Preface

From Soluble Forms to Last Snapshots: Surrealism's German Echoes

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At last, the present edited volume—devoted to Germanophone surrealism—sees the light. The book was planned for 2024, to celebrate the centennial of the movement's official inception. While that occasion is now past, it seems all the more fitting that a volume on surrealism should appear belatedly.

Indeed, the notion of belatedness could be said to be crucial to the movement's unfolding. Belatedness underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of surrealism, showing how its core ideas resonated and were adapted by artists beyond their origins. It highlights the ways the movement's aesthetics were reinterpreted in different historical, geographical, and cultural contexts—often by artists who emerged after surrealism's initial peak in France (and Europe more broadly). This idea of belatedness demonstrates that surrealism's history has not been marked by homogeneous continuity but by continual adaptation and reinvention, as its ideas and gestures have been shared and embraced across continents. It is worth noting here, in passing, that 2025 could still be considered part of the centennial celebrations of the movement's early activities, since 1925 marked the opening of the first exhibition of surrealist painting at La Galerie Pierre Colle in Paris, on November 13, featuring Man Ray,

Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Max Ernst, Hans Arp, and Paul Klee.

Thus, the unintended belatedness of this edited volume's publication in 2025 may in fact enhance and expand its original plan—just as surrealism itself has continued to proliferate and evolve since 1924. One may hope that this volume, too, will contribute to such proliferations: a second-order reflection and reappraisal that, despite (or perhaps because of) its "minor" status among the many major publications and events worldwide, from conferences to exhibitions, will nonetheless assert its place in the centenary discourse.

This is a small but precious book. It gathers a select number of unique, both creative and critical, both personal and scholarly, texts and images that, on one hand, reexamine the legacy of the historical movement a century after its birth, particularly through the lens of its ties with Germanophone culture and art. On the other hand, and more crucially, the contributions imaginatively engage with surrealism's core gestures and principles, re-inventing and adapting them, re-investing them with the affective and political intensity that today's global capitalist society urgently requires: in short, with the force of a political awakening akin to Walter Benjamin's reflections on innervation and profane illumination—states of individual and collective becoming he identified in the surrealists' embrace of the porous boundaries between dream and waking life, childhood and adulthood, myth and history.

Within this framework, the essays, reflections, stories, and photographs collected here approach surrealism less as a fixed, well-defined

object of study than as the impetus for a critical re-evaluation—as one contributor writes—of the market value that accrues to certain sites and means of cultural production and consumption, surrealism itself and its legacy among them (Jonathan P. Eburne, in this volume). In this regard, through its focus on surrealism's own revaluation practices—practices directed toward the marginal, the heterogeneous, the accidental—this volume re-circulates those aspects and energies, those "unpredictable intensities" (Eburne) inherited from surrealism that still animate our passionate academic and cultural investments, our insistence on holding onto them and holding them up, even as they are threatened with obliteration or commodification by utilitarian academic Reason and, fittingly, market value.

Hence, among the aspects of surrealism the contributions examine—and at the same time reflexively perform—is the ongoing significance of the outmoded: not only the relevance that the outmoded held for the surrealists *d'antan*, but also the counter-value that outmoded elements and intensities of surrealism, the facets explored in these essays, may still wield in disrupting contemporary consumer culture.

Each chapter and image in the book addresses obsolescence in its own singular way. Part Two explicitly grapples with desuetude: outmoded collages in Ernst's production, old-fashioned children's illustrations, and the notion of dream-kitsch in Benjamin are the focus of the essays gathered there. In contrast, obsolescence remains more submerged in other chapters—almost literally

so—as in Benedikt Wolf's story *E mediis rebus (Das Verschwinden aus der Mitte der Dinge)* or Jonathan P. Eburne's *Surrealism in the Imperfect*, both in Part One.

In the former, Bereket,[1] the protagonist, embarks on an oneiric journey toward his own dissolution and that of his world: he leaves behind the emptiness of a reality saturated with useless excess to merge finally with the seemingly void sea—a world, in fact, brimming with unknown life. Bereket dissolves into and becomes one with the images and ideas generated by his *dépaysement*.[2] Along the way, he loses track of any directionality, the landscapes à la Yves Tanguy he traverses recede,[3] and his own human contours blur. "His vanishing started early," the story ends. When he disappears into the liquid fullness of the waves, he reverses and renews the evolutionary process,

[1] The name Bereket recalls Carl Einstein's "Bebuquin" and is, at once, a sonorous reference to "Benedikt" Wolf – this story's author.

[2] For a reference to the operations of *dépaysement* –e.g.,"dis-placement or dis-orientation [that] informed the isolation, fragmentation, and close cropping often seen in Surrealist photographs," see Jodi Hauptman and Stephanie O'Rourke's discussion of Jacques-André Boiffard (3). Ara H. Merjian associates the term and technique with the political import of collage and montage, but also with the more allusive forms of objects' displacement in Giorgio De Chirico. She writes: "the visual consequence of incongruity (of catachresis, prapraxia and their various cognates) held some promise in the domain of political aesthetics" (online).

[3] See Tanguy's painting "The Sun in Its Jewel Case (Le soleil dans son écrin)," among others. For more on the painter's landscapes, see the online collection of the Guggenheim (New York) https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/yves-tanguy

returning from human form back to fish—via bird—and again to the sea. (Birds recur as emblems throughout the story.)[4] This dissolution, or "chemical" change of state, operates as the physical and psychic embodiment of André Breton's recurring image of the "soluble" in his texts.[5] Recall

[4] A bird announces Bereket's "task"—his appearance and subsequent disappearance from the text (e.g., the writing on the page) and/or the narrative. This act blurs the boundaries between external reality and the alternate realms of dreams, fiction, and fantasy. The story suggests that vanishing from the text is not a permanent dissolution into emptiness, but rather a return or reappearance in another form, another story, and another time. The bird then flies "in" Wolf's story as a novel archangel suggesting the possibility of secular re-births to come. This recalls Max Ernst's notorious birds, particularly his alter ego, Loplop. On Ernst's Loplop figure, see the text (from Max Ernst, *Biographische Notizen*) cited on Christie's webpage, https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-1832737. It's reported that the death of Ernst's childhood parrot, coinciding with the birth of his sister Loni, prompted the merging of human and bird in his work. The death-rebirth motif became central to his paintings. Returning to the bird in Wolf's story, it's notable that its beak functions as the nib of a pen, literally in•scribing—through a tear in the white sheet of paper—the dispatch Bereket holds in his hands, the task. The bird's flight and incision transform the page, adding an exclamation point in the text thereby converting the words into a decipherable command, his task: to dissolve all directions, all tasks.

[5] See Dufrêne, especially footnote 3, on page 4. One could add here Kristeva's interpretation of the "soluble," which –for Kristeva-- involved a dissolution of the phallocentric Symbolic. Abigail Susik reads Kristeva's position thus: "For Kristeva, Breton's desire to make phallocentrism soluble, so that masculinity dissolves into the folds or skin of woman, was a regression fantasy that manifests the Oedipal desire for the mother and the phantasm of occupying the jouissance of the other." (*Surrealist Sabotage and the War on Work*, 59). As Susik

that the 1924 surrealist manifesto was initially conceived as a preface to Breton's *Poisson soluble* (1924), which collected the first automatic writing experiments. Moreover, the first issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* (December 1, 1924), directed by Pierre Naville and Benjamin Péret, featured the image of a fish, angled upward and cutting across the page, intersecting with the word *SURRÉALISME*. If Breton declared, "Man is soluble in his thoughts" (May 20, 1924), then the fish icon of surrealism proclaims 1924 as the year of surrealism's first fusions: between being and writing, individual and collective, past and present, sleep and work, dream and life, literature and action.

The motif of dissolution resurfaces in Douglas Cushing's essay, which examines Breton's complex engagement with the early Romantic poet Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg). Cushing traces Breton's shifting relation to Novalis's notion of the Absolute, first highlighting Breton's early ambivalence—before 1925—toward what he saw as Novalis's mysticism, then showing Breton's later embrace of the Absolute, stripped of religious connotation, particularly from 1938 onward during surrealism's turn to alchemy. As Cushing observes:

> Neither Aragon nor Breton were searching for the Absolute as divine Logos. But they longed

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then goes on to explain, quoting Breton (per his 1924 manifesto and as further exemplified by "Soluble Fish"), automatic writing requires "a receptive state of mind" and the ability to "balance keen listening and heightened perception with involuntary openness, a 'complete state of distraction'" (72).

> for contact with the infinite totality that lay beyond the rational mind's reach. … Breton's Second Manifesto further blurs the distinction between Hegel's and Novalis's ideas. One key passage speaks of Surrealism's intent to reconcile not only conscious and unconscious, but to dissolve all life's antinomies into an absolute, crystalline unity.

In a more horrific and grotesque register, Jean Marie Carey's impressionistic account of the TV series *Hannibal* (Part Three) explores how cinematic techniques reanimate surrealist and hybrid emblems—such as the raven-stag and the Wendigo—crafting what she calls "a narrative of psychological metamorphosis and human-animal hybridity." In Carey's view, this "relaxation" of the self extends to the dissolution of the human figure itself, destabilising anthropocentric notions of an integral, self-standing human identity and body. As she suggests, the series subverts ideas of human distinctiveness in ways reminiscent of surrealist artists like Ernst, Hans Bellmer, and Meret Oppenheim. On the one hand, by identifying such motifs within the series, Carey positions *Hannibal* as a surrealist-inspired cultural product; on the other, one might propose that the series could be seen as an object worthy of a surrealist's collection in its own right, a popular crime narrative ready for inclusion in the repertoire of the contemporary surrealist collector.

Indeed, the essay's unspoken but palpable backdrop is the surrealists' sustained engagement with violence, crime, and the resulting (disjointed)

corpses—an interest extensively documented in Eburne's monograph *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* (2008). As Eburne has shown, surrealist writers and artists amassed a vast archive of crime-related materials, ranging from sensational press articles to crime scene photographs, police records, medical reports, trial documents, and detective fiction. For them, crime served as a launchpad for cultural critique, offering a means to probe and transgress established boundaries between sanity and insanity, morality and immorality, and the respectable norms of bourgeois society. Against this backdrop, *Hannibal*—as Carey reads it—could well belong in a surrealist collection updated for today, one that encompasses not only yesteryear's pulp fiction but also the full gamut of contemporary violence: state-sanctioned genocide, technological and biological warfare, terrorism, and more. Against this backdrop, the TV series *Hannibal* –as examined through Carey's eyes– could well belong in one such surrealist collection itself, a collection updated and perhaps expanded today to include a whole gamut of *imaginable* contemporary violence, acts such as state-sanctioned genocide, technological and biological warfare, terrorism, etc.

If Carey scrutinizes the offshoots of the surrealists' passion for the subversive potential of crime in today's screen series thereby revamping yesteryear colportage; Silvia Ulrich's essay (Part Three) returns us to those early 20th-century years. Ulrich discerns in Walter Serner's short erotic crime fiction (1920–1927) both surrealist traits—wit, non sequitur, and nonsense that at times prefigure surrealist automatic writing—and an unmistakable

dose of sarcasm. Yet, Ulrich raises a pressing question: might Serner's acerbic blows be directed not only at bourgeois society but at the avant-garde itself, and even surrealism? How does Serner's biting prose, while appropriating surrealist devices like black humour and erotic transgression, also turn these staples against the movement, exposing its failures or limitations? Where does Serner's practice endorse surrealism's revolutionary intentions, and where does it lay bare the avant-garde's broader impotence in political action, despite its literary and artistic innovations? Might Serner's literary techniques, precisely by their anti-bourgeois acrimony and their refusal of high-minded pronouncements, prove politically sharper than more overt avant-garde political statements? These are just a few of the questions Ulrich poses when analysing Serner's poetics and fiction, both targeting the set of behaviours and communication strategies at work in what Serner's viewed as a contrived community of bourgeois actors, and possibly avant-garde practitioners.

For his part, Eburne (Part One) insists on the political awakening that arises from the unpredictable intensities informing our "imperfect" — and inalienable — cultural investments, including accidental encounters with surrealism as they occur in the chance discovery of remaindered books: publishers' liquidated overstock, circulating at the margins of the cultural economy. Among other things, Eburne draws attention to those remaindered books authored or published by the underappreciated surrealists active during the second phase of the movement and beyond. These

works coincide with a less circulated, more haphazardly "accumulated" form of surrealist capital — or rather, counter-capital — within the current economy of cultural production and consumption. In short, they offer yet another way of tapping into the outmoded, twice or even thrice over.

The value of the outmoded recuperation of the outmoded –as practiced by Ernst-- is topical in Raymond Spiteri's essay (Part Two). Spiteri advances the thesis that Ernst's own return to the outmoded materials and style he had employed in his collages for *La femme 100 têtes* (1929), as well as his return to the collage technique itself within the context of his wider production up to that point, may have carried political motivations or implications. Could it be that by revamping collage in 1929, after his shift to frottage in 1925—thus rendering his own work outmoded—Ernst was subtly and obliquely participating in the contemporaneous debates surrounding surrealism's political and counter-aesthetic programme?

As Spiteri argues, Ernst's return to his earlier collage practice may have been prompted by the surrealists' renewed efforts to assert a collective political position, particularly in response to attacks from critics championing the modernist avant-garde, and painting specifically. Yet the surrealists' counterattack against the autonomy of art—waged through strategies such as collage—ultimately failed to translate into a committed political praxis. Through close readings and historical analysis, Spiteri shows how Ernst's text-and-image cycle *La femme 100 têtes*, while clearly distancing itself from

"high modernism" through its recourse to outmoded popular sources, also distanced itself from contemporary political experience. Its "poetic" approach, rather than politicizing the work, further insulated it from effective political action. Here, Spiteri recalls Benjamin's cautionary assessment of surrealism: despite the political potential Benjamin ascribed to surrealism's broad array of practices—foremost among them the practice of "profane illumination," which, as Spiteri citing Benjamin notes, "transposed the surrealist experience of the marvellous more firmly into an anthropological, materialist context"—Benjamin warned of the danger of slippage into "a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance."[6]

Benjamin's name is the red thread running through this volume, a pivotal figure whose positions and ideas several—if not all—essays engage with to varying degrees. Both Abigail Susik's and Barbara Di Noi's contributions (Part Two) explicitly return to Benjamin's texts, unpacking topics he shared with the surrealists: children and adult relations, illustrated books, toys, kitsch, the unfashionable Parisian arcades, and more.

In her analysis of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, Di Noi credits the critical framework of anthropological materialism that shapes this unfinished work to his earlier essay on surrealism—alongside his foundational meditation on the outmoded. In this sense, her essay picks up where Spiteri's leaves off. More broadly, Di Noi traces how key instances in

[6] See Spiteri in this volume, especially footnotes 53-56, for references to Walter Benjamin's Surrealism 1929 essay.

Benjamin's late work—architecture, fashion, myth, and history—find their roots in his reflections on surrealism. For example, she notes how the subtitle of Benjamin's surrealism essay," The *Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,"* already signals the retrospective gaze that will permeate the *Arcades Project*. Yet, as Di Noi emphasizes, this gaze does not settle into nostalgia. Rather, it calls for a complex reconceptualization of modern temporality, one structured by continuous relays between the *has-been* and what Benjamin names *Jetztzeit*, the *now-time*. For Benjamin, she suggests, to reactivate "what has gone" in the name of the future was the task of surrealism; and to retrieve what has been in surrealism—its still unrealized potential for the future—is the critic's task.

If, as Di Noi conjectures, surrealism for Benjamin aimed at a secular transcendence amid modernity, then the *Arcades Project* invokes *awakening* as the means to decipher the noise that compenetrates our dreams—the traces left by the 19th century in both the collective psyche and the material world of things. Di Noi details how Benjamin constellates the themes of myth, space (architecture), history, and names—motifs dear to the surrealists—yet does so in ways that decisively depart from their intoxicated embrace of dream. Here, practices of profane illumination and innervation, along with the concept of *Leibraum*, serve Benjamin in articulating an awakening within the collective body, a revolutionary knowledge not yet conscious.

Di Noi elaborates how the surrealist recovery of space as charged, intimate, and dreamlike

parallels the phenomenological conception of *Leibraum*: space as lived, felt, and embodied rather than measured or planned. Yet, in the *Arcades Project*, she reiterates, Benjamin moves beyond this dream intoxication. For him, bodily, sensuous experience of space is not an end in itself but the ground for what he calls the dialectical image: the flashpoint where past and present collide, revealing historical truth—not from objects or places themselves, but from an altered relation to them. The arcades, as covered passages lined with commodity displays, embody this tension. They are at once sites of capitalist phantasmagoria—where commodities enchant and mislead—and potential *Leibraum*, where tactile presence can disrupt the spell of commodification. These passages, with their ambiguous status as both interior and exterior, public and private, become the *Schwellen* (thresholds) for this embodied critique, which, as Di Noi shows, also demands a "relaxation of the self," an emptying out of individuality not unlike the "emptiness" that dialectically fills the arcades (and *Arcades Project*). Here, space is not neutral but charged — historical layers press upon the present, and the (collective) body becomes the medium through which these layers are sensed and activated. Modern space, for Benjamin, must be reinhabited as *Leibraum* if it is to resist the reification and phantasmagoria of the commodity world. It is in the sensory, affective, and corporeal navigation of the arcades that the possibility of revolutionary awakening begins.

If, in Di Noi's reading, the arcades mark the thresholds where collective bodies awaken through

sensory and spatial re-inhabitation, Abigail Susik's essay turns our attention to another, register of Benjamin's work on or around surrealism: the psychic and somatic spaces of childhood. In her contribution to this volume, Susik reinterprets Benjamin's concept of *Traumkitsch* not as a simple indictment of bourgeois bad taste, but as a critical practice that reclaims outmoded, commodified forms through dream and play.

Central to her argument is Benjamin's engagement with Ernst's overpainted frontispiece for Paul Éluard's *Répétitions* (1922), which she reads as a figure of redemptive relationality: a way of dreaming away social conditioning, rooted in childhood's imaginative capacities. Yet, as Susik carefully shows, the childhood Benjamin evokes is not some universal category but specifically the childhood of his own generation—shaped by the 19th-century culture of pedagogical repetition, didactic illustration, and educational toys. Ernst's overpainting, with its partially buried references to these disciplining forms, becomes for Benjamin a complex emblem of the rapport between children's games and adult systems of control. By conjuring up these outmoded materials from the past and then systematically distorting, "misunderstanding," and reworking them, surrealism—via Ernst's practice—offers a way of deciphering and dismantling the visual and textual codes that structured the power dynamics between adult society and childhood, at the cusp of the 20th century.

In this light, Susik reveals dream kitsch as a form of de-instrumentalized post-consumption—transforming capitalist detritus into sites of

emancipatory reverie. Ernst's overpainting does not simply recycle familiar forms; it repurposes them, evoking the latent dream-life embedded in commodified images, while subverting the mechanisms of control they once carried. For Benjamin, as Susik underscores, this process is intimately linked to childhood's playful, tactile relation to objects—a relation that, at least momentarily, suspends the oppressive structures of adult authority.

Susik's reading situates dream kitsch at the intersection of surrealism's engagement with the outmoded, Ernst's aesthetic practice, and Benjamin's critique of capitalist culture through the psychically charged residues of childhood. This triangulation not only clarifies Benjamin's evolving theory of surrealism but also underscores the political and somatic stakes of surrealist image practices more broadly. As such, her essay extends the logic of awakening traced by Di Noi—from the collective body's sensory navigation of modern space to the child's reanimation and misreading of discarded images. And in aligning dream kitsch with a mode of post-consumption, Susik's analysis also opens a dialogue with Eburne's reflections on remaindered books: both point to the critical afterlives of cultural surplus, where value is neither fixed nor extinguished but reactivated through altered relation and renewed use.

It is fitting that this volume, which opens with Benedikt Wolf's oneiric fiction, closes with Tom Denlinger's photographic suite *In the Palace of Polysaccharides* (2023 - 2024). Both works, though distinct in form, engage with dissolution and

transformation as central operations: where Wolf's text traces an immersion and vanishing from one world to re-emerge in another, Denlinger's images confront us with botanical and microbial forces that break through and remake the familiar surfaces of human reality. Drawing on Ernst's techniques of texture accumulation, Denlinger layers photographic traces and perforated forms to create porous, membrane-like environments, where the human figure recedes and is revealed as occupied territory: traversed by fungal, bacterial, and plant agencies that care little for human borders. His works evoke not only the material matrices of cellulose and glucose but also the deeper structures—biological and psychic—that unsettle the apparent autonomy of the self.

Denlinger's series thus stages a contemporary reworking of the surrealist impulse that runs through this volume, while extending it into the register of ecological and posthuman critique. Like Ernst's overpainted images and Benjamin's arcades, his photographic objects operate at the threshold—*Schwellen*—between surface and depth, self and other, human and non-human. They echo the concerns traced in these pages: the reanimation of outmoded forms, the unveiling of submerged systems, and the uneasy symbiosis between subject and world. Closing the collection, Denlinger's images offer not a resolution but a visual awakening to the botanical and microbial substrata that sustain and disturb us—marking yet another zone where human dissolution becomes the ground for recomposition on other terms.

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