is not to say that a *feeling* of immediacy cannot be achieved in language, for instance by casting off the received and habitual norms of language. As such, language has a manifold and paradoxical status in surrealist thinking and practice: it is at the same time one of the essential media of our experience of reality, one of the main vehicles of restrictive norms and thereby an obstacle to authentic experience, and also one of the main avenues of authentic experience.

Mythopoetic

This idea of language as constitutive of reality is central to a mythopoetic view of reality that is common to both Blumenberg and the surrealists; their reflections on artifice, imagination, and language are emblematic of this idea. Aragon for instance sees myth as being essential to the mode of human thinking: "[thought is] a mechanism analogous in every respect to the genesis of myth" (*Paris Peasant* 130). He contrasts this with the standard concept of myth as "a figure of speech, a means of expression," stating "I was mad enough to prefer abstract thought to myth, and even to congratulate myself on the fact" (128). Myth is psychologically necessary: "myth is above all a reality, and a spiritual necessity, that it is the path of the conscious."

And it is important to grasp the philosophical implications of this mythopoetic reality. Blumenberg and the surrealists propose to do away with those foundational conceptualizations of reality that claim to go deeper than mere experience or habitual linguistic expressions, since they are deemed to be rooted in logic or objective fact. Blumenberg's project of metaphorology rejects this traditional privileging of concepts over metaphors, and deems his study of rhetorical forms to be the only path for philosophy "once it takes seriously the unattainability of eternal truths and final certainties" (Baynes, et al., 424).

In this vein Blumenberg describes metaphor as occupying "empty space," and characterizes the process by which imagination produces reality as "projective": "Now metaphor is in fact not only a surrogate for concepts that are missing but possible in principle, and should therefore be demanded; it is also a projective principle, which both expands and occupies empty space — an imaginative procedure" ("Anthropological Approach" 453-54). Thus reality is transformed by

human creativity, of which, by virtue of its innovation, modern(ist) art is deemed to be the epitome: “[S]eit der *Parmigianino* 1523 sein Selbstbildnis aus dem entstellenden Konvexspiegel malte ... ist im Kunstwerk die Signatur des schaffenden Menschen als des um seine Potenz Wissenden immer schärfer artikuliert worden” ‘In 1523, the Parmigianino painted his self-portrait from a distorted convex mirror. . . . Since then, the mark of the creative human being aware of his power has become ever more clearly evident in works of art’ (“*Nachahmung der Natur*” 10; “*Imitation of Nature*” 18).

Subverting Necessity

But this creativity does not exist in a vacuum, as is indicated by the references above to norms and habits. And it is my view that the surrealists’ prizing of innovation does not subvert norms *for the sake of it*, but because this subversion undermines the sense that such norms are in some way necessary. This loosening of the bonds of necessity is not limited to verbal and visual forms but seeks to unpick any sense that reality is bound by laws that are necessary and ineluctable: psychological, logical, verbal, visual, objective reality. Surrealist art’s gesture of disruption — of visual, linguistic, and logical norms — seems to aim precisely at undermining the necessity and certainty in which these modes of reality are cloaked.

A case in point is Breton’s phrase of a “man cut in two by the window.” These words defy logic, not least insofar as they conflate verbal and visual realms, inasmuch as it seems like a verbal equivalent of a Magritte painting. This war against necessity underlies the value attributed to impulse and intuition in surrealist theory and practice, noted above, as instances of that which is deemed to be involuntary, accessed for instance by automatic drawing or writing.

This antipathy to necessity is also an important point of overlap with Blumenberg’s formulations. In “*Nachahmung der Natur*” the latter argues that modernist art rejects nature’s hold over us, and calls into question the “*Verbindlichkeit der Natur für das Kunstwerk*” ‘binding quality of nature for the art work.’ Characteristic of this non-binding quality is modernist art’s interest in novelty, which Blumenberg contrasts with the function of art as representing that which is already given:

Es wird also nicht etwas “wiedergewonnen,” was in einem Verfallsprozeß geschichtlich verloren gegangen ist, irgendwann aber in ursprünglicher Präsenz dagewesen sein könnte als mythisches Elementarerlebnis, das sich restaurieren ließe, sondern Poetisierung ist durchaus mit Neuheit, Erstmaligkeit verbunden.

It is not that something is “regained” that was lost in some process of decline but might have been originally present at some point as a mythical, elemental experience that might be restored. Rather, artistic-

literary creation is entirely bound up with novelty, with doing things for the first time. ("Sprachsituation" 150)

Certainly, innovation in aesthetic techniques seems to be a driving force for the surrealists. For Aragon novelty is the essential difference between good and bad art, which are to be distinguished "[b]y their power. By their novelty" (*Treatise on Style* 95). This is echoed by Mabilie, for whom the "tradition" of the marvellous is continued not by "museum curators or guardians of the academy" but by "innovators who continue the great adventure" (32). And while this prizing of innovation may be understood as a means of unsettling habits of language and thinking, it also has some relevance for philosophical arguments concerning the nature of reality — specifically human reality. On the one hand, this prizing of innovation gives a certain specificity to the characterization of surrealism as quintessentially modern that we noted at the outset. Aragon sees the essence of modernity as change, referring to "the vertigo of the modern" (*Paris Peasant* 129). On the other hand, for Mabilie at least, this capacity for innovation is neither specifically modern nor exclusively counter-cultural, but rather captures the essence of humanity: "The real tradition of humanity is not one of acceptance but of revolt" (58). Indeed, even if a sense of reality is indispensable, "necessary" as Aragon has it, it seems to be essential to the surrealist worldview that the exact nature — the contents, if you will — of that reality is ultimately indeterminate. In my view this provisional quality of reality is one of the essential features of mythopoetic reality.

This provisionality is evidenced for instance in Blumenberg's reoccupation thesis, and the surrealist notion that the human world-view is subject to endless transformations: "It became apparent to me that man is as full of gods as a sponge plunged into the open sky. These gods live, attain the zenith of their power, then die, leaving their perfumed altars to other gods" (*Paris Peasant* 130). Aragon sees even the succession of traditional gods is seen as evidence of the "transformation of everything. They are the necessity of movement." For this reason Mabilie sees little distinction between modern scientists and those poets, priests, architects, and painters who are all cited as proponents of the marvellous earlier in the text: "The path goes from Prometheus to the hermetics, from them to modern physicists. The latter use the most precise methods and possess the most powerful instruments. But they are nonetheless the legitimate heirs to the tradition of the marvellous" (58; see also 30-31). The common ground with Blumenberg is evident here, insofar as he also questions the assumption that modern scientific worldview is an improvement on fantasy. Rather, in his "reoccupation" thesis he insists on the continuity between mythical (or religious) and scientific worldviews. According to this argument, which is essential to both *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966) and *Work on Myth* (1979), stories of salvation and "world explanation" do essentially the same job, merely "reoccupying" positions (see *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* 65-69).

Contrasts

But there seems to be something of a tension here between this continuity thesis and the contrast between myth and science drawn above: whereas the latter is built upon an order of logic and grounds that are reckoned to be necessary, the former eschews and indeed refutes such foundationalist claims. In Blumenberg's writings this distinction is elided by seeing reality — mythopoetic or scientific — as the product of self-assertion. But this self-assertion also introduces a kind of necessity, in the form of utility or pragmatism, which has some common ground in the writings of Breton, Aragon, and Mabille, but which I see as fundamentally distinguishing Blumenberg's position from theirs.

Self-Assertion

Blumenberg's remarks on creativity ultimately bear on the question of determination: what determines or causes human action? In his view the answer to what causes human action is categorically different from what causes any other event on the planet: in his view we can only interpret human life as a "human accomplishment" ("Anthropological Approach" 439). This accomplishment encompasses modern science, whose "self-assertive sense" Blumenberg discerns in its capacity to "foresee events, to anticipate them, to alter or to produce them" (*Legitimacy of the Modern Age* 209). But it is also evident in the procedures of replacement and substitution that are the mechanisms of social institutions and linguistic formulations. Even individual identity is described not as given but as "a kind of accomplishment" ("Anthropological Approach" 456).

This idea of human reality as the product of self-assertion — and the concomitant sense of nature as inert and plastic material — is a recurrent thread in writings associated with philosophical anthropology from Herder and Schiller to Arnold Gehlen. The latter, in *Man: His Nature and Place in the World* (1928), describes a scenario in which "man actively masters the world around him by transforming it to serve his purposes" (29). This reappears almost verbatim in Blumenberg's writings, starting with *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966), in which he traces the modern conception of human purpose from the gnostic idea of the world as "fallen" to its fruition in the scientific and technological age. Blumenberg sees the turning point on this journey from ancient to modern as Francis Bacon's conception of knowledge as an application of nature, which is put in the service of man and society (384ff). The fallen world of the Gnostics, forsaken by God, leaves open a space into which man can — and indeed for Bacon must — remake the world. Bacon's view of man's status and task in the world is underpinned by the theological project of retrieving a lost paradise, but Blumenberg also points out the radically modern quality of Bacon's attitude, which is apparent in the sense that knowledge is no longer teleological — set towards a particular aim or purpose. Rather Bacon insists that the potential of knowledge can have no bounds, no pre-ordained limits. This attitude makes

obsolete previous conceptions of man's connection to the world: the classical conception of nature as the model for all human endeavour, the medieval *curiositas* about the world, and indeed "the old story of heaven and earth [in which] everything had been found a meaning, purpose, reason, function and cause" (Hollis 23).

It is true that in some surrealist formulations the human imagination is also deemed to be the only possible source of order, of necessity, as Aragon puts it: "The world's necessity originates in me. Thus the whole of nature is my machine" (*Paris Peasant* 138). And this reference to nature as machine seems to anticipate Blumenberg's Baconian reading of modernity as mastery over nature. This connection certainly suggests that surrealism is not necessarily inherently progressive and benign, exclusively interested in liberation from the constraints of an overbearing reason or petrified language. Rather, an inherent instrumentalism in human reality creeps into the discussion. This is echoed in Mabille's characterization of the marvellous as "both external to humankind and contained within us, requiring an outward conquest of nature and a constant inward searching" (17). Likewise Mabille characterizes human history as "like a long voyage directed toward conquering a marvelous realm" (17), clarifying later in the same book that, "[f]or humans, true conquest doesn't consist of establishing an ephemeral power over one's peers, but of mastering the elements" (58).

Surrealist writings are likewise not immune from the idea that human action is guided primarily by self-interested instrumental reason. Concomitant with the aforementioned turn away from nature is the sense that reality may be governed by almost unlimited self-assertion. As Aragon puts it: "See, already creations of pure fantasy have made you masters of yourselves" (*Paris Peasant* 77). Breton, writing of Lewis's *The Monk*, concurs: "[i]n *The Monk*, the 'nothing is impossible for him who dares try' gives it its full, convincing measure" (*Manifestoes* 15). He continues: "Man proposes and disposes. He and he alone can determine whether he is completely master of himself, that is, whether he maintains the body of his desires, daily more formidable, in a state of anarchy" (18).

Poetics of Disinterest

But stronger is the thread in surrealist writings that rejects any such utility, which is just another variant of the necessity which we have seen as one of its primary targets, much like constraining reason or logic. So, for instance, Breton claims that surrealist thinking is interested in "the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dreams, in the disinterested play of thought" (*Manifestoes* 26). And at the end of the first manifesto he contrasts imagination, viewed as the essence of life, with material existence: "It is living and ceasing to live that are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere" (*Manifestoes* 47).

This inutility is central to what Benjamin classifies as surrealism's "radical concept of freedom," which could "liquidate the sclerotic liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom" (189). Central here is that this liberation "'must be enjoyed unrestrictedly in its fullness without any kind of pragmatic calculation, as long as it lasts.'" Breton insists that surrealist activity must be "exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern" (*Manifestoes* 26), and display an "unflagging fidelity to the commitments of Surrealism [that] presupposes a disinterestedness, a contempt for risk, a refusal to compromise, of which very few men prove, in the long run, to be capable" (*Manifestoes* 129). For his part, Aragon describes pragmatism as "ludicrous": "Yet, as it happens, for close on a century men have accepted this idea, which constitutes a veritable suicide of the mind, as the only valid one" (*Paris Peasant* 206). He defends poetic inutility against the "pen-pushers," who are of the same ilk as Breton's people who would "use their minds as they would a savings bank" (*Manifestoes* 129): "The purity of the dream, the unusable and the useless of the dream: this is what must defended against the new-fangled pen pushers' craze that is about to be unleashed. The dream must not become the prose poem's twin, nor the cousin of nonsense, nor the haiku's brother in law" (*Treatise on Style* 94).

This prizing of inutility is evident in the surrealists' focus on that which dominant culture takes as ephemeral and inessential, that which the instrumental mind does not notice or need. Aragon, for instance, includes the following in an allegedly randomly generated list of unnoticed elements of reality:

It is enough to make one shudder to see a bourgeois family taking its morning coffee without ever noticing the unknowable that shows through the tablecloth's red and white checkered pattern. . . . After that, what hope for man to become aware of the enchantments that surround him? (*Paris Peasant* 190)

There is something essentially impossible about this task, as Aragon points out: "You think, my boy, that you have an obligation to describe everything. Fallaciously. But still, to describe. You are sadly out in your calculations. You have not enumerated the pebbles, the abandoned chairs" (*Paris Peasant* 194). But at the same time an incomplete quality is inevitable when judged by the conventional yardstick of authoritative or convincing communication. When assessing his account of the trip to the Buttes-Chaumont park he describes it as "ha[ving] an unfinished look about it" and "realizes that [he has] scarcely said anything about this garden, that [he has] neglected all the essential features" (*Paris Peasant* 197).

Blumenberg's Pragmatics: Culture as Dependable

The contrast between surrealist inutility and Blumenberg's pragmatism may be traced to a very different approach to the enviroing culture. Blumenberg characterizes human culture as a framework that makes action possible and meaningful. This possibility is attributable to one crucial characteristic: the

dependability of these institutional arrangements. So, for instance, Blumenberg describes the function of language as “a set of instruments not for communicating information or truths, but rather, primarily, for the production of mutual understanding, agreement, or toleration, on which basis the actor depends” (“Anthropological Approach” 433). In this respect he sees myth as continuous with instrumental rationality, not least in that it is pragmatic. As such, myths are characterized primarily by their consistency of ideas: “Iconic consistency is the most characteristic element in the description of myths” (*Work on Myth* 149). And he describes institutions as quasi-natural, “approach[ing] the stupendous variety and the convincingness of the forms of nature itself,” and myth in particular is described as “equal to nature in the validity of its patterns” (162).

This quality of dependability suggests that utility functions as an underlying and ultimate necessity in Blumenberg’s formulations, in contrast to the surrealist desire to dethrone necessity in all its forms. If culture is characterised by its dependability, the creativity the surrealists value — whether in the form of myth, the image, or the marvellous — appears to be de facto counter-cultural insofar as their illogical juxtapositions seem precisely intent on subverting the dependability and consistency of cultural forms that Blumenberg identifies as their essential features. Breton for example characterizes culture as the obstacle that is to be overcome to achieve liberated, authentic existence. It also seems to be the point of Breton’s remarks on painting, with its “fixing” of visual images and “beaten tracks” and “circuitous paths” (*Surrealism and Painting* 2-3). It is also why he prefers poetry, as intuitively less compelling than visual forms.

Constituted Reality Versus Derealization

And in my view this contrasting view of culture underlines a crucial difference between Blumenberg’s position and surrealist writing and practice, which may be expressed in terms of whether surrealism — notwithstanding its name — can be considered a *realism* in any coherent sense of the word. Whereas Blumenberg claims that modernist art is emblematic of constitutive reality, in my view surrealist theory and practice prefers strategies of *derealization*. That is to say, its aesthetic interventions seek to disrupt the norms of logic, language, visual reality, and value, albeit in a way that precisely points up the constructed — or at least provisional — nature of that reality. This reality is not constructed out of sheer self-assertion, but rather of logical, linguistic, and visual norms whose provisional nature surrealism seeks to point out, and whose necessity it seeks to undermine.

This notion of derealization is borrowed from Alquié, for whom surrealist practice seeks to undermine the petrification of our reality by overly dominant or predictable norms of language or image: “But desire may take another route, that of the imaginary. It then derealizes this world, forgets its laws, and is satisfied in changing our very manner of apprehending it” (57). For Alquié the royal road to this derealization is “the path of emotion, of dream, of reverie, of poetry, and of

madness." But I would be less definitive and more functional in this respect and say this experience of derealization can be a consequence of any strategies that subvert the fundamental conventional structures or habits of meaningful experience: language and visual imagery, but also logic, selfhood and identity, an ordered sense of time or space.

Dreams evidently accomplish this subversion, as can poetic language. But alongside these more rarefied realms, it is evident that some surrealist artworks precisely thematize the norms of everyday experience. For instance it seems to be just such a juxtaposition of strategies of subversion with mundane aspects of reality that is in operation in some of the most familiar — and perhaps most resonant — images of the surrealist canon, Magritte's paintings. His unsettling treatments of familiar images are often simple, but resist coherence, and do so with the very building blocks of reality and existence. They have been likened to Freud's uncanny (see Levy), and Hughes describes them as "snapshots of the impossible, rendered in the dullest and most literal way: vignettes of language and reality locked in mutual cancellation" (243).

If visual culture comprises a "veritable language," then Magritte's paintings, encompassing portraiture, landscape, and still life, constitute a metaphorology of images of everyday life. In each some crucial element of meaning is subverted, in ways that seem to resound with profound meaning, but whose depth might ultimately be revealed to be just mirror-deep. So for instance selfhood and identity are subverted — even traduced — in his portraits, such as *The Phantom Landscape* (1928), in which the face is labelled "mountain." Night and day, the literal and figurative parameters of our lived reality, are subverted in the series of paintings called *Empire of Light*, in which the most mundane of images, particularly in Magritte's oeuvre, that of bright blue sky dotted with clouds, is juxtaposed with a kind of opposite, various instances of domestic homes at night. The deeper paradox here is that clouds are from a certain perspective highly alien to human life, while home could barely be more homely.

This relationship to norms of mundane experience underlines the idea that surrealist innovation is not necessarily taken as a value in itself, which was a view that was central to Blumenberg's interpretation of surrealism. By virtue of their absurd or illogical images and utterances, surrealist works may seem non-referential, self-reflexive, and thereby to privilege creativity per se. So the above example of Breton's man cut in two by a window may be said to happen without "relationship to events," or at least with a relationship to events that is not straightforwardly referential, inasmuch as the described scenario could not happen in reality. But by virtue of the fact that this image subverts norms of logic and physics, I would argue that these norms are present, albeit appearing *ex negativo*, as constraints that are being cast off.

This disruption of norms, it seems to me, is at the heart of Sontag's identification of the essence of surrealism (and photography) as defamiliarization, though she does not use that word: "What is surreal is the distance imposed, and

bridged, by the photograph: the social distance and the distance in time" (58). In Sontag's view, classic surrealist painting singularly fails to blur the boundary between art and life, thereby remaining "undialectical" (51). But arguably works like Magritte's paintings depicting mirrors, words, and portraits do approach reality from another direction insofar as they thematize some of the very building blocks of reality: language, visual perception, logic, identity. Sontag focuses on time and temporal dislocation as the essence of the surreal, but in my view time is only one of a number of the building blocks of human reality, the disruption of which has surreal, derealizing effects.

So, does this strategy of derealization preclude surrealism from being a variant of realism? Dell'Aversano thinks so, arguing that surrealism is in fact

the only theory (and practice) of visual representation that has neither presented itself as an improved, more accurate, and therefore "more real" version of realism nor declared realism and all the issues surrounding it obsolete and irrelevant, but has instead reconstructed the *real-unreal* dichotomy by radically subverting the realistic ontology. (332)

I would agree and suggest that another way of putting this is to say that surrealism's subversion of the very building blocks of human reality — language, logic, visual imagery — resists distillation into a statement on ontology, however tempting this may be.

Conclusion: The Limits of Doing Philosophy With Surrealism

This issue of the relationship between surrealist theory and practice and ontological questions returns us to Aragon's and Breton's remarks about doing philosophy with surrealism. By stating that classical surrealist texts and artworks subvert realist ontology, I do not mean to say that surrealist theory and practice do not have certain underlying ontological assumptions. An important one of these, in my view, is Aragon's conviction that human experience is thoroughly metaphysical: "It is impossible to imagine a mind that does not have metaphysics as its object, however vulgar that mind, however muddled by opinionated feelings" (*Paris Peasant* 208). This metaphysical quality of human experience is arguably implicit in our foregoing reflections on the roles of artifice, imagination, language, and the mythopoetic quality of human reality.

Granted, the characterizations of human reality as mythopoetic or metaphorical sound like they are making ontological claims. But in my view the strategies of subverting necessity and dismantling norms also reflect an underlying reticence regarding statements about what counts as reality. This reticence means that I do not agree with Alquié's association of surrealism with transcendentalism, which he argues for with reference to surrealist thinking's "affirmation of the infinity of spirit, of its superiority over any possible object" (64). In my view any such assessment is undermined by many surrealist

statements and images on topics of language, logic, and the nature of reality which, as Hughes puts it, seem to oscillate between philosophy and farce (see 244).

But I also have difficulty in agreeing with Altieri's materialist alternative, which emphasizes surrealism's thoroughgoing challenge to logic and comprehension, and valorizes "the very material of art [which] is seen to so parallel perceptual acts that the materials themselves become the vehicle for directly rendering mental forces, which idealism tries to ennoble" (96). Altieri is concerned to refute in particular the sense that modernism often and perhaps typically invites identification with an idealist ontology, "show[ing] how mind matters because art is primarily the workings of constructive intelligence, often in pursuit of . . . higher realism." It is true that surrealism seeks to undermine this intelligence, but in my assessment a serious point motivates the aforementioned farcical attitude, which is that notions like idealism and its materialist opposite are antinomies that are for some surrealists the most pernicious of the logics that govern how we think about reality. Aragon for instance precisely questions the "false duality" of reason and senses just as much as the hard and fast distinction between dream and reality (*Paris Peasant* 22). So this materialist alternative is important, but not if it is hypostatized into an ontological statement, another claim to higher realism, and thereby another way to police the boundaries of reality in a way that surrealism precisely seeks to undermine.

Of course, one might counter that the surrealist practices precisely perpetuate these antinomies by virtue of their obvious preference for one term over the other: inutility, unreality, etc. But I would suggest that this is a paradox that is born of the radical nature of their ontological critique, which seeks to undermine the very building blocks of the reality on which that critique also inevitably depends. In any case, the desire to undermine and dismantle such antinomies is a recurrent feature of Aragon's and Breton's theoretical writings. In the Second Manifesto the latter insists:

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. . . . From this it becomes obvious how absurd it would be to define Surrealism solely as constructive or destructive. . . . (*Manifestoes* 123-4).

This last remark, and the "constructive intelligence" that Altieri disparages, seems to speak directly to — and to refute — Blumenberg's notion that surrealism is emblematic of the idea of reality as constitutive. I hope to have shown that classical surrealism's ethos is more critical than this, and less foundational, even as it toys with the some of the very foundations of our sense of reality.

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