

Essay:

Surrealism and Femininity: A Heterosexual Paradox

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From Montaigne's "what do I know"¹ to Gauguin's "where do we come from"² to Breton's "who am I"³, French intellectuals have long grappled with the questions about self-identity, self-consciousness, and their relationships with the tangible world. The unconscious mind and the dream state were essential in opening the portals to these inquires. Surrealists were the pioneers in incorporating newly proposed psychoanalysis and theories about the unconscious mind, such as Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899, into their literary and artistic practice. However, despite being considered avant-garde in certain fields, surrealists were not exempt from following many of the traditions of a long-established male dominated society.

The Surrealist group was formed by mostly male writers, poets, and artists. Even though there were female members, the major publications and manifestos were written by men. Surrealism advocated *l'Esprit Nouveau* including new ways of thinking, seeing, reflecting, and treating reality through artistic creations. Yet, considering both the conventional tendency of objectifying, idealizing, or sexualizing women in artistic expressions, and the default social structure of marginalizing, manipulating, and transforming female roles, Surrealists intentionally or unintentionally created a heterosexual relationship between the movement and femininity. Surrealism works often emphasized psychological movements, which further amplified the

¹ See Michel de Montaigne's *Essais, Apology for Raymond Sebond*

² See Paul Gauguin's painting, *Where do We Come From? What are We? Where are We Going?*, 1897-98, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts Boston

³ André Breton, *Nadja*, (New York, London: Grove Press; Evergreen Books, 1960), 11.

internal activities of masculine views on women. Women were portrayed as muses, mirrors, symbols, lovers, and *flâneuses*. In modern standards, many Surrealist statements and portraits are viewed as sexist and employing a male gaze, such as Man Ray and Rene Magritte's collaboration *I do not see the woman hidden in the forest*; however, it is hard not to admit that Surrealists set the precedent of looking inwards and beginning to question conventional beliefs (Fig.1). The conflicts reflected the instability of social values in the development of modernity.



Figure 1: Man Ray and Rene Magritte, *I do not see the woman hidden in the forest*, 1929

The active yet marginalized role of female Surrealist members has been a well-explored subject in scholarly discussion.⁴ Nevertheless, the essence of Surrealist works resists interpretation or analysis, defying facile classification as a specific aesthetic, style, or medium. Rather, Surrealism is better comprehended as a dynamic “relation.”⁵ Film emerged as a favored medium among Surrealists not only for its capability to project animation but also for its unique

⁴ Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli, and Gloria Gwen Raaberg, eds., *Surrealism and Women*, 1st MIT Press ed (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991).

⁵ Michael Richardson, *Surrealism and Cinema* (Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2006), 10.

cinematic experience, setting it apart from other artistic forms. The “relation” between the viewer and the film being viewed was more important to the Surrealists than labelling the film itself surrealist. The act of sharing a “darkened room” in a with others in a cinema facilitated the dissemination of an individual creator’s cognitive faculties a collective public memory.⁶ Furthermore, the Surrealist movement evinced a pronounced textual predilection, centering extensively on literature and ekphrasis of the imaginary through manifestos. This underscores its documentary nature beneath the veneer of imaginative aesthetics.

In dissecting femininity within the framework of Surrealism, it is essential to traverse the bridges of “relation” instead of focusing on specific works or mediums. By examining Surrealism in different forms – film, manifestos, and literature – one can gradually understand the representation and role of femininity in a time of psychic revolution.

Buñuel and Dalí’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) visualizes the “psychic automatism” of the unconscious mind through a series of metaphorical montages, constructing dream-like sequences.⁷ However, instead of delving deeper into its semiotic deciphering or historical significance, given its status as one of the most extensively analyzed and studied films in film history, this groundbreaking work should be considered as a reliable gateway. The projective and social natures of cinema, as a medium, bridge the psychoanalytic documentation of femininity in male-dominated Surrealist texts with the lived experience of female Surrealists in reality.

André Breton formalized the Surrealism movement through his seminal work, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, and contemplated on his own principles in the semi-autobiographical fiction *Nadja*. Femininity is a common theme in all three works, but it is explored with varying degrees of depth. *Manifesto of Surrealism* employs women as one of its linguistic vocabularies, or lexical

⁶ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, (Paris: 1924), 46.

⁷ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 26.

resources, in a conventional masculine way to better communicate its ideas to the 20th century European audience. *Nadja*, on the other hand, is Breton's attempt to implement his Surrealism theories, resulting in a juxtaposition of both projection of his own unconscious mind on the heteronormative relationship with Nadja and his conscious effort to examine her as the *flâneuse* of the *surreality* world. *Un Chien Andalou* establishes its surrealist "relation" with the viewers by transposing expectations, evident in the absence of phonetic dialogue and the loss of semantic meaning in intertitles, thereby blurring the boundaries between the woman on the silver screen and in reality.

In *Manifesto of Surrealism*, woman is used as an example of the countless entities encountered in the "waking state".⁸ Breton believed that the "waking state" and the unconscious mind affect each other, creating a "phenomenon of interference".⁹ Impressions of women and the countless other things during consciousness "isolate the mind for a second from its solvent and spirit it to heaven".¹⁰ Thus, the reality and the unconscious form a new "kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*".¹¹ Another way Breton construed the concept of the *surreality* was through the imagination of a "castle" on the "romantic ruins", where historical and contemporary intellectuals resided and worked.¹² He observed and concluded that fundamentally people are "masters of ourselves, the masters of women, and of love".¹³ Women, again, are termed as the entities in the reality that men possessed.

Breton cited several writers to support his argument that the most powerful imagery is "arbitrary to the highest degree" and "takes the longest time to translate into practical

⁸ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 13.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 14.

¹² Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 16.

¹³ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 17.

language”.¹⁴ Interestingly, several examples from Breton’s ekphrasis for the most powerful imagery were associated with femininity and romance, such as “Rose Selavy”,¹⁵ “Beautiful as the law of arrested”,¹⁶ and “The color of a woman’s stocking is not necessarily in the likeness of her eyes”.¹⁷ Breton recognized the feminine as the muse of visual beauty.

Breton delved further into his preference for “arbitrary” imagery over textual description in *Nadja*. Deeming literary descriptions as inadequate for portraying the *surreality*, Breton used three types of imagery in *Nadja* to supplement the truth: portraits, urban landscapes, and artistic still life. The portraits, including those of Breton’s fellow surrealists, a selfie, and several female figures, were real film photographs of existing people. As proofs of the reality, these photographs validate that surrealism is real. Among the female portraits are those of Blanche Derval, an actress (plate 13)¹⁸, and Madame Sacco, a clairvoyant (plate 19).¹⁹ However, none of these women can be definitively identified as Nadja. In the 1963 edition of *Nadja*, a montage of photographed eyes is the closest visual representation of her (Fig. 2 and 3).²⁰ The image is subtitle “Les yeux de fougère...” and the corresponding text describes these “fern-colored eyes” as belonging to Nadja:

I’ve seen her fern-colored eyes open mornings on a world where the beating of hope’s great wings is scarcely distinct from the other sounds which are those of terror and, upon such a world, I had as yet seen eyes do nothing but close.²¹

Fougère’s squiggled contour or green leaves resemble nothing of human eyes, yet plant’s history as source of inspiration for decorative patterns and architectural scrolls mirrors women’s roles as muses and nurturers. They are the “two distant realities” connected through the power of analogy.²²

¹⁴ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 39.

¹⁵ See quote by Robert Desnos

¹⁶ See quote by Lautréamont

¹⁷ See quote by Max Morise

¹⁸ Breton, *Nadja*, 49.

¹⁹ Breton, *Nadja*, 79.

²⁰ André Breton, *Nadja* (1963 Edition), 126.

²¹ Breton, *Nadja*, 111.

²² Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 36.



Figure 2: Photomontage of Nadja's eyes, added in the 1963 edition.

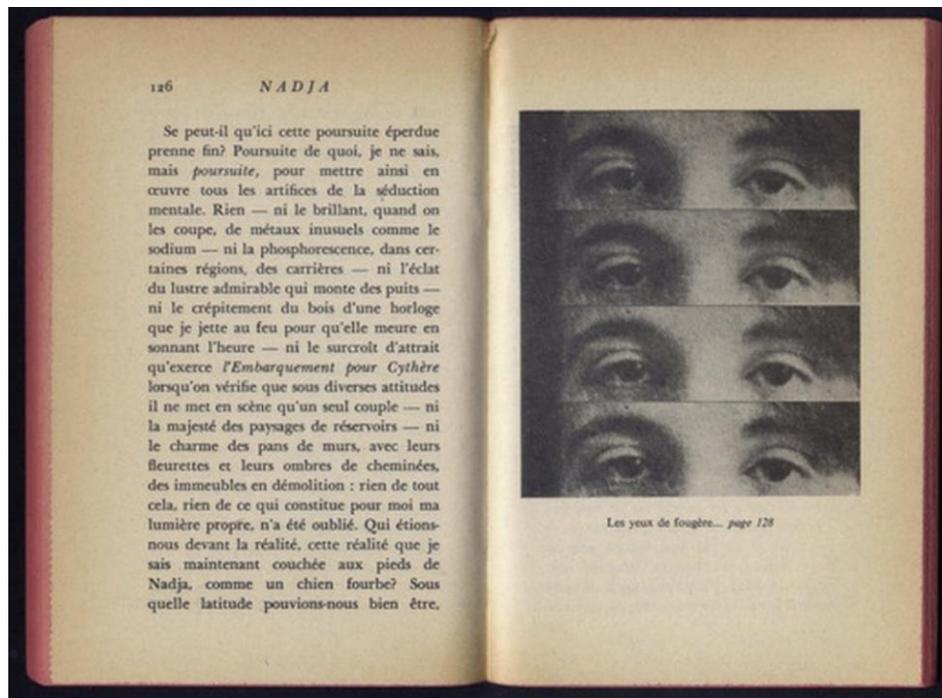


Figure 3: The 1963 edition of Nadja

In the montage, the four pairs of eyes arrange vertically, leaving no room for the audience to imagine the rest of Nadja's facial features. While the eyes appear to be gazing outwards and attracting the audience to focus their attentions on them, the attempt to concentrating on interpreting this montage image instead makes it more abstract. Breton saw the reflection of his own unconscious mind through Nadja's eyes, making her a mirror of his heterosexual minds.

Breton sought the answer of "who am I" through Nadja. He was also interested in discovering her identity in the reality as a heterosexual "other" and observing the 20th century French society through her movements and dialogues. "Who are you?"²³ Nadja is the *flaneuse* who roams in the city of Paris randomly and appears in his mind irrationally. Nadja is fully aware of her existential meaning. She answers, "I am the soul in limbo".²⁴

Ultimately, Nadja exists in three realities. In the literary fiction, she appears as an obscure and irrational character; reading from Breton's semi-autobiographical (or pseudo-) lens, she exists in reality as an unpredictable and "arbitrary" person; and in the 20th century France, "Nadjas" were the marginalized and aimless women *flaneuses*. All three identities are fictional and surreal, yet their triple overlapping commonalities echo to the *surreality*, demonstrating Surrealists' interests in everyday life.

Manifesto of Surrealism and *Nadja*, both of which were written in an illogical and non-linear structure, reflect Breton's suggestion to "write quickly"²⁵ as a Surrealist and his admiration for Picasso and Braque's assemblage technique. *Un Chien Andalou* effectively showcases the connection between automatism and the unconscious mind on the silver screen, visualizing the dream-like sequence through techniques of montage. The continuous sequence from the cutting

²³ Breton, *Nadja*, 71.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 29.

of a bull's eye to the cloud piercing through the moon, the “two distant realities” that is difficult to articulate in words is made easy through imagery. The movie's non-coherent flow is shown in the chaos of time. Time is marked in the form of intertitles, such as “in spring” or “sixteen years ago” (Fig. 4). The passage of time, however, is not shown in the movie scenes. The “Andalusian dog”, or canine in general, are also absent. Thus, the chronological meanings behind the intertitles or the literary indication behind the main title are deprived, making them exist in purely textual forms. The words connect the dream world in the film with the audience sitting in the screening rooms, completing the formation of the *surreality*. To Breton, it is the film photographs and his collage-like writings that associate his words with the reality. Picasso and Braque's use of materials in everyday life, for instance newspaper or magazine cut-outs, made assemblage a medium bridging the two realms.



Figure 4: The intertitle “In Spring...” in *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), 00:16:00. Public domain, 1929.

In comparing *Un Chien Andalou* and Breton's texts, one noticeable difference is the absence of dialogues in the film. Instead, it is compensated by the characters' elaborate body languages and exaggerated facial expressions. As the “couple” spies on the crowd surrounding the woman with the chest on the street from the apartment window, the malevolent crescent

playing upon the man's lips contrast with the woman's composed observation, implying a dichotomy of gender attitudes. These are the imagery "arbitrary to the highest degree" that Breton praised about, granting film medium a privilege that literature could hardly achieve. Breton, limited by the medium of paper, suggested that "the forms of Surrealist language adapt themselves best to dialogue".²⁶ Dialogue allows for a sense of "suddenness"²⁷ and enables frequent exchange of thoughts between different minds. The dialogues between Nadja and Breton are sometimes disjointed, with Breton admitting "I have more and more difficulty following her monologue"²⁸. Yet, Nadja's seemingly incomprehensible comments demonstrate "each precise sign of intelligence, of assent it requires."²⁹ Therefore, the ability to channel the *surreality* and the unconscious mind is spontaneous and innate, not something that should be trained for. Here, women are the muses of intuition.

All three works showcase the authors' knowledge and taste in the history of art. In *Un Chien Andalou*, the scene of the man being shot resembles Édouard Manet's 1863 painting *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Fig. 5 and 6). Blending three Renaissance masterpieces, Manet inherited the ambiguity of Giorgione's *The Tempest* and borrowed the compositional harmony of Titian's *Fête Champêtre* and Marcantonio Raimondi's etching of Raphael's lost work *Judgement of Paris*. Manet was not only showing his knowledge of the past, but also continuing an unfinished quest of the sixteenth century masters to challenge the ambiguity of subject matters and the subtlety between text and image. Buñuel and Dali borrowed a work that is already a reinvention of the past, adding another layer to its intellectual depth. In *Nadja*, Breton also demonstrated his profound knowledge in art, ranging from Paolo Uccello's Renaissance predella *The Miracle of*

²⁶ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 34.

²⁷ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 41.

²⁸ Breton, *Nadja*, 106.

²⁹ Breton, *Nadja*, 72.

the Desecrated Host (plate 23)³⁰ to the Surrealists' inspiration Giorgio de Chirico's *The Enigma of Fatality* (plate 38)³¹. These knowledge of the past and present consolidate the cultural significance of Surrealism. Dali, Buñuel, and Breton could not escape the long convention of building upon the past even though they desperately tried to create a new form of aesthetic and spirit. Not only traces of artistic expressions from the past were extended to surrealist works, but also traditional values towards femininity. Women existed in all forms; however, they were always silenced from projecting their own voice.



Figure 5: Edouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863, Musée d'Orsay.

³⁰ Breton, *Nadja*, 94.

³¹ Breton, *Nadja*, 122.



Figure 6: Screen capture from *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). Public domain, 1929.

Despite the residue of male-gazing values, Surrealists embraced femininity as a symbol of looking towards the future. Nadja, a Slavic name carries the meaning of “hope”, was Breton’s optimistic vision for the future of Surrealism. While the opening of *Nadja* takes the readers on a curious venture of existential exploration, the ending affirms the uncertain, continuous, and endless possibilities of life through a statement referring to femininity: “Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all.”³² In *Manifesto of Surrealism*, an unfinished subsection titled “*How to catch the eye of a woman you pass in the street*”³³ is left blank of any description. Breton left questions about the future of Surrealism, as well as the future of women, for others to answer.

And who is most qualified to answer such question? It is women themselves. Female Surrealists, such as Leonora Carrington and Méret Oppenheim, participated in the movement

³² Breton, *Nadja*, 160.

³³ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 32.

with ambitions to establish their careers beyond being muse to men. It is irrelevant to delve into the career trajectories, relationships, rumors, or scandals of these female Surrealists as many of them were engaged with established male artists. What is important was their existence. These women humanized themselves by actively participating and outputting as artists, producing a “*shock*”³⁴ to the male-dominated world.

³⁴ Breton, *Nadja*, 160.