The occultation of Surrealism: a study of the relationship between Bretonian Surrealism and western esotericism

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Prelude

In the late summertime of 1924 a small book was published in Paris. It was called The Manifesto of Surrealism, and with its publication a historical avant-garde movement of the twentieth century was born: Surrealism. A tiny movement of dissident writers at the time, it would grow quickly and expansively into an international force to be reckoned with, counting painters, sculptors, photographers, filmmakers and performers as well as writers and poets among its ranks. In fact, the eventual success of Surrealism was of such a scale, influencing popular culture to such a degree, that critics and intellectuals since the 1940s quickly came to downgrade it from an innovative avant-garde movement to kitsch for the masses. Back in 1924, when hardly anyone had heard of Surrealism outside of a very small group of fledgling Surrealists, André Breton (1896-1966) [plate I], writer of the Manifesto, could only have dreamt of the way the adjective ‘surreal’ would pass into everyday speech today. Possibly that would have been a nightmare—for all that he intended Surrealism to be a revolution liberating mankind, and womankind too, it was emphatically not meant for all and sundry. While elements of mass culture were celebrated as inspirational, Surrealism was nonetheless always positioned in the vanguard of society, never among the masses.

Already in the early days this was a point of concern. In 1929 Breton wrote a Second Surrealist Manifesto in which he insisted that ‘the approval of the public must be avoided like the plague’. Moreover, he felt that people were taking liberties with ‘his’ Surrealism. So how to keep Surrealism as well as the Surrealists on the right (vanguard) path, and how to prevent ‘the public’ from approving? Breton’s answer was:

I call for the profound, the veritable occultation of Surrealism.²

This study is concerned with the nature of that ‘occultation’—a term that refers not only to a ‘concealment’ of Surrealism, that is to say making it even less accessible, but also to its engagement with the occult and occultism, something that in itself is clearly a strategy of distinction, aimed at demarcating the avant-garde
from the masses. Obviously the interpretation of ‘occultation’ as ‘allying with occultism’, is my main concern here.³

What is Surrealism?
Before we can explore further to what extent Surrealism was ‘occulted’ and what such ‘occultation’ consisted of, the first issue to address is what Surrealism itself was and was about. There seem to be as many different definitions of Surrealism as there are scholars and authors: it was a ‘way of life’ or a ‘cultural passage of time’, ‘a complex project attempting to found another culture’ or ‘a corporate experience’, even (it is said) ‘a hoax invented by artists and encouraged by intellectual snobbery.’⁴ While popularly known as a visual arts movement, and in France as a literary movement, Surrealism supported many more art forms than only the visual and literary arts and possibly transcended art entirely. While the arts were instrumental in expressing the surrealist project, they were never the movement’s main objective. It is probable that Surrealism should be qualified above all as a philosophy.⁵

Surrealism was a part of the larger western cultural development known as Modernism.⁶ Modernism’s great project of re-enchanting art and life stood also very high on Surrealism’s agenda.⁷ Without a doubt Surrealism was also a political movement, and was perceived by its adherents as a revolution. Indeed, ‘revolution’ was one of Surrealism’s three central objectives throughout the long life of the movement, the other two being ‘love’—a euphemism for desire—and ‘poetry’, which we should understand to refer to art in general. In all Surrealism’s undertakings, we should keep these three essential concerns in mind; whatever new journey, experiment or art work Bretonian Surrealism embarked on, love, poetry and/or revolution were its objectives.⁸

In his Manifesto, Breton himself provided the following definition of Surrealism:

ENCYLOPEDIA. Philosophy. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of the dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life.⁹

Concepts such as ‘dreams’ and ‘thought’ in Breton’s definition make it clear that mental processes form the heart of Surrealism, and I argue that we should understand Surrealism foremost as a certain state of mind.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the mind had become a dynamic
new area of research. Consciousness in particular, or should we say, the subconscious or the subliminal, was a key area of concern, which the rise of the disciplines of psychiatry and then psychoanalysis testified to. In the wake of the first French translations of Freud’s works and other developments, Bretonian Surrealism made the mind a seat of literary and artistic wonders, and the Surrealists—as veritable ‘Marco Polos of the mind’ or ‘speleologists of the psyche’—set out to explore all the psyche’s nooks, crannies and dark recesses. They were fascinated by mental states such as madness, for instance, and experimented with states of induced insanity, with automatism and with other mental states.

Breton insists that Surrealism is a psychic mechanism. It functions by means of the psyche, or mind. Therefore, we can consider (the practice of) Surrealism as a rapport with the world, both real and super-real (or sur-real). The term ‘rapport’ expresses quite well that the relation one engages in with (sur-)reality is very specific, dynamic, and not necessarily equal. Being a Surrealist is a choice about how to interact, mentally, with the experienced world, inner and outer, real and sur-real, and how to interpret it. That this choice implies not only a psychical but also a political agenda is evident to the Surrealists:

[Surrealism] is a means of total liberation of the mind and of all that resembles it.

One means by which the mind was liberated was by focussing upon the irrational. Rationalism was associated with a restrictive, old-fashioned, positivist, and (most horrible) bourgeois worldview. Breton, who had positioned Surrealism from the outset as an avant-garde movement that would revolutionise society, later proudly wrote that Surrealism

[had opened] certain doors that rationalism boasted of having boarded up for good.

We can be certain that under Breton’s guidance the Surrealists gleefully crashed through those boarded-up doors at every opportunity. With rationalism defined as Surrealism’s opponent, the irrational thereby became almost by default a source of everything authentic, inventive, new, exciting, inspiring, and sur-real. The ‘irrational’ was a large and extremely heterogeneous category for the Surrealists, incorporating diverse elements ranging from outmoded heterodox socialist thought to the writings of Christian mystics; from dreams to hallucinatory visions; from all forms of automatism to contemporary cinema; from the art and literature of mental patients to that of Hieronymus Bosch and William
Blake. Importantly, esotericism, including occultism, was located by Breton within that domain of the irrational too, whether it be in the form of motifs or tropes, images, individuals, books, or worldviews, or, as well, in the form of a coherent current of thought, generally termed ‘the hermetic tradition’, and later ‘esotericism’.\textsuperscript{15} Crashing certain doors of rationalism therefore also meant engaging in one way or another with esotericism, that is to say, ‘occult’ Surrealism.

Before turning to a brief definition of the esoteric, there are a few more ‘exoteric’ factors that need to be determined: the scope of this study with regards to character, place and time. However, the choices I have made in this regard have a direct bearing on my investigation of Surrealism’s relation with esotericism.

Plate I.

**Further delineations of scope**

As the title already makes clear, I am primarily concerned in this study with Surrealism of the Bretonian kind, that is to say, the Surrealism of Breton himself and under his direction. One result of this is that the main focus of this study is directed towards French Surrealism, in particular Parisian Surrealism—as Breton resided in Paris throughout his life, a period of exile during the Second World War excepted—at the expense of the Surrealisms that arose in other cities and countries.\textsuperscript{16}

Surrealism is often identified almost exclusively with Breton, which is no
wonder as he was Surrealism’s main instigator: his writings continuously shaped and (re)defined the movement, and his strict—some say, authoritarian, even popish—personal direction constantly guided it. I acknowledge that there are other Surrealisms than that of Breton, but in this study he is the main character. His opinions, mediated primarily through his publications, are my first touchstone. In various instances I will discuss other members of Surrealism and the surrealist group collectively, but only briefly. This is certainly detrimental to the individual histories of other Surrealists. Still, there is no denying that the current perception of the discourse of Surrealism is defined for a significant part by Breton’s writings; and the many well-known complaints about Breton’s strict management of ‘his’ movement indicate that the perception that he shaped it significantly accommodates a historical reality. The particularly close-knit character of the surrealist group—variously defined as a ‘magician’s coven, a bandit gang, a sect of heretics or a revolutionary cell’, for instance—made them into a true collective, practically as well as ideologically. Their intense contact means that we can assume that information travelled rapidly among all members, and, furthermore, that Breton could indeed make sure that all members of his group adhered to his vision of Surrealism. I feel confident, therefore, to posit that (at least for his group) Breton functioned as the ‘gatekeeper’: controlling the group’s composition, activities, source material, input, output and ideology to a considerable extent.

My focus upon Breton and ‘his’ Surrealism is particularly relevant in the context of esotericism. Within the context of the alleged occult leanings of Surrealism, scholars have almost always accorded Breton a central role. I have set out here to both define that role, and question that which other authors have ascribed to him. Other artists whose interest in esotericism was just as avid as that of Breton, or even surpassed it, such as Max Ernst (1891-1967) and Victor Brauner (1903-1966), have recently been recipients of thorough scholarly studies. In Breton’s case, however, scholars have as a rule either resorted to vague and generalising statements that beg for specification, or have argued in favour of an extremely esoteric Breton—Breton the magus, for instance—from which I beg to differ too. I propose, therefore, to write an alternative history of Bretonian Surrealism; specifically, alternative to those who have claimed that the Surrealism of Breton has had little to do with occultism, or esotericism, as well as to those who have made the claim that it had everything to do with it.

Breton’s surrealist group was not the only one. Breton’s best known opponent is Georges Batailles (1897-1962). After a time of crisis by the end of the 1920s, a number of Surrealists left Breton, or were excluded, and rallied around Bataille. One can speak therefore of a Bataille-group and a Breton-group, who both practiced their own, albeit somewhat similar, kinds of Surrealism. Others again started their own movement in 1929, Le Grand Jeu. I will refer to these other groups only
very sparingly.

With Breton the main character of this story, it stands to reason that his death in 1966 implies the movement’s end and this study’s limit. One of the first scholars of the movement, Maurice Nadeau (1911), dated the end of the movement’s avant-garde phase already to 1935. In his—by now canonical—work The History of Surrealism (1944), Nadeau divided Surrealism into a prelude or ‘elaboration’ (1914-1922); a period of establishment or ‘heroic period’ (1923-1925); a period of growth (1925-1930); and one of consolidation or ‘autonomy’ (1930-1939), also known as Surrealism’s ‘Golden Age’. Both this division and the title of his book indicated that the period during the Second World War (and after) should be considered Surrealism’s ‘Hellenism’, as it were. This view has been very influential; already in 1947 French critics commented that Surrealism had returned from exile only to enter into its ‘phase of reflection and classicism’. In the English-speaking world, where intellectual opinion was defined by Alfred H. Barr (1902-1982) and Clement Greenberg (1909-1994), luminaries of art criticism, Surrealism was often judged mainly as reactionary figurative kitsch, peripheral to art’s teleological developments towards abstraction.

Some critics and scholars have found evidence for the supposed waning of Surrealism after 1940 in the fact that esotericism rather suddenly appeared very high on its agenda. When Breton started ‘treading in the waters of occultism’ in earnest, decline set in—or so it is thought. Such an opinion provides insight into how some scholars view(ed) esotericism, even as it also reveals the underlying assumption that still cutting-edge avant-garde movements would not ‘dabble’ in occultism or esotericism. Some critics wondered (and wonder today, too) why Surrealism would have anything to do with currents of thought that have distinctly religious overtones; after all, Surrealism was widely known for unequivocally disapproving of religion. The surrealist disdain for all things religious (and Catholic in particular) was showcased in many angry pamphlets as well as several literary, visual and practical jokes; a photograph of Benjamin Péret (1899-1959) insulting a priest, or so the caption tells us, published in the surrealist journal La Révolution Surréaliste, serves as a well-known example [fig 1]. Opinions about esotericism aside for the moment, it is indeed the case that Breton’s engagement with it changed dramatically in the 1940s. In fact, the Second World War formed the catalyst in Breton’s fascination for, deepening investment in, and literary and artistic employment of, esotericism. This development reached a climax in 1947, right when many critics were writing the movement off. This is obviously not coincidental, as will be touched upon in chapter five.

Therefore, while from an art historical point of view Surrealism’s first two decades (the 1920s and 1930s) are usually considered the most important, from the point of view of the history of esotericism those two decades can be considered a
period of gestation, with the 1940s as the eruptive and creative phase. Consequently I will not only pay attention to the first two decades of Bretonian Surrealism, as so many art historical and literary studies do, but also to the 1940s. Decline did set in, however, after the turn of the decade, leading to an entrenching in already established and more or less static positions in the 1950s. Therefore, the chronological limit of this study is Surrealism’s fifth decade, the 1950s.

**Esotericism**

The very same grounds that led many (left wing) critics and scholars to disapprove of esotericism, and therefore of Surrealism’s involvement with it, led Breton and his Surrealists to validate it positively. The Bretonian Surrealists associated esotericism with irrationalism and marginality, which reflects a view that was widespread at the time (and in some cases still is today). Surrealism followed popular opinion that esoteric thought was pre-rational, illogical, and basically just backward. Indeed, they associated the esoteric worldview with the primitive worldview. It was that very marginality that made it so attractive to the Surrealists; after all, they ‘pursued heterogeneity in all its forms’ and esotericism was certainly considered heterodox—and therefore something deserving of appropriation by this movement that was hell-bent on taking a course perpendicular to that bourgeois society was thought to be on.

The Bretonian Surrealists gained most of their knowledge of western esotericism, including occultism and the occult sciences, from nineteenth century, more or less scholarly, studies about witches and magic, as well as from twentieth century academic studies of Romantic poets and their fascination for esotericism. Scholarly secondary sources, therefore, played a very important role in mediating knowledge about esotericism to the Surrealists. This squares with the fact that we should consider esotericism primarily a scholarly construct. In line with Wouter Hanegraaff, the eminent specialist in the academic study of esotericism, I consider ‘Western esotericism’ to be a constructed category, an umbrella term under which various heterodox western religious movements, practices, ideas, groups and individuals can be collected. It stretches from the Renaissance until the present day, and has been profoundly influenced by modernisation. It is essentially a counter-category, serving as an ‘Other’ to mainstream religions, groups or worldviews, to which excluded, rejected, prohibited, outdated, or otherwise marginalised knowledge can be attributed. As Hanegraaff sees it, esotericism functions as a conceptual ‘waste-basket’ for elements that have since the Enlightenment been considered no longer part of the (approved) Western identity. Magic, for instance, was relegated to this category of ‘the Other’ because it was considered superstitious, or unscientific. Note that there is not one ‘esoteric worldview’, there is only a collection of worldviews, ideas and concepts that may fall into this particular category.
I prefer the term ‘reservoir’ over ‘waste-basket’. Esoteric thought was never ‘thrown away’, it was merely perceived to be side-lined, and what is considered irrelevant by one, can become very relevant for another. As a supposed reservoir of rejected knowledge, of things considered marginal, heterodox, superseded, archaic, irrational, illogical and downright strange (etcetera), esotericism can be drawn upon by individuals and groups for purposes outside of its original magical or occult contexts, as it was. Following in the footsteps of the Romantic poets they admired, the Surrealists associated themselves with this category of heterodox irrationality because it broadcasted their revolt against orthodox bourgeois society, showing that their ‘occultation’ was in full process; and, secondly, because of the treasure trove of inspiring material it appeared to be.

Esotericism has been a recurring subject in scholarship in the West since the nineteenth century, but we should note that it has frequently been treated in a manner that is decidedly not neutral. To summarise the usual positivist post-Enlightenment opinion, esotericism is only a remnant of superstitions that cannot survive the light of the (scientifically enlightened) day and should have been superseded already (which is indeed why the Surrealists valued it). Conversely, religionist approaches (particularly in France) have treated it as the ‘true’ core of Christian spirituality, eternal truths from the dawn of time that have (secretly) survived the ages, the repression of the Church and the ignorance of the masses.33 Sometimes, the attitude towards it is sensational, highlighting lurid details of Satanism and the like and pointing out (alleged) political conspiracies of occultists.34 These approaches have been replaced by more neutral investigations of the field of esotericism in the last couple of decades.35 Current scholarly research focusses upon the category of esotericism as a whole and its characteristics, as well as upon currents that are placed under its overall heading, such as Neo-Platonism, Swedenborgianism, Christian theosophy, Illuminism, Spiritualism, modern Theosophy, occultism, New Age and Neo-Paganism, to mention only the more prominent ones.36 As this list shows, ‘Western esotericism’ is a meta-construction encompassing a wide variety of early modern and modern currents and movements, and as such is not only transdisciplinary but touches upon many integral aspects of modern Western culture.

Clearly, however, this study’s title refers to the ‘occultation’, and not the ‘esotericisation’, as it were, of Surrealism. I admit immediately that that would seem the proper designation, as indeed the various esoteric references one can find in the discourse of Surrealism derive from the full range of Western esotericism. The latter is in essence my touchstone here, not occultism alone. Still, I have chosen to retain Breton’s term ‘occultation’. First, because in the context of Breton’s demand ‘occult’ should be understood as referring to the current of esotericism in general anyway. Secondly, because nineteenth century occultism became the lens through which the Surrealists viewed other periods and currents. Indeed, as will be shown,
**INTRODUCTION**

Historical occultism became the most important reference point for Bretonian Surrealism, and the surrealist fascination was strongest for nineteenth century esoteric thinkers and (possibly mythical) figures. Finally, I have retained the term ‘occultation’ for aesthetic reasons.

To bring all threads together, I propose here to write a history of Bretonian Surrealism’s relation to (Western) esotericism. By studying the various esotericisms that were mentioned, engaged in, appropriated or rejected, for diverse reasons, in five decades of Surrealism, I have set out to accomplish three objectives: firstly, to provide an overview of those particular esotericisms that are relevant to Bretonian Surrealism. Secondly, to provide insight into the way in which Breton and his Surrealists related to esotericism and to what extent one can say Surrealism was really ‘occulted’. Finally, I will position this as alternative to already existing scholarly and other studies of this topic.

**Outline of this study**

In closing, I will briefly outline the structure of this thesis. The first chapter is a historiographical survey of, on the one hand, the preeminent sources of esoteric information for Bretonian Surrealism, and on the other, the various academic and popular works that have explored the question of the esotericism of Breton and his Surrealism before me. I will focus upon many points that have been touched upon only briefly above, including the construction of ‘esotericism’ and its conceptual predecessor, ‘the hermetic tradition’, by various scholars in relation to Breton and to his Surrealism, as well as by Breton and the Surrealists themselves. Further attention will be paid to the role ideas about tradition, erudition, and politics have played in both the scholarly and the surrealist discourses.

Starting with chapter two, each chapter covers a particular period, indicated in the chapters’ titles: the ‘time of slumbers’, which is the preliminary period of 1922-23; the ‘period of reason’, or the late 1920s and the early 1930s;37 the ‘Golden Age’ of the 1930s; and finally, in chapter five, the period of the 1940s, with 1947 as its climax. At the same time each chapter covers not just a period but also a stage within the surrealist trajectory of ‘occultation’—or ‘occult process’ as Breton would refer to it later in life38—and can be related to an esoteric concept, or to an important development in esotericism’s history. As Surrealism was essentially a revolution of the mind, each chapter covers a mental process or state, and to all these ‘psychic mechanisms’ there is an esoteric dimension.

Breton made his demand for a ‘profound, veritable occultation’ in 1929. While it found its effect in the 1930s and particularly in the 1940s, it is important to realise that the stage for an occultation was already set in the early 1920s. In chapter two, I will discuss how the Bretonian Surrealists explored the idea and practice of creative automatism. Automatism is a practice that originated in the disciplines
INTRODUCTION

of psychology and psychiatry, and more specifically within these disciplines’ own marginalised esoteric histories of psychical or parapsychological research, somnambulism and mesmerism. With respect to the mind’s revolution, this chapter deals with the surrealist issue of expressing the authentically artistic mind as directly as possible via automatism and similar somnambulistic states.

Around 1925 it became clear that pure verbal automatism was not sufficient as a means of expression for the Surrealist, as I will argue in chapter three. A growing emphasis upon the visual arts, among other things, led the Bretonian Surrealists to further explore another faculty of the mind, the imagination. This was linked closely to clairvoyance and the notion that the artist is a seer. Female clairvoyants and mediums were served up as ‘seers’ whose example the Surrealists should follow. Becoming a seer was important, because after the experiments with automatism—a surreality existing solely within the mind—the new issue now was how to ‘see’ the surreality that is immanent within the world experienced outside of the mind, that is to say, surreality within reality.

For Surrealism’s next decade, the 1930s, discussed in chapter four, I have maintained the classical designation ‘Golden Age’—but not necessarily a ‘golden age’ of the arts or literature, nor of esotericism, but primarily a golden age of the mind, as it was in that decade that Breton firmly established the surrealist mind as the ‘psychic mechanism’ par excellence. The overriding concern for the interaction of mind with surreality in reality—or sur/reality—defined this decade. It raised the question which meta-structure would allow for creative interaction between mind and world. To facilitate this interaction, Breton constructed a surrealist universe based upon principles of correspondence, in which everything is related and various acts and things can be symbolic and meaningful. Desires within the mind can merge with signs in the outside world. Preferably, the established connections are illogical and irrational, or ‘magical’. While magical worldviews can already be said to be a part of esotericism, the emphasis upon correspondences is certainly prevalent in many esoteric systems of thought. Hence the magical, or esoteric, worldview became firmly associated with the surrealist worldview in this decade.

With the essential groundwork for an alignment of Bretonian Surrealism with esoteric thought laid during these periods, around 1940 the movement made a distinct and more explicit turn towards the esoteric. This was part of a larger turn towards the heterodox that was prompted by rising political tensions and the eventual outbreak of the Second World War. During the war Breton came to appreciate the important role of esoteric thought in Romantic and Symbolist literature, which strengthened him in his view that esotericism also offered valuable ideas and symbols for his own movement. The Surrealist had become a magician, someone who effects changes that are desired mentally in the world through her/his art. By 1947 Breton deemed it necessary to share the magical surrealist worldview with the pub-
I will discuss all these developments in chapter five, the core of which is the 1947 exhibition, in which all the various esoteric threads in Bretonian Surrealism were brought together. This chapter will also cover the 1950s.