

Verbundkatalog Kalliope

**In: The American Mercury. Vol. 56, Nr. 230, Februar 1943, S.
174-181**

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Februar

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► A phase of the "revolution of nihilism" in the field of art.

SURREALIST CIRCUS

By KLAUS MANN

NOT everything defamed by Hitler as "cultural Bolshevism" is necessarily culture. Surrealism, for instance, is not. Indeed, in the writer's considered opinion, surrealism itself shares the spirit of illogic, negation, vandalism that has found expression politically in Nazism. If the Hitler program, in Hermann Rauschning's phrase, is a revolution of nihilism, surrealism is the revolution of nihilism in art.

The average reader may be inclined to confound surrealism with modern art in general, and with abstract or fantastic painting in particular. This is a misconception. Neither is it correct that surrealism is the personal hobby of an ingenious young man named Salvador Dali. Though the talented Catalan may be regarded by the uninitiated as the very embodiment of surrealism, he is in fact not even a genuine surrealist. We have the word of the high priests of the cult for that.

The point of the matter is that there is no such thing as surrealism. There are only surrealists — a coterie of poets, journalists, paint-

ers, sculptors and suckers who stick together, purport to admire one another, and abuse those who don't belong to their set. The chief and founder of the surrealist tribe is a French critic and visionary named André Breton. His first lieutenant is Max Ernst, a painter of German birth. If you want to become a surrealist — which offers certain social and emotional advantages — you need the blessing of these two gentlemen. They may reject you regardless of how ecstatically surrealist you may be in thought and conduct and artistic output.

On the other hand, the surrealists are in the habit of claiming all sorts of celebrities, living and dead, as members of their club. The *Surrealist Pocket Dictionary* — there really is such a thing! — lists the august names of Jonathan Swift ("surrealist in malice") and the German poet Friedrich Hoelderlin ("surrealist in his madness"). Others who have been adopted include Pythagoras, Barnum and the Marquis de Sade. Since surrealist headquarters were moved from

Paris to Manhattan, M. Breton and his associates have discovered Father Divine and Superman (not the Nietzschean but the cartoon personage).

It needs to be acknowledged that the crowd of unwitting surrealists by acclamation, including also Chaplin, Lenin and Cagliostro, is far more colorful and interesting than the real surrealist clique. The sad fact is that the group around Breton and Ernst has lost much of its lustre of late; maybe it finds more competition in New York than in Paris. Not that the surrealist circus has lost its appeal altogether — on the contrary, it is still prospering — but it is no longer what it used to be in the old days.

The whole affair started back in the 'twenties. It was the period when the radical artistic movements launched shortly before or during the first World War gradually lost momentum. What had taken place in the decade of 1910-1920 was indeed an artistic revolution. I do not intend to discuss here the dangers and promises inherent in such inspired experiments as cubism in France, expressionism in Germany, futurism in Italy, constructivism in Russia, and so forth. Whatever their merits or defects, these efforts deserved at least to be taken seriously. Paint-

ers like the Italian Giorgi de Chirico, the Russian Marc Chagall, and above all, the Spanish genius Pablo Picasso, were undoubtedly instrumental in molding and expressing the artistic consciousness of this epoch.

Perhaps even the obstreperous devices of a group called Dada were not without a certain relevance to the moods and currents of the tragic and riotous years from 1917 to the early 'twenties. "An attitude of disrespect became universal," André Breton tells us in his preface to *Art of This Century*. He adds:

The negation of previous values was complete, it was a matter indeed of making a clean sweep. The despair that prevailed could only be overcome by a kind of dismal jesting, a "black humor." In New York, Marcel Duchamp affixed his signature to a reproduction of the *Giaconda* which he had decorated with a pair of handsome mustaches. The only entrance and exit to an exhibition of the works of Max Ernst in Cologne was through a urinal. . . . Picabia, in Paris, conceived a "picture" composed of an empty frame riveted to the ground and stretched from side to side with strings to which a live monkey was chained.

That was Dada, the direct ancestor of surrealism.

II

The founder of the German branch of Dadaism, Max Ernst, got tired

of his native Cologne and moved to Paris, together with his fellow-Dadaist, Herr Baargeld. These two presently made friends with a set of congenial Frenchmen gathered around Breton. Up to that point, the surrealist coterie had consisted mainly of literary men, among them such talented writers as the novelist Louis Aragon and the poet Paul Eluard. Others who stuck to Breton at that early stage of his venture were René Crevel and Philippe Soupault, both authors of exceptional ability. The lively clique was subsequently joined by a few gifted painters — Joan Miro from Barcelona; Yves Tanguy, a former officer of the French merchant marine; André Masson, French painter and graphic artist, and some others. As for Dali, he “insinuated himself into the surrealist movement in 1929,” to quote Breton.

The surrealists believed in the creative functions of paranoia, practical jokes and publicity. They excelled especially in the domain of pranks which seemed bold but were in reality brutal and insipid. There was hardly much risk when Breton counterfeited an interview with the great French writer André Gide (whose most famous novel, incidentally, is called *The Counterfeiters*). Nor did it require much im-

agination to plague a sickly poet, Jean Cocteau, whom they had picked as one of their pet aversions. Cocteau, in many respects a fore-runner and a successful rival of the surrealists, may be a decadent freak, but he commands two qualities apparently remote from rank-and-file surrealists: genius and a love for his mother. When old Madame Cocteau was dangerously ill, her son received a telephone message that she had just died. In tears, Jean rushed to his mother's house, only to be greeted by the jeering of Breton's relentless gang.

Their anti-religious cracks and exhibitions likewise involved no serious danger. The Church was not in a position to protect the symbols of Christian faith from obnoxious insults. How easy it is to be daring in a liberal country! And how cheap!

Dali, with his sharp instinct for publicity, was the first to sense that they could not get away with this sort of horseplay — not in the long run and in a city already fed up with such antics. In search of new hunting grounds, he discovered the United States, whither he imported not only the surrealist tricks but also the surrealist Muse — a fabulous female by the name of Gala, a Russian of unusual imagination and energy. She has

been a faithful devotee of the surrealist movement, first in her capacity as Madame Paul Eluard, subsequently as an assiduous promoter of Max Ernst's talent, and finally as Madame Salvador Dali.

Dali's American career, started as far back as 1934, flourished impressively. The dashing young man from Catalonia proved himself a master in arousing scandal and whipping up curiosity. Whatever he did became the talk of the town. His experiments in window dressing and window smashing, his Dream Pavilion and fantastic films, his ballets *Bacchanale* and *Labyrinth* — both produced by the Metropolitan Opera Company — and his jewelry ("designed in collaboration with the Duke de Verdura") — all his poses and paradoxes touched the imagination of a naïvely responsive audience. At the same time, however, his solid craftsmanship has been recognized and well paid for by exacting collectors.

His inordinate popularity on this side of the Atlantic gradually got on the nerves of the real surrealists, those who remained in Paris. At first they had thought it a good idea to let him popularize their nebulous cause in Hollywood and New York. But the Catalan went too far for their comfort when he posed as *the* representative, and

even as the inventor, owner and incarnation of the surrealist movement. Breton felt that his disciple was on the point of stealing his show. He excommunicated Dali. His people unleashed an avalanche of abuse against the presumptuous dissident. They called him a traitor, a dilettante, a Franco agent, and — insult of insults — an academician.

III

Just when Dali was staging and exploiting the surrealist vogue in America, about 1938 and 1939, Breton's position in Paris was becoming more and more desperate. Nobody was any longer startled when the intense and now aging young men darted their rabid invectives against God and the French Academy, the League of Nations, the Russian ballet, Cézanne, and the Bank of England. Little by little, the most talented writers withdrew from the club. The first to desert was Philippe Soupault, who backslid to professional journalism. René Crevel, the purest and most lovable character among them all, committed suicide, leaving on his chaotic desk this terrible note: "I am disgusted with everything." Louis Aragon renounced macabre eccentricities and joined the disciplined family of

Little Father Stalin. So did Paul Eluard, whom the surrealists had called the "nurse of stars," nobody knows why.

A disaster of apocalyptic dimensions threatened Europe and the world. But Breton and his depleted following continued to concoct and publicize their unsavory mixture of Marxism and paranoia, music hall and psychoanalysis. As the Nazi hordes invaded Austria, Czechoslovakia, Norway and the Low Countries, the surrealists kept on gushing insults and paradoxes. The approach of chaos convulsed our civilization, but the unflagging parlor anarchists stuck to their lurid games, clamoring for even more chaos.

They got it. The Maginot Line proved as chimerical as a spectre evoked by Ernst or Dali. The situation, in short, looked grim for those spoiled *enfants terribles* of a cosmopolitan café society. But the surrealists manage to dodge tragedy, consistently, cleverly, under all circumstances. Their good luck seems surreal. Millions may die and worlds may crash, but the Breton coterie will be carried to safety and comfort on the wings of benevolent angels.

In this case, the friendly wings were spread by Peggy Guggenheim. They sheltered not only the

surrealist messiah and his prophet, i.e., Breton and Ernst, but a batch of their friends. The party occupied most of the seats and beds in a transatlantic clipper. Shortly after Marshal Petain signed his agreement with Hitler, the American lady signed a check and the surrealist family rose into the skies. Ernst married Miss Guggenheim and the American phase of surrealism got off to a start with one of the great American fortunes at its disposal.

So the whole show can now begin again, solidly backed and glaringly advertised in the United States. Deplorably *passé* in Montmartre and Montparnasse even before the war, surrealism has a new lease on life along Park Avenue and in the 57th Street galleries. Shocked and amused, Americans witness an increasingly fashionable revival of all the familiar gags: the fancy publications and complicated intrigues, the noisy artistic snobbery, the fights, the pretentious blare and bustle. Of course, some of the more daring gadgets have to be sacrificed — the anti-capitalist and anti-God stuff, for example, is a trifle too hot for Park Avenue palates.

But there is plenty of fun, in the name of the incomprehensible arts, even without rude blasphemies and red banners. An intricate set of social preferences and jealousies is

being hatched and nurtured. Who can be played off against whom? What can be done to compromise that arch-villain, Dali? What about the American Primitives, discovered and advertised by the critic and art collector Sidney Janis — should they be admitted to the Guggenheim museum, *Art of This Century*? The Primitives might look a little too refined and decadent amidst the gaudy toys in the exhibition. The Guggenheim gallery looks like the amusement area at a second-rate World's Fair, say in Mexico City or Bucharest, with all kinds of turning wheels, changing lights and mechanical tricks. But behind it all, an industrious connoisseur might discover a few really fine canvases by Chagall, Chirico, Klee, or Braque.

It goes without saying that the American installment of the surrealist movement enjoys a little magazine. It is called *View* and is edited by a young man named Charles Henri Ford. It is as cute as can be. I enjoyed especially the issue in which a Mr. Calas signed as guest editor. The leading feature was an interview granted to Mr. Calas by Mr. Breton. Mr. Calas assures us that Mr. Breton assured him that both Messrs. Breton and Calas are very eminent poets. There were also edifying passages on

the "truly surrealist flora" of the New York countryside. The nation at large will be thrilled to learn that Breton liked "enormously" what he had seen of the Hudson and has already begun his "initiation into the mysteries of American butterflies." Mr. Calas' final question was whether Mr. Breton thinks that a Third Manifesto of Surrealism is in order? "Absolutely!" Mr. Breton replied.

IV

Why shouldn't these people have as good and gay a time as possible, despite wars and Hitlers and other nuisances? There can be no real objection to their innocuous games. There is nothing terribly wrong with a surrealist exhibition of their "First Papers," under auspices of the Co-ordinating Council of French Relief Societies. Consider the essential innocence of "His twine: Marcel Duchamp." "His twine" is a very intriguing surrealist trick — a kind of labyrinth through which the visitors have to find their way. M. Duchamp, the inventor of this device, introduces himself as a "French painter, Cubist, Dadaist, artist and anti-artist."

The tip-off is in the last word. I am against surrealism because I am in favor of art. The world is being

wrecked by anti-artists. Hitler and Goering are anti-artists. So are Laval, Franco, Mussolini. Surrealism is not the disease but another of the symptoms. The disease is fascism, the revolution of nihilism. The surrealists are the nihilists in art.

"That was really the trouble with the surrealist crowd," says Gertrude Stein — not conservative, on the whole, in esthetic matters — "they missed their moment of becoming civilized . . . they wanted publicity, not civilization, and so really they never succeeded in being peaceful and exciting."

Far from being peaceful and exciting, the surrealists become increasingly dull, while remaining noisy and truculent. Nothing could be more tiresome than the clichés of madness. The Venus of Milo may be a bore when presented as the obligatory norm of beauty and the surrealists have a right to sneer at her. But what do they offer to supersede the debunked ideal? The Venus with three profiles, a fish tail, her eyes teeming with vermin and a pianoforte instead of a bosom. Just another stereotype, a new bunk.

The surrealists repeat themselves with dreary obstinacy. They fail to understand that their time is over. They do not grasp that their play-

acting has become silly against the backdrop of a universal cataclysm. If they were not lacking in elementary tact, they would feel how stupid it is to praise the Marquis de Sade when hordes of sadists are making a shambles of civilization.

The question is not whether, and to what extent, the surrealists are artists in their capacities as poets, painters, writers and critics. Some of them, I think, are fairly gifted — Yves Tanguy, for instance, whose vision has a genuine poetic quality; or Dali at his best. It is in their capacities as crusaders that they become utterly mischievous. The Breton group and their devotees keep pretending that they have a mission. They imagine themselves innovators, captains of a revolutionary movement.

What kind of revolution, then, do they herald? An upheaval without consistent aims, without a feasible program. Its every assertion is a negation, the whole thing adds up to a hoax. It is not directed against any particular order, but against order and reason as such.

These trends are implicit in the prose and poetry, the painting and music, the sculpture, and the bizarre and unfunny jokes. They are explicit in the surrealist pronouncements. Mr. Calas, in his role as Breton's publicity agent, recom-

mends surrealism as the "revolt against beauty." In *New Directions*, he hails the movement as a revolt also against intellectual responsibility — "to *responsibility* the surrealists oppose *revelation*" — and revolt against humanism. "Once again," says Calas, "humanism comes to an end. I cannot but agree again with Ezra Pound. . . ."

As is generally known, Mr. Pound is a frank Fascist agent. Messrs. Calas and Breton and Ernst and their surrealist coterie are nothing of the kind. No doubt they dislike fascism heartily. Yet their methods and philosophy have unmistakable Nazoid aspects. On their own reduced scale, they are as brutal and as irresponsible, as vociferous and as mystic, as cunning and as confused as the great Führer. Obviously, it would be hateful and disproportionate to compare a handful of exiled artists and their confused American friends to the fiendish Nazis. What I am trying to point out is the subtle but profound affinity between the murderous destructiveness of the Nazis and the playful destructiveness —

of values, forms, sentiments, deep-rooted affections — of certain artistic movements, of which surrealism is the latest and most spectacular exemplification.

Our civilization is too seriously imperiled by dark, irrational forces to cry down logic and harmony. Breton wants the artist to create with "thought's dictation, all exercise of reason and every esthetic or moral preoccupation being absent." This is evil advice. The exercise of reason and morality are all too absent from this blood-smeared, insanity-stricken planet.

It cannot, it must not, be the function of art to glorify and multiply the present disorder. Its mission must be, rather, to anticipate and inspire the slow reconstruction that will come when we emerge from "his twine," from the dark and mystifying corridor devised by the twisted little corporal.

I am against surrealism because I have seen what the world looks like "with every esthetic and moral preoccupation being absent." It looks like hell, or like a surrealist painting.

Note by Goethe

☞ THAT which thy fathers have bequeathed to thee, earn it anew if thou wouldst possess it.