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

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Introduction: Nadja

One day in 1926—October 4th—André Breton encountered a woman while he was walking the streets of Paris:

Suddenly, perhaps still ten feet away, I saw a young, poorly dressed woman walking towards me, she had noticed me too, or perhaps had been watching me for several moments. … She was curiously made up, as though beginning with her eyes, she had not had time to finish, though the rims of her eyes were dark for a blonde, the rims only, and not the lids… I had never seen such eyes. Without a moment’s hesitation, I spoke to this unknown woman, though I must admit that I expected the worst [i.e. that she was a prostitute]. … I took a better look at her. What was so extraordinary about what was happening in those eyes?¹

Compelled by those extraordinary eyes, Breton accosted this woman whom he would call Nadja. They started a brief affair, which mainly consisted of meetings in bars and long walks together through the city. Breton was fascinated by her: Nadja behaved oddly, erratically, unlike any other person Breton knew. Through her, he felt close to the marvellous, that quintessential yet so ephemeral something Surrealism was always after. But after a couple of weeks, perhaps months, her glamour faded, and the affair ended badly. Less than a year later Nadja—that is to say, the person behind the character of Nadja, Léona Delcourt (1902-1941)—was institutionalised in a mental hospital. Breton, for his part, had moved on to a new lover and had also published Nadja, an unconventional, semi-documentary, pseudo-autobiographical novel that appears to document their affair.²

Nadja is a complex book, not easily retold or summarised; here I will briefly recap certain elements that I consider to be relevant, which concern the story of the actual affair (only one part of this multi-layered narrative), with an emphasis on the unusual incidents.³ The story of Nadja herself starts around a
third of the way into the novel, when the narrator André meets her for the first time, as recounted above. They talk, go for a drink, and agree to meet again the next day. During that second meeting, Nadja states that she ‘sees’ André’s home (‘je vois chez vous’, are her words), seeing—correctly, the author assures us—that his wife is a brunette and has two pets. On the third day of their encounter, Nadja tells André of the powers he has over her, of making her think and do what he wants, and requests release. When they have dinner, she seems to see a crowd of dead people, and subsequently predicts that a red light will come on behind a certain window, and almost immediately, it does. They take a late-night walk, and an iron grille in the wall petrifies Nadja. She wonders if in a distant past she might have been imprisoned as part of Queen Marie-Antoinette’s retinue. She is scared, restless, acting strangely. When they cross the Seine, she sees a flaming hand floating over the water. Near midnight, they arrive at the fountain in the Garden of the Tuileries. Nadja describes something André was reading about earlier, astonishing him, as he is sure she could not have known of it.

On the fourth day, 7 October 1926, André feels troubled. He encounters Nadja not at the agreed time and place but on the street by chance. This had happened the day before as well, and ‘it is apparent’, the author writes, ‘that she is at my mercy’. Their encounters seem unavoidable, perhaps even providential. October 10th, they have dinner at a restaurant. It appears as if Nadja influences people and events around her, making the waiter spill wine and drop plates. ‘She knows her powers over certain men’, the author remarks. Later, when they are out walking once again, she becomes distraught and tells André that he will write a book about her (and obviously, from our side of the story as readers, we know that this prediction will come true). October 12th, Nadja gives André some of her automatic drawings, which she has started making since they met.

Their relationship quickly deteriorates. André finds it increasingly hard to communicate with her; she phones his house, only to leave a message that she cannot be reached. They see each other a few more times, but Breton does not provide much detail in the novel. One more interesting incident occurs, when at an unspecified time Nadja visits André at home. She admires his art collection and then proceeds to reveal information about some of the artefacts that he thinks she could not have known; she even ‘recognises’ important works, as if she has seen them before, and offers an interpretation of Max Ernst’s ‘extremely difficult’ painting Of this men shall know nothing [plate IV] in words similar to those Ernst had written on the back of the canvas. The story of Nadja ends when the author states, quite matter-of-factly, that he has been informed that Nadja has gone mad. Note that this is not quite the end of the novel itself, which goes on for several more paragraphs about André’s new love-interest, ‘X’.

Scholars of Surrealism regularly position the novel Nadja at the centre
of Breton’s oeuvre, and often at the centre of surrealist literature in general too, as a *roman à clef* that exemplifies the objectives of (Bretonian) Surrealism: an elusive search for something undefined, uncanny encounters with the marvellous, relationships with mysterious loved ones. Scholars consider Nadja to be the archetypal surrealist character: ‘the prototype of the surrealist heroine’. Based on Breton’s suggestive but evanescent descriptions, Nadja is interpreted as a medium, a clairvoyant, a muse, a powerful witch, a madwoman, the Other, a typical bohemian character, or a combination of these; as well as a ‘mascot for Breton’s ideas’, ‘the most powerful and the most negative representation of Woman in Surrealism’, and an example of the (male) Surrealist’s objectification of women. There are as many Nadja’s as there are scholars, obviously, and as most agree that Nadja seems to have embodied the essentials of Surrealism for Breton, discussion of him and his movement cannot pass her by. Of course I am interested here in the Nadja who is seen in an esoteric light: Nadja the medium and Nadja the clairvoyant. Decades later Breton himself called her a ‘sorceress’, with ‘magic powers’ even, thereby retroactively creating the possibility that her strange behaviour should be interpreted in a magical light. Scholars consider Nadja to be a clairvoyant and/or a medium, as she apparently possesses powers of clairvoyance (she sees into André’s home, and later his art collection), and furthermore precognition (the window turning red), prophecy (‘you will write a book about me, won’t you’), remembrance of past lives (the incident at the grille in the wall), and telepathy (the incident at the Tuileries). Note that Breton never used such explicit terms as ‘telepathy’ in *Nadja*; he only provides more or less implicit suggestions and leaves it up to his readers, critics and scholars to interpret what may actually have occurred.

Often, therefore, scholarly interpretations of Nadja have nothing to do with metaphysics or Spiritualism or lucid faculties and derive from the sphere of psychiatry, for instance. Nadja is thought to be mentally unstable or just outright mad, a judgement based not least on Breton’s comment that she ‘had gone mad’, besides his descriptions of her erratic behaviour. Obviously, when details about the real Delcourt surfaced and it was proven a fact that she was institutionalised for mental illness, this reading of her was only confirmed. In this chapter I will be concerned with Nadja the madwoman just as much as Nadja the clairvoyant and/or medium. As will be demonstrated, from the surrealist point of view being clairvoyant, mediumistic or mad is more or less the same, and it is my view that Nadja was all of these things. Nadja herself is a constructed character created by Breton. Even though his affair with Delcourt lay at the basis of the book, and even though *Nadja* appears to be a documentary account, it is fiction. Therefore, there is the question of whether Nadja/Delcourt is even present at all; another category of scholarly interpretations presents a psychoanalytical view in which Nadja is interpreted as the unconscious, as Other, and probably as his other. Fittingly enough, *Nadja* opens
with this question by the author: ‘Who am I?’ He continues, ‘Whom do I haunt?’ Both questions point towards the fact that his narrative may well be about himself, and his relation to himself, to his Other. Nadja is not just a muse, but functions as Breton’s gateway into surreal reality, because as will become clear in this chapter, engaging one’s own Other is engaging the surreal.

In my view, Nadja the Other can be likened to Nadja the madwoman and Nadja the medium. As Breton’s/André’s unconscious, Nadja can be described as Surrealism, or as surrealistic, but never as a Surrealist, an artist in her own right. She is obviously surreal, not real, which is perhaps also why Breton suppressed all information about the real Delcourt. Clearly I will be concerned foremost with Nadja as a constructed idea in this chapter. As I will describe, during the second half of the 1920s, under the direction of Breton the Surrealists developed the idea of the artist as a seer, someone who is capable of a particular type of vision I would term ‘surrealist vision’. For the Surrealists constructing the notions of surrealist vision and the surrealist artist-seer entailed an interaction with other seers, such as clairvoyants, mediums, and also those known as ‘aliénés’, or mad people. Such people were thought to have vision closely approaching although not entirely the same as surrealist vision, and in the process of developing the idea of surrealist vision and seERShip, they were frequently quoted as examples in whose footsteps the Surrealist should tread.

I will first explore how and why mediums, clairvoyants and the mad were associated with visions, and why they were more or less considered to be of a kind. There is of course also the question why the Surrealist was suddenly required to become a seer possessing surrealist vision. Three developments are important, I believe. The maturation of surrealist visual art meant that the surrealist model upon which all art (including literary) should be based became internal once and for all. Evidently this requires inner vision. Secondly and roughly simultaneously, surreality became immanent in reality, whereas before it had been located in the mind alone. Nadja is in fact an account of the search for and subsequent uncanny encounter with the surreal in the real. The immanence of surreality also required a means of perception, that is to say, a manner of seeing it. Surrealism favoured the eye above all other senses, therefore every sensory perception is essentially reduced to a visual one. I will also show that Breton associates Nadja emphatically with vision and positions her as a clairvoyant-seer-medium, and furthermore that he associates her with a certain way of seeing, which he opposes to his own visionary manner. This opposition is important because surrealist vision, unlike mediumistic vision for instance, depends upon contradictions, oppositions and tensions. Finally, in his continual exploration of what surreality might be, and might mean, Breton developed the notion of a state of grace, a theoretical position wherein oppositions are transcended and perception and representation become one. Again, this
perception is visual, more specifically, visionary. An essay he wrote in 1933 plays a pivotal role with regards to this concept and present the climax of his ideas concerning (surrealist and other kinds of) vision.

These three developments together made it necessary that the Surrealist become a seer. By the end of this chapter, after discussing seer-ship and surrealist vision, it will also become clear that there is a gender dimension to those concepts. While the Surrealists are seers, they are not necessarily seen, whereas the mad mediums are both seers and seen. This is because they are women—or if men, feminised—because femininity is an essential part of being a clairvoyant, in particular of acting as a clairvoyant for someone else, in this case the (male) Surrealist. And the Surrealist desires to look upon woman just a he desires to look upon the surreal.

For me, Nadja embodies all the characteristics of the surrealist seer: she is mad, she is a medium, she is clairvoyant, she is a woman, she is automatic because of the preceding four points; as a woman and a seer, she is seen; and finally, she is Other, specifically the Other of Breton. She is what he desires (to see) most of all: Surrealism.
I. Towards surrealist vision: the savage eye

Mad, mediumistic, clairvoyant

The Surrealists barely distinguished between mental patients (the ‘mad’) and mediums; as far as they were concerned, the Augustines and Hélène Smiths of this world were all people who were often, perhaps constantly, in a state of automatism, whereby their expressions could be interpreted as poetical and artistic. Several Surrealists did not limit themselves to just reading and writing about mediums; in 1925 Breton, Ernst and Michel Leiris, among others, started paying regular visits to the parlour of a local clairvoyant and fortune-teller, known as Madame (Angeline) Sacco. This was hardly a secret; for instance, Breton reproduced a dramatic stage-photograph of Mme Sacco in Nadja [fig 17] and also recounted a number of anecdotes involving her. At one time she told him that a certain ‘Hélène’ occupied his thoughts. He wondered if that might be Hélène Smith, but when he shared this with Nadja, she insisted that she was this Hélène. This is a clear sign that one should interpret Nadja as a clairvoyant, as well as mad. Breton also recounts that he asked Ernst to paint Nadja’s portrait, but that Ernst refused because Mme Sacco had warned him to beware of a certain ‘Nadia or Natasha’. In a letter to his wife as well as in the ‘Letter to Seers’ (1925) Breton wrote enthusiastically about Mme Sacco’s predictions, such as that his life would change drastically around 1931, that he would die, that he would live in China for twenty years, and that he would be the head of a political party.

Just as some scholars today take issue with Surrealism’s constant recourse to mediums, mediumship and Spiritualism, so did a prominent intellectual at the time, the cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940):

Now I concede that the breakneck career of Surrealism over rooftops, lightning conductors, gutters, verandas, weathercocks, stucco work—all ornaments are grist to the cat burglar’s mill—may have taken it also into the humid backroom of spiritualism. But I am not pleased to hear it cautiously tapping on the window-panes to inquire about its future. Who would not wish to see these adoptive children of revolution most rigorously severed from all the goings-on in the conventicles [sic] of down-at-heel dowagers, retired majors, and émigré profiteers?

Ernst, Breton and others were indeed braving the ‘humid backrooms’ of dowagers and others to hear their future, but not for the objectives one might think. They came for the imaginative stories of the clairvoyants, and to be more precise, for the effect of those stories upon their own imaginations. An example serves to clarify this. Breton reflected upon the predictions that he would die and also travel
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The thing to understand about the surrealist attitude towards mediumistic prediction, I suggest, is that the mediums were taken at their literal word. The result is two-fold: firstly, the words of the mediums have an effect on the surrealist poet himself. The very fact that Mme Sacco’s prediction had made Breton consider, in his imagination, going to China, had caused him to go there in thought.27 And in Surrealism, as we know, ‘once something has been thought, it exists’.28 This is the supreme reality of surrealist thought, which for instance made simulation during the sleeping sessions perfectly acceptable. Superiority of thought was furthermore the mechanism behind the successful assumption of mental illnesses by Éluard and Breton during the period they composed The Immaculate Conception.29 Prophecy is cast in the same mould. The distinctions between what will be and what is, between real and virtual, between possible, probable and factual, are blurred by the prophesies of the seers.30 ‘It is your role, Mesdames’, Breton addressed the backroom seers, ‘to make us confuse the accomplishable fact and the accomplished fact.’31 The resulting confusion in the mind is surreal—and note, it exists in the mind alone, which, as that is superior, is all the existence that matters for the Surrealist anyway.32

Besides letting the words of the clairvoyants influence their imagination, the Surrealists took them at their literal word in a second way: interpreting the predictions as verbal expressions of the hidden creative self. The mediums were judged on their merits as poets; that is, by the originality and creativity of their language.33 Whether they predicted the future correctly, or if they could at all, is not even relevant. One does not believe the clairvoyant’s words, one believes the clairvoyant’s words. Everything in Surrealism was literature, hence prophecy is a speech act. Automatic text is by definition surrealist text; as a matter of fact it was so essential that producing (an automatically written) ‘surrealist text’ was the rite de passage for joining Surrealism.34 Because automatism is the determinant, not only Surrealists write, or speak, surrealist texts, but other automatists, that is to say mediums and the mentally unstable, do too. Breton regards the letters of Nadja (crazy and clairvoyant) as more or less automatically written, which is why he reads them ‘the same way I read all kinds of surrealist text’.35 Let me emphasise again that there is no pathology but only aesthetics in Surrealism: automatism is

to China, forecasted as occurring around roughly the same time:

I do not think that ‘it must be one way or the other’ [that is, either dying or going to China]. I have faith in everything you [the clairvoyant seers] have told me. I would not try to resist the temptation you have aroused in me, let’s say to wait for myself in China, for anything in the world. For thanks to you, I am already there.’26
neither a talking nor a writing cure; it is talking, full stop. It is writing, full stop. The automatisms of the Surrealists were all textualised in one form or other and so framed as literature. In a similar vein, expressions of others who were considered automatists were also treated as text, and possibly, even probably, as literature.

By treating every automatic expression as text, it was divested of any originally spiritual, religious, or metaphysical context. This is how surrealist secularisation works, I find: by reducing everything to text, that text to automatism, and automatism to an expression of the hidden creative self. I will provide a further example of this surrealist dual process of secularisation and poeticising at the cost of the original spiritual(istic) context. Victor Hugo, one of Surrealism’s revered Precursors, was involved in spiritualist séances during his exile on the Isle of Jersey in the 1850s. As this was the dawn of Spiritualism, communication with spirits or other entities still happened mainly through turning and rapping tables, and the contact Hugo was convinced he established with his deceased daughter, among others, was facilitated through such a table. Hugo kept notebooks of those sessions, which, as they were considered damaging to his reputation, remained locked away for over half a century. When they were published in 1923, the Surrealists immediately availed themselves of this new publication, as a particular reference demonstrates. In the essay ‘The Mediums Enter’ Breton refers (somewhat obliquely, it must be said) to the ‘poem’ ‘Ce que dit la Bouche de l’Ombre’ (‘What the Mouth of Shadow Says’) by Hugo. Interestingly enough, that this was a poem is surrealist spin; at the time Hugo himself thought it a transcription of what a spirit known as the ‘Mouth of Shadows’ had, apparently, tapped out.40 As far as the Surrealists were concerned, however, it was an automatic product stemming from Hugo’s unconscious, and within Surrealism ‘getting the mouth of shadow to speak’ in fact became code for automatism. Breton was of the opinion that the belief that spirits were guiding automatic writing was a ‘pathetic joke’ and he chastised the Hugo family in a 1933 essay for giving their ‘unthinking support’ to such a belief. In the same essay, ‘The Automatic Message’, he included a reproduction of the word ‘aube’ (‘dawn’), written by Hugo’s hand during a séance as a spirit communication, as an example of automatic writing [fig 21]. All is automatism, which is creativity; Spiritualism is at best no more than an alibi.

A result of the fact that automatism is the determining factor is that the Surrealists, and Breton in particular, regularly use designations such as ‘medium’, ‘clairvoyant’ and ‘seer’ interchangeably, as they consider the mediums of Spiritualism, the mediums of dynamic psychiatry, ‘dowagers’ in their humid back rooms, and clairvoyants in general as a similar kind. Breton’s 1925 ‘Letter to the Seers’ is addressed to all such ‘seers’. In this ‘Letter’, Breton addressed their ‘disgrace’: the ‘vulgar hoaxes’ they have let themselves be caught in red-handed, but even worse the fact that they ‘have been submitted’ (as a result of such instances of apparent
fraud) to ‘doctors, “scholars” and other illiterates’. As such people are concerned either with the veracity of the seers’ spiritualism—which is irrelevant to the Surrealist—or try to cure them—which is detrimental to their automatism—they cannot truly understand them and do not grasp the seers’s powers. The Surrealists do, as they know how to separate original automatism from the ‘necessary conditions’. Breton celebrates the ‘seers’ for their ‘immense power’. Poets too, he asserts, possess a ‘small bit of clairvoyance, hardly different from your [the seers’] own’.

It is my argument in this chapter that as the 1920s wore on, these ‘seers’ became increasingly more important to Surrealism because of the very fact that they were thought seers, i.e. possessed of a certain kind of vision that originated in their unconscious and was expressed automatically. As I have already mentioned, certain developments that occurred in Surrealism around this time required the surrealist poets and artists to become seers themselves. Such a thing is not done easily, and the Surrealists should look to the mediums, and also to the ‘madmen’, as examples, because they are seers and have vision—or so writer Max Morise contended in 1924:

Let’s admire the madmen, the mediums who find some way to fix their most fugitive visions, as the man given to Surrealism tends to do, with a slightly different motive.

The question is, why did the Surrealists ‘tend’ to ‘fix their most fugitive visions’? And what is the ‘slightly different motive’ behind the need to become a seer? Firstly, Surrealism evolved from a literary to painterly movement, which led to an increased stress upon inner vision. All was not only text anymore, as I will discuss below. As will be touched upon after that, the fact that Surrealism became immanent in reality required a means of perceiving it as well, another reason for the development of surrealist vision.

**Surrealist painting**

In her first years Surrealism was exclusively a poetical and literary movement. In 1925 surrealist writer Pierre Naville stated baldly in an essay for *La Révolution Surréaliste* (LRS) that

there is no such thing as surrealist painting.

Several Surrealists were of the opinion that even though certain paintings might be surrealistic in image, their expression (the medium and process of painting) was not. It was just too slow and complex to be done automatically, contrary to speaking or writing which could be done rapidly and seemingly without thought.
The reality was, however, that it was painfully clear in 1925 that ‘such a thing as surrealist painting’ was already established. André Masson had been making automatic drawings since 1923, while some of the dreamers, such as Desnos, had made such drawings during the sleeping sessions. Artists such as Man Ray and Max Ernst were first-hour Surrealists; both had been steadily creating visual art since the dawn of the 1920s. In addition, reproductions of works or illustrations by Masson, Ray and Ernst, and by Picasso and de Chirico too, had been adorning the pages of LRS since its first issue in 1924. By 1925 surrealist party policy was in serious need of adjustment, which was promptly provided by Breton in a serialised essay published in LRS, ‘Surrealism and Painting’.

During the 1920s various automatic techniques were introduced—and subsequently ratified by Breton—that enabled the creation of visual art while allowing as far as possible for dissociation and/or free association: collage, frottage (rubbing) and grattage (scraping), and later sand-painting and decalcomania (inkblots). Ray experimented with automatic photographic techniques, known as the rayogram (or photogram) and solarisation. In the 1930s object-related techniques were added to this automatic repertoire, such as assemblage and incorporation of the objet trouvé. The elements of chance and the game too became more important in the creative process. The most famous examples of this are the composite collective drawings known as ‘exquisite corpses’, which would be created by three or more Surrealists completing each other’s drawings unseen. This game could also be played with words. Automatism, the game, chance and shared authorship were thought to undermine (bourgeois) artistic standards such as individual artistic genius and long artistic processes of creation, while providing ample opportunity for free association; making these techniques just as suitable for Surrealism as automatism proper.

In my opinion the most important result of the modification of Surrealism from a literature-only movement to one where the visual arts where equally (if not more) important, was the internalisation of the surrealist model once and for all. As Breton remarks:

\[\text{the plastic work of art will either refer to a purely internal model or will cease to exist.}\]

Internal models are dreams, fantasies, visions, hallucinations and, generally speaking, most products of the imagination, preferably generated ‘automatically’, that is to say more or less by the unconscious. Without a doubt the surrealist model had been internal from the outset; The Magnetic Fields already resulted from a turn inwards, while the sleeping sessions revolved around a state in which the eyes were closed and the entranced person was dreaming lucidly, as I have argued. The
fact that the eyes are closed clearly indicates that sight (or vision) was the sense preferred above all in Surrealism. Indeed to bring this point home Breton opened his ‘Surrealism and Painting’ with the statement that

[t]he eye exists in its savage state.57

Such savagery provides the key, obviously, because it is only by being unordered and irrational (anti-bourgeois, in other words) that true sight can be developed: seeing differently from anyone else, even beginning to see what is not visible.58

In literature generally the inner model had become current since Romanticism. The visual arts, however, had only relatively recently started rejecting traditional modes of representation and its supposed basis in visual reality, arguably with Impressionism and certainly with the advent of the avant-gardes.59 What’s more, after the First World War France’s state-sponsored call for a ‘return to order’ had led to a return of realism in art; something the Surrealists could not wait to foreswear.60 Finally, the pervasive presence of (the relatively new art forms of) photography and film meant that mimesis of reality had already been co-opted anyway. Therefore, ‘the only domain left for the artist to exploit [had become] that of pure mental representation’.61

However, how does one go about representing something ‘purely mental’? How to paint purely internal models? Just as they had done at the dawn of Surrealism, the Surrealists turned to those automatists they so admired: the mediums. They possessed, as Morise implied, ‘enchanted eyes’ that provided their ‘fugitive visions’.62 Great was the Surrealists’ surprise and delight to discover that the ‘madmen and mediums’ were once more ahead of them and had already found ample ways to ‘fix their most fugitive visions’ in painting, drawing and sculpture.

Medium-artists

Obviously, if the mad and mediumistic were already painting automatically, there could no longer be any reason why there was no such a thing as surrealist painting. The source that brought this point home to Surrealism was Artistry of the Mentally Ill, a ground-breaking study of art by the insane by Dr. Hans Prinzhorn of the Heidelberg asylum.63 The very same year it was published, 1922, Ernst took the book with him to Paris, and although few Surrealists could read German, they could study the images in this lavishly illustrated book—187 illustrations—perfectly well. There is significant evidence that several surrealist works were directly inspired by illustrations in Prinzhorn’s Artistry. One of the most convincing cases concerns Ernst’s Oedipus (1931), which obviously echoes Miracle Shepherd (1911-13) by August Natterer (1868-1933) [fig 23, 24].64 While providing inspirational visual material,
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Artistry of the Mentally Ill also stressed that artistic works by such patients could, or perhaps even should, be considered art. Rather than simple by-products of mental disturbance, the objects had an artistic value in themselves and should be treated like other art works. In the nineteenth century there was growing appreciation for the art of ‘innocents’, that is to say those not tainted by education and western culture. In the first instance it was mostly directed towards the art of children, in the second instance, as the fascination with the marginal became one of Modernism’s central concerns, also the art of ‘primitives’, non-western tribal peoples. Around the 1920s, the art of the mentally ill, or ‘asylum art’, was added to this curriculum. It was something new to Surrealism, therefore. An older book L’Art chez les fous (1907) by Marcel Réja circulated among the Surrealists too. But as Réja’s book focused mainly on the literary arts, it was only Prinzhorn’s Artistry that provided Surrealism with irrefutable proof that their ‘madmen and mediums’ were employing the visual arts as automatic expressions.

It is probable that the ‘doctor’s club’ within Surrealism was already familiar with the fact that spiritualist and psychodynamic mediums had been making drawings since the middle of the nineteenth century. Still, it is only from 1925 onwards that we find mediumistic drawings in the surrealist discourse, and I interpret this as a direct result of the confrontation with, on the one hand, the need for ratification of painting in Surrealism, and on the other with the existence of mediumistic and mad art through the agency of Artistry. The very first page of LRS 4 (1925) is illustrated by a mediumistic drawing, with the following caption: ‘mediumistic drawing obtained by Mme Fondrillon, medium draughtswoman, in her 79th year, Paris, March 1909’ [fig 25]. No further text accompanies it, but in my opinion it is no coincidence that an automatic mediumistic drawing is reproduced so prominently in the issue in which the first instalment of Breton’s Surrealism and Painting was published.

As the second half of the decade progressed, Breton would emphasise more and more that the mad and the mediumistic were able to produce visual art automatically. In Nadja, for instance, he reproduced drawings from Nadja’s hand, such as The lover’s flower, a Self-portrait and The shield of Achilles [fig 26-28], taking care to stress that they were automatic drawings. We find the climax of his fascination in the essay ‘The Automatic Message’ (1933), in which he included no less than twenty-six reproductions of automatic art he considered to be by the hand of a ‘mediumistic’ draughtsman or woman [fig 29]. Among them are an eau-forte by Victorien Sardou, Mozart’s house on Jupiter [fig 30]; three examples of unearthly script by Hélène Smith and two paintings and two aquarelles by her hand as well [plates V and VI; fig 29]; the drawing by Mme Fondrillon already reproduced in 1925; various other mediumistic drawings and examples of automatic writing; a drawing by Nadja; a painting by Augustin Lesage and one by ‘le Goarant de Tromelin’; a photograph of a fantastical ‘palace’ build by Ferdinand Cheval; and a
photograph of a crystal ball, besides some other non-mediumistic work [fig 25, 31, 32].

Even though the reproduced works vary in technique, style, material medium, and age, and are just as diverse a collection as the artists themselves—some of whom are famous mediums while others are unknown or anonymous or hardly mediums at all—there is nonetheless one factor that binds all together: their automatic creation. Two things should be noted. Firstly, that the designation of these works as automatic was not necessarily made by Breton himself but put forward in the sources whence these reproductions derived. Secondly, that those particular sources all more or less belong to the discipline of dynamic psychiatry. The reproductions of Smith’s works, for instance, are derived from Flournoy’s *From India* and Deonna’s *De la planète Mars*; Sardou’s from *La Revue Spirite*; the anonymous fragments from another publication by Flournoy, *Esprits et Médiums*; and other works from *Annales des sciences psychiques* and the *Revue métaphysique*.75 These sources confirm that Breton, at least, was still relying upon dynamic psychiatry and psychical research for finding information about mediums. In fact his entire essay, which is a discussion of automatism and mediumistic art, is framed in a discourse upon experimental psychiatry; he refers to Charcot, Freud, Myers, Flournoy, and many others.76 Any remaining doubts about whether surrealist mediums should be characterised as anything other than *medical* (psychodynamic) mediums are dispelled by ‘The Automatic Message’. Moreover, Breton takes the opportunity to articulate his rejection of, even distaste for, Spiritualism and its belief in communication with the dead once and for all: it is ‘nauseating’, ‘a pathetic joke’, ‘degrading’, ‘posited on a tainted basis’ and characterised by ‘a staggering level of naivety’.77

The point is, however, that Breton is interested in the ‘medium draughtsmen’ not because of their ‘unreasonable belief’,78 but because of their draught-work, their automatically created art. During the second half of the 1920s his fascination with the medium Smith, for instance, only increased. He mentioned her in *Nadja*, and represented her in ‘The Automatic Message’ with seven (!) artworks. I see a clear parallel between the evolving interest in Smith, and the development of Surrealism into a painter’s movement and the accompanying stress upon finding an internal model for one’s fugitive visions. During Surrealism’s early (literary) years she was celebrated for her talent for ‘inventing languages’.79 In 1927, Breton compared her to Nadja, someone who already speaks, writes, acts and draws automatically. By 1933, he was lyrical about Smith’s creative versatility and represented her evolution from automatic speaking to writing, to drawing, to, finally, full-blown painting. But even as her artistic expression evolved from the literary to the visual arts, her visions and her underlying talent for automatism remained essentially unchanged. In turn, it is that automatism that matters. I argue that the (surrealist) perception that a particular artistic expression is created automatically is the determining factor for
calling a particular category of untrained artist ‘mediumistic’. Trained artists, such as the Surrealists, only emulate the mediumistic, but are not mediums themselves. But when automatists express their hidden creative self in literary or plastic form, they are called ‘mediums’.

I will provide a further example. The other favourite surrealist medium, besides Smith, is Ferdinand Cheval (1836-1924), known as ‘the postman’. Over the course of 33 years, he had built a fabulous fantasy ‘palace’ in his back yard in the French region Drôme, based on a remembered dream [fig 29, 31]. An article in the Belgian surrealist journal Variétés had introduced Cheval to the Parisian Surrealists in 1929, who admired him not least for giving such a large, unique and lasting shape to his visionary dreams. Dali, for instance, was much impressed by Cheval’s sculptural ‘poetry … that makes your hair stand on end’. Photographs of the palace and of Breton beside it were reproduced in various surrealist publications, not least ‘The Automatic Message’. The Surrealists considered Cheval a mediumistic architect-cum-sculptor. As his palace was furthermore useless for habitation or even storage, because of its crooked construction, it surely appealed to the surrealist sense of humour too. The fact that Cheval was classified in Surrealism as a (creative) medium is quite telling and my main point here, because by most definitions he was no medium at all. Even though his palace may have been inspired by a dream, Cheval built it while conscious, lucid, and not in any state of trance, while he furthermore had no interest at all in Spiritualism, nor was he (diagnosed as) mentally ill. Yet Breton insists on calling him ‘the undisputed master of medium-derived architecture and sculpture’. What this shows, I would argue, is that for Breton (and by extension, for his Surrealism), mediumship is not the qualifier for automatism, on the contrary, it is the other way around. The means justify the end. The Surrealists grouped all alienated artists (patients), mediumistic artists, naive artists (such as Cheval) and spiritualist artists together as ‘automatic mediums’. Furthermore, they compared them to children and ‘primitives’, who were thought to create automatically and exclusively from their ‘hidden creative self’ too. Even though the category of ‘art brut’ or outsider art would only be officially created in the 1950s—a development Breton was instrumental in bringing about—the Surrealists had fashioned it already, although they knew it as automatic mediumistic art.

‘The Automatic Message’ affirms the status of the artist-mediums as non-normative, that is outsider, artists. Ideologically, O/outsider art functions primarily as the negative of conventional aesthetic criteria, as the mirror image; it is a constructed category of subversion. Breton emphasised that medium draughtsmen are untrained; that they come from simple working class backgrounds (‘Machner the tanner’, Lesage the miner’, ‘Cheval the postman’ and are therefore uncultured; and that their artistic practice goes entirely against the established grain. Breton
discussed how the automatic painter Desmoulin not only worked without light and with his face covered, no less, but ‘back to front, on a slant’ too; clearly in a manner entirely ‘out of order’. Even though ‘un-ordered’ behaviour was the Surrealists’ daily bread, painting blindly was surely the extreme limit, and one by which the Surrealists—after all, obsessed with dreaming with eyes open and seeing with eyes closed—were quite inspired.

Such criteria were hardly Breton’s invention nor beholden to Surrealism alone, but already current at the time and, together with additional ones, institutionalised decades later as the criteria for admittance to the category of art brut or outsider art. Some scholars employ additional criteria for mediumistic art; others deem the possible mediumship of an outsider artist not relevant at all, or even ‘an alibi’. Conversely, for Breton and the Surrealists the very fact that the medium-artist was (considered) a medium was always important. It was in fact the defining factor of the category; ‘regular’ outsider artists such as Cheval were made into mediums as well. Furthermore, I think we can extend the definition because artistic expression was in fact the real touchstone of mediumship. We find proof of this when we consider the mediums who are not mentioned. Let me provide an example. Among all the many psychodynamic sources Breton undoubtedly consulted were also studies by Schrenk-Notzing and Richet. Both these men had experimented with the medium Eva Carrière (known as Eva C.; 1886-?), who became famous for her work with ectoplasm. Yet she is not mentioned even once in any surrealist source, notwithstanding the fact that a few scattered references show that the Surrealists were certainly familiar with the term ‘ectoplasm’, and the fact that Breton visited Richet’s Institute de Métapsychique. The mediums mentioned by Breton without exception produced some sort of artistic work, be it subliminal romances, invented languages, drawings, paintings or sculpture. If not creative in word or image, a medium was not considered worth mentioning, and probably not even considered a medium at all.

Essentially, artistic mediumship functions in Bretonian Surrealism as a constructed anti-category. It is the negative of conventional rationalism, it is irrational and even without conscious thought entirely. The mediumistic are insane, uncivilised, uncultured. Note that their un-status is a good thing; being cultured is considered an obstacle by Breton cum suis, in line with modernist thought generally. Creative expressions of mediums and medium-artists are derived from the ‘subliminal’, which is the same locus the Surrealists intend to obtain their own automatic poems and artworks from. The mad mediums have no trouble turning the ‘messages’ of the subliminal into automatic art. Hence also the title of Breton’s essay, which refers directly to Frederick Myers. The rational Surrealists, on the other hand, are constantly obstructed by their rationality and their culture. This is perhaps why Breton wrote in the same essay that ‘the history of automatic writing in
Surrealism is one of continuous misfortune.¹⁰² Unlike the mediums, the Surrealists did not always receive the message as they should.

Finally, the artistic mediums are seers. They have ‘the most fugitive visions’ that the Surrealists are also after. As discussed earlier, the medium-seer-clairvoyant is one fluid category for Breton and in his Surrealism. To stress that point he included an illustration of a crystal ball in ‘The Automatic Message’, twice, flanking the title. It was Breton’s property, as a matter of fact [fig 32]. Its caption: ‘le boule de cristal des voyantes’.¹⁰³ ‘[T]his ball’, he wrote of it, ‘empty in full sunlight, but which in the dark may reveal all manner of things.’¹⁰⁴ In my opinion, ‘full sunlight’ refers to the harsh light of reason, while ‘the dark’ represents the irrational and heterodox. If there were any doubt whether the automatic message was delivered via ordinary means of perception, the crystal ball is there to disabuse one of such an idea.

Three developments towards surrealist vision
I have sketched the reception of mad and mediumistic art in Surrealism above for a reason: it paralleled and probably proved the impetus for Breton’s development of increasingly more complex ideas concerning internal models, inner vision and the perception of surreality in reality. These were all in turn related to vision and essential to the creation of surrealist vision. Here I will outline this development, which is threefold.

The first stage was the assertion in 1925 that surrealist visual art would refer only to internal models. Because it was so emphatically made, it stressed that literary art was already based upon such models (or should have been) and that in fact the visual ‘poet’ should continue the practice of the literary poet. Whether literature or plastic art, ‘fugitive visions’ should be the inspirational source. Surrealist poetry, after Symbolist poetry, placed great value on the interplay between a visual image seen with the mind’s eye, that is to say with the imagination, and the poem resulting from it. The poet has in-sight, literally, which for one is also why the Surrealists preferably create automatic poetry with eyes closed.¹⁰⁵ The in-sight(s) of the automatic mediums also lead to poetry, and as the celebration of Cheval’s architecture as poetry shows, such ‘poetry’ could indeed be plastic as well. Whether literary or plastic, automatism remained a pure psychic activity undertaken from inside the mind alone, from which vantage point one looked upon inner models and was able to create mental representations. As I have argued above, the fact that mad mediums were creating visual art automatically—or so the Breton Surrealists considered it—implied that the Surrealists could do the same, and that they should follow in their footsteps.

The second development that led to the construction of surrealist vision was that surreality became immanent in reality. In 1928 Breton confirmed that
Everything I [Breton] love, everything I think and feel, predisposes me towards a particular philosophy of immanence according to which surreality would be embodied in reality itself and would be neither superior nor exterior to it.\textsuperscript{106}

If surreality is immanent this means that it can be found (with)in quotidian reality. Breton developed this idea between 1926 and 1928, which is exactly the period of (meeting, writing and publishing) \textit{Nadja}. In fact the whole novel is about the search for, and subsequently the encounter with, the marvellous-within-the-quotidian, the sur-real inherent in the real. While psychic automatism is rooted in the mind, it is employed in the interaction with the world \textit{outside} of one’s mind too. The immanence of surreality implies that a real Surrealist should be able to perceive it in reality; or at least should cultivate the talent for doing so. As I will discuss in the next part of this chapter, one way of achieving this is by once again emulating the mentally ill, now in particular their state of alienation from the real. Such alienation functions primarily by means of the \textit{gaze}. Therefore, this development too called for the Surrealists to develop their faculty of vision, to become a seer.

The need to develop vision to see inner models and the need to see the surreal in the real combined eventually in the Bretonian concept of a certain ‘state of grace’, wherein objective and subjective (visual!) perception would become one. This is the third development, and while the first notion was more or less in place by 1925, and the second developed during the writing of \textit{Nadja}, the notion of the ‘state of grace’ was formed throughout the entire second half of the decade and prompted by both. It found its fullest expression in ‘The Automatic Message’,\textsuperscript{107} and it becomes clear now why the reception of \textit{mediumistic art}, in tandem with \textit{mad art}, was so relevant. Even though ‘The Automatic Message’ is a complex and multi-layered essay, I find that it is united by one overarching goal: to demonstrate that perception and representation can be one, that they are the product of ‘a single original faculty’.\textsuperscript{108} Even though the Surrealists was still trying to attain this state, in which to perceive is also to represent, the automatic medium had already achieved it. The ‘original faculty’ in question is only circumscribed, but I interpret it as the pure unadulterated automatic creative drive exhibited by the mediums, who find the means to express the ‘automatic messages’ of their hidden creative self in drawing and poetry. As these outsider artists (also including children and ‘primitives’) still have unimpeded access to this self, they have access to the ‘state of grace’ too. For them, inner and outer model, perception and representation, coincide perfectly. The most evident form of such representation is the plastic work of art, which is why, I think, Breton put increasingly more emphasis upon the plastic works of mad mediums, at the expense of their literary abilities.

The ‘state of grace’, for all that it carries decidedly religious overtones\textsuperscript{109}, is
secular and located in the mind. Breton ‘maintain[s] that automatism is the only path that leads there.’

Evidently the ‘state of grace’ is related to visual perception, it is associated closely with vision, visionary powers and visionaries. Again, an incentive for the Surrealist to become a seer, and to ‘see’ the surreal: internally, immanently, and from within, or with, or possibly resulting in the (hardly specified) state of grace.

I say one must be a seer

The title of Breton’s ‘A Letter to Seers’ is a direct play upon the essential poetical manifesto by Rimbaud that is colloquially known as the ‘Letters of the Seer’. It deeply impressed the young Surrealists, for whom Rimbaud and Baudelaire were, in this decade at least, the principal Precursors they revered and tried to emulate. Indeed, I think one can even say that Rimbaud’s words were scripture for the Surrealists, and none more so than a core passage from his ‘Letters of the Seer’:

I say one must be a seer, make oneself a seer.
The Poet makes himself a seer by a long, gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses. All forms of love, suffering and madness.

In my view, around 1925 Rimbaud’s commission to become a seer was a task taken up in earnest in Surrealism, prompted by the developments that made it clear that the Surrealist should develop some faculty to make ‘fugitive visions’ possible.

The Rimbaudian view of the poet as a seer is based upon the Romantic conception of poet-seers. In French and German Romanticism poets were considered outsiders, operating (wilfully) on the margins of rationalism because they perceived its limitations and appreciated what had come to be called ‘irrational’ means of knowing the world, such as dreams and intuition. During this time, the early decades of the nineteenth century, some esotericists too were generally considered to be outsiders or positioned themselves as such, just as their world-view was thought to be contrary to rationalism as well. This similar social status and in particular this shared worldview proved to be the ground for a fruitful and comprehensive sharing of ideas between poets and esotericists; or perhaps more properly, an appropriation by the poets of concepts from the discourse of esotericism. Poets and intellectuals drew in particular upon the esoteric works of Boehme, Swedenborg and Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, among others. The esoteric notions they appropriated or otherwise adapted to their own discourse included the following: validation of intuition and imagination above reason, an emphasis upon visionary powers, a preference for the subjective approach, a celebration of the cosmos as living and mysterious, and an appreciation of poetry and analogical language as mystical, transformative and/or revelatory. These
were integrated into the idea of the poet as a seer or voyant.\textsuperscript{116}

As Romanticism’s ‘tail’,\textsuperscript{117} Surrealism in turn was fairly familiar with the Romantic notion of the poète-voyant, although it is important to realise that any esotericism that came with it was only latently present. As I have touched upon before and will explore at length in chapter five, Breton only really fathomed the close associations between French and German Romantic poets and esotericism in the early 1940s, from which point on he would integrate esotericism more explicitly in his movement. In the 1920s, the focus of Bretonian Surrealism was primarily directed towards the Symbolist concept of the seer-poet as proposed by Baudelaire and Rimbaud. Rimbaud declared Baudelaire a seer, a judgment taken over wholesale by the Surrealists, who considered the two of them together the most eminent of the poet-seers.\textsuperscript{118} In fact, as Albert Béguin has demonstrated, the whole concept of the poet-seer, paralleled by the understanding that poetry is a near magical transformative discipline and that the imagination is its main constituent faculty, was really only explicitly formulated by Baudelaire and Rimbaud, as it had been fairly implicit in the ideas of earlier Romantic thinkers.\textsuperscript{119}

In Rimbaud’s view poetry leads to a transformation of the poet personally, and subsequently to a transformation of the world. The poet should become a seer out of Promethean duty, create a new universal language and bring about a new utopian age.\textsuperscript{120} So far nothing new, perhaps. But what is more particular to the Rimbaudian poet-seer, and which would have a far-reaching influence upon the Surrealists, is that all the poet’s powers stem from the mind only, instead of any outside, and possibly supernatural, agency. The Rimbaudian poet-seer is secular, and the source of their visionary powers is the psyche alone.\textsuperscript{121} The poet-seer should hone their mind as the perfect tool, by means of a ‘derangement of the senses’, long and rational (even), through love, suffering and madness. Visions, dreams, imagination and intuition in particular were important, as they had been strongly associated with the irrational since the Enlightenment and therefore highly prized by Rimbaud, as they had been by the Romantics generally before him.

The Surrealists were deeply beholden to the secular and revolutionary interpretation of the seer by Rimbaud, and to honing the mind by means of a long sensual derangement, by means of love and madness in particular.\textsuperscript{122} In 1934 Breton summarised it as follows:

Thus the whole technical effort of Surrealism, from its very beginning up to the present day, has consisted in multiplying the ways to penetrate the deepest layers of the mental. “I say that we must be seers, make ourselves seer”: for us it has only been a question of discovering the means to apply this watchword of Rimbaud’s. In the first rank of those of these means whose effectiveness has been fully proved in the last few years is psychic
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automatism in all its forms….123

Here once again the superiority of mind in Surrealism (‘the mental’) is restated. The key to Surrealism is, and will remain, psychic automatism. Surrealist seership has therefore nothing to do with biological or spiritual factors, and everything to do with psychology. Secondly, Breton’s explicit addition ‘in all its forms’ implies, I think, that visual automatic techniques were by this point a canonised part of psychic automatism too. Moreover, by referring to the ‘technical effort of Surrealism’, Breton stresses that Surrealism is still an experimental research project, singularly aimed at ‘penetrating the deepest layers of the mental’ by any means at their disposal. I find becoming a seer and developing surrealist vision to be a continuation of the surrealist agenda that was initially developed during the time of slumbers and immediately after. The surrealist voyants do not wait to be overcome by visions, as happens to the mediums and ‘madmen’; they rather make themselves seers. They do this actively, experimentally, and by exploring the mind. We might even go so far as to say that the Surrealist-seer does not even ‘have visions’ as such, but has attained vision. This is a manner of perceiving the world, real as well as surreal, from the vantage point of the deepest self. Therefore, if the Surrealist wanted to become a seer, this meant descending into oneself and engaging the Other.124 Again, this was based on Rimbaudian scripture, as he had said:

I is an other.125

Mediums and the mentally ill were already othered by their mental state. They were automatically automatic, so to speak. Nadja the madwoman did not need to become a seer, she already was one. Not so for the Surrealists, however, who would have to work at developing their surrealist vision and so become surrealist poet-seers. Similarly, earlier they had had to work at, that is to say experimented at length with, making themselves talentless ‘recording instruments’, or speaking mediums, during the sleeping sessions.

The question is, how does seership manifest itself in Surrealism? What does it consist of? What is surrealist vision? Unfortunately, I cannot really answer that exactly. Neither Breton nor Ernst—who for instance both considered themselves seers at a certain point—nor any other Surrealist explained the exact details of their becoming a seer. Perhaps it is inexpressible. Scholarship as a rule does not really proceed beyond stating that the Surrealists adhered to Rimbaud’s aphorisms that he is another and that one should make oneself a seer.126 However, that the Surrealists took the assignment of making oneself a seer very seriously is beyond doubt. Furthermore, this chapter is based on my assessment that they did not just want to become seers, but that they in fact developed (a concept of) surrealist vision, which
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combines inner models, visionary qualities, and perception of the surreal in the real. And without going into the exact and unutterable details of surrealist seer-ship, I think I can still approach the question of what surrealist vision is by a roundabout way. The surrealist obsession with it led to a proliferation of the motif of vision in surrealist literature and art. Sight, vision and eyes are a leitmotif in Breton’s _Nadja_, but feature just as prominently in many other surrealist art works, visual as well as literary. The Surrealists were constantly reflecting upon the concept of vision as such and upon their own particular manner of seeing well, not only in the context of the inner model, but also of immanent surreality. Therefore, to approach the notion of surrealist vision, I will now turn to a discussion of this motif in the arts.
II. To make yourself a seer, or psychic voyeurism

Introduction

How to become a seer? Just as this is not easily done—or so I assume—it is not easily described either. As I have said above, I will try to approach the issue by looking at the various forms of vision promoted in Surrealism. I will first trace Breton’s use of vision as a leitmotiv in his novel Nadja. Note that here I mean vision in a general sense, i.e. encompassing watching, gazing and looking, etcetera, as well as sight’s agent, the eye. This close reading will make clear that he distinguished between two types of vision: the look that observes, or ‘objective’ and rational vision on the one hand, and the vision of Nadja, which is subjective, hallucinatory and visionary, on the other. First of all, the tension between these two types of vision serves to highlight the marvelousness of ‘visionary vision’ against the foil of ‘ordinary vision’. Secondly, the seemingly neutral and documentary character of ordinary vision lends extra credibility to the veracity of hallucinatory vision. Thirdly, the tension itself matters, because it is the contradiction between things that is one of the essential elements of Surrealism itself.

I will also discuss the same leitmotiv in surrealist art, focusing foremost on two famous surrealist films, but also on other forms of visual art, including photography, painting and mixed media works. I will show that one element of surrealist vision is that very tension created in contradictions: seeing with eyes closed, dreaming with eyes open, etc. Surrealist vision, as I will argue, is the radical other of normal vision. It is constructed as a contradiction. Another avenue is by emphasising vision to such an absurd degree—by focusing only upon one eye to the exclusion of everything else, for instance—that it leads to an alienation of vision; vision becomes something strange and uncanny. This may subsequently lead to reflection upon the faculty of sight, which in turn paves the way again for alteration of vision. Obviously the most radical alteration of vision is blinding, or more mildly, covering the eyes; and I will also trace this motif in surrealist art. Essentially, the more radically one’s normal eyes are subverted, the more one’s other eyes are opened.

There is a gender dimension to the issue of sight and vision too, which I think is very relevant to my discussion of surrealist seership. While man sees, it is woman who is seen. She acts as an instigator for the Surrealist’s development of his seership skills. At the same time, woman also sees; she is a clairvoyant by virtue of her femininity alone. Women, as only partly realised beings, are much closer to their unconscious than men, and therefore they are seers almost by default. Note, though, that this means that the female clairvoyant medium can be surrealistic, but never a Surrealist, as the latter implies active, wilful, conscious and rational agency. Obviously Nadja illustrates this point, since she is a passive recipient of visions and strange events. Finally, we arrive at the difference between the Surrealist-seer
and the mad medium, who happens to also be a seer: the former displays active creation. After all, the Surrealists deranges his senses rationally. Moreover, Breton referred to the second half of the 1920s as ‘the period of reason’, testifying to the fact that the Surrealists took a rational approach to the process of becoming a seer. As I will show by the end of this chapter, it is this active and reasonable element that is essential to surrealist seership, and it is furthermore aligned with alchemy. Where the poet practices alchemy of the word, the plastic artist practices alchemy of the image. Vision, as will become clear, is an important part of the surrealist alchemical process of transformation. Incidentally, this has hardly anything to do with laboratory or spiritual alchemy; again it results first and foremost from, again, ‘a long and reasonable derangement of the senses’, preferably of course by means of love and madness.

Seeing Nadja

Nadja is a complex novel and the author has employed a number of motifs, but the one I consider the leitmotif for both characters, Nadja and André, is vision. By the time Breton was writing it, from 1926 to 1927, he was so obsessed with vision that it defined his whole novel, which supports my argument that the introduction of surrealist painting forced him to investigate seership in general and develop a concept of uniquely surrealist vision in particular. Eyes, seeing, visions, and visual signs abound in Nadja, both in visual images and in the text. Vision even forms a structural element of it.

The first meeting of André and Nadja, cited in the introduction to this chapter, is framed in a description of reciprocal vision, him seeing her and she watching him. It is followed by a description of the agent of sight, the eye, and of her arresting eyes in particular (even their lids, rims and makeup). Breton included a photomontage by Man Ray of Nadja’s eyes in the novel’s extended edition of 1964 [plate XI]. This photomontage is the only visual image of Nadja in the entire novel, and for a long time it was the only one available of her at all. It testifies to the fact that her eyes were the main focus of his bodily interest in her. I can speculate that this was no surprise to the real Nadja, Léona Delcourt, as darkly outlined eyes are her only facial feature in a Self-portrait she drew for Breton [fig 26]. Another of her drawings, The lover’s flower, consists of two hearts and four staring eyes [fig 27]—perhaps those two sets of eyes that watched each other across the street during their first meeting.

From the outset, the author associates Nadja not only with (her) eyes but with vision itself, writing not only that she has ‘visions’—one of her automatic drawings was ‘made after a vision’, he states—but actually describing them. As already noted, Nadja ‘sees’ his house, his wife and her pets. On another occasion, she sees a crowd of dead people. Another vision is of a flaming hand floating above the
Seine; later in the book that hand turns out to be a commercial sign. A vision based upon a visual sign; references to the motif abounded to an almost excessive degree. The author himself confesses to an obsession with another commercial visual sign, this one for charcoal, which he suddenly started seeing in numerous locations [plate XII]. The presence of these commercial signs in the book is not accidental: they are not only visual objects, but also important visual markers in the urban landscape of the city that serves as a background to the story. Being signifiers themselves they furthermore signify the act of seeing, of receiving information via the eyes.

Vision is furthermore an essential part of the novel’s structural form, in two ways. Firstly, the author’s style is dispassionate and even clinically objective; many passages read like a litany of observation, making it clear why the novel is often considered something of a documentary novel. For instance, the author observes the city of Paris through which Nadja and André wander, and the many descriptions of specific Parisian places, squares, or statues serve not only to locate the story but also to paint a picture of the city itself, as if the novel were also a guidebook. The description is so dense that Paris could possibly be considered a third character in the story. The author also observes himself, or at least his alter-ego André, by describing not only his actions, but his opinions, sentiments and thoughts too. This is indicated by the opening question ‘Who am I?’ Most of all, the novel observes her, Nadja. Breton gives an account of her actions and statements in a detached and clinical tone, as if writing a medical case study.

The novel’s appearance of a fact-based observational report is reinforced by the presence of a number of black-and-white photographs. These are the second notable aspect of the novel’s form. Taken mainly by surrealist photographer Jacques-André Boiffard, they document the Parisian places described in the book, such as the square with the small establishment where Breton and Nadja have dinner, the Sphinx Hotel on the Boulevard Magenta where Nadja once stayed, or the wood-coal sign [fig 33, plate XII]. Already by their mere presence as visual objects embedded in a discourse full of prominent visual signs, the photographs reinforce the reader’s association with vision. Furthermore, because photography pretends to objectivity, the photographs act as visual evidence of the text and underline the idea that Nadja presents a documentary or neutral image of everyday reality and factual occurrences. They represent, let’s say, ordinary vision.

Because of that, some critics have called the photographs merely ‘banal’. However, I think this rather misses the point; it is precisely because of that apparently banal appearance that they subvert reality, something Walter Benjamin already noticed in his discussion of the novel (1929):
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[in Nadja] photography intervenes in a very strange way. It ... draws off the banal obviousness of [the] ancient architecture to inject it with the most pristine intensity towards the events described...\(^{145}\)

The photographs ‘intervene strangely’ by depicting reality while alienating it at the same time, as other contemporary reviewers had noted too.\(^{146}\) By representing places from the narrative, and people too, they add ‘pristine intensity’ to the narrated events through repetition. Yet they are only pseudo-documents, constructions of a reality that perhaps never was, whereby they infuse locations and things with an uncanny atmosphere even more effectively. I detail this role of the photographs because the narrative operates in exactly the same way. The reader is familiarised with the real, by description and image, only to be estranged from it, for instance by the author’s style or by the strangeness of his account.

[IMAGE COPYRIGHT PROTECTED]
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As I have said earlier, the novel is essentially about a quest for, and the subsequent encounter with, the surreal. That Breton considered it successful is supported by the fact that in 1928, that is the year *Nadja* was published, he confirmed that surreality is immanent in reality. He is the novel’s observant watcher, who writes objectively of his meeting with a marvellous person who offers him the possibility of discovering the surreal. The constructed clinical objectivity of his tone adds extra weight to the uncommon occurrences; if they are scientifically observed (as he pretends), one assumes they must be real. One can hardly deny the surreal in the real any longer, and the more he stresses how odd the real is, the more one can approach the surreal. This is in fact known as ‘alienation of the real’, which allows for familiarisation with the surreal. Alienation is a method of interaction with, in this case, the world, and in my view it is indicative of the *rapport* that developed between the Surrealists and the world in the later 1920s. It came to full fruition in the 1930s, as will be discussed in the next chapter, but the very insistence upon the immanence of surreality in reality paved the way for a dynamic relation with reality outside of one’s mind that was operated from within the mind. Vision, as other scholars have already contended, is crucial to this rapport, as the act of seeing is the foremost means by which the real, specifically the surreal-in-the-real, is located and perceived.

*Alienating the real*

*Nadja* is ‘virtually … a manual for achieving the surrealist vision of inspired alienation’, according to psychiatrist Louis Sass. ‘Inspired alienation’ is a state of estrangement from the normal. The alienation itself is usually considered a state of mental illness, but when it is cultivated by artists for its creative potential it becomes ‘inspired’. As it is a state of mind, the Surrealists could remain true to the definition of Surrealism as psychic automatism, even while looking outside of themselves, because the alienation with which reality is perceived remains a psychic condition. It is this technique of alienation that allowed the surreal to move from an existence in the mind alone to becoming immanent in reality too. After the enclosed darkened rooms of the sleeping sessions, after the intimate study-room experiments with automatic writing, by 1927 ‘the marvellous no longer manifest[ed] itself only within the mind of the surrealist lost in automatism in his study’; Breton and his Surrealists were taking to the streets en masse to find the marvellous there. The incursion of the sur-real or supra-normal into the real world was becoming an ‘objective, observable fact’, hence Breton’s observational tone in *Nadja*.

The Surrealists were not the first to employ alienation of the real as a creative technique. Romantic and subsequently modernist artists and intellectuals had experimented with this state for various reasons—as inspirational experience, as artistic motif, or for artistic validation—that all boil down to rebellion against
traditional, that is to say primarily rational and sane, norms of perceiving the world. Importantly enough, alienation of the real operates by means of the gaze, a stare in particular, and is therefore in effect a visionary faculty. The longer one stares at something, the stranger it becomes. Suddenly the experienced world is imbued with an enigmatic atmosphere. The real is stripped of ‘its usual meanings and ‘sense of coherence’, but rather than turning simply into something abnormal, the normal becomes supra-normal, uncanny, frightening, and indescribably mysterious: ‘unreal and extra-real at the same time’.\footnote{154}

In Surrealism, alienation of the normal was certainly associated with artistic creativity, but foremost with perception of the surreal. The tension that Breton created in Nadja between the quotidian and the odd is essential to it: ‘[t]he marvellous is the eruption of contradiction within the real’,\footnote{155} Louis Aragon pointed out, because ‘[r]eality is the apparent absence of contradiction.’ He employed a technique of alienation similar to Breton’s in his novel Paris Peasant (1926). It is a detailed description of parts of Paris that were soon to be destroyed, mainly the passages. As an account of the marvellous in the quotidian, it focuses upon the incursion of the past into the present (the nineteenth-century passages) even as the future (destruction) is about to arrive, which lends the passages an extra-temporal quality.\footnote{156} The extra-reality of historical landmarks is probably why the Surrealists haunted the Parisian Tour St. Jacques, for instance, as they did so many other historical structures [fig 34]. After all, the Tour was (and is) a gothic relic of times long gone by, oddly placed in an empty square that disconnects it from any surroundings, symbolising things that have become meaningless in the present, and associated furthermore with all manner of mythical figures, such as the legendary alchemist Nicolas Flamel. It is not only a geographical landmark, but a chronological one too, an afterlife of a grand and possibly invented past.\footnote{157} While the—possibly nostalgic—fascination with the past is something one finds in Romanticism too, the emphasis upon the uncanny effect that sites of the past can have on an observer is distinctly surrealist and something Breton pointed out on numerous occasions.\footnote{158} The majority of uncanny moments in his writings occur near Saint James’ Tower.\footnote{159}

The visual equivalent of surrealist alienated reality can be found in early works by Giorgio de Chirico, painted in the style called \textit{pittura metafysica}.\footnote{160} His paintings depict strange, uncomfortable and uncanny almost-but-not-quite-realities, empty of action while appearing to be full of meaning. The Surrealists were very impressed by his paintings, and until his fall from grace in 1928, they celebrated de Chirico as a living Great Precursor, as a seer and a painter of surreality. Breton owned \textit{The child’s brain} and \textit{The enigma of the day} (1914), and placed such superlative value on them that Surrealists were influenced for generations to come [fig 35, 36].\footnote{161}
Nadja, on the other hand, represents extra-ordinary vision. She has ‘visions’ and ‘hallucinations’, seems to ‘see’ things (and crowds) that he does not, and perhaps even cannot. Each of the two characters functions as the foil against which the other(s) mode of vision) stands out. The watcher’s eyes do not see as the visionary’s eyes do, and it is exactly that difference that is important.

As the observer, André does not enter into a state of alienation from reality himself. On the contrary, Breton has employed Nadja for that. She, the madwoman, is alienated. He is continuously amazed, and urges her on, but note that he does so for his sake rather than hers; she sees the surreal not for herself but for him. She is his visionary. Even though he would experiment personally with states of mental illness in 1929, leading to The Immaculate Conception (1930) co-authored with Éluard, in 1927 Breton was still experimenting with someone else rather than himself.

Nadja’s alienation is observed by André, and described by Breton in a ‘manual’ that allows us, the readers, to experience something of alienation of reality too, just as he could through the writing of it. A comparison with the sleeping sessions is unavoidable: there too Breton positioned himself as the rational observer who could not cross a certain line but faithfully observed and carefully noted down everything concerning the one who could, Desnos. He suggests this comparison himself in Nadja, describing Desnos as an oracular visionary and including Ray’s photograph of him entranced [plate VIII]. In a similar vein, he admired de Chirico’s alienated vision as captured in his paintings, without having to go through the (painful) experience of becoming alienated himself. Obviously the same goes for the mad mediums the Surrealists were supposed to emulate; such emulation comes without the negative experience of being (judged) mentally unstable and institutionalised.

Being Breton’s visionary came at a price. Desnos became more or less addicted to the sleeping trances, until Breton forcibly ended them. When de Chirico abandoned his painting of alienated surreality and opted for a classical style, he was ruthlessly ousted from the surrealist group. Nadja/Delcourt, as we know, was committed to an insane asylum. She would never be released.

Two-thirds of the way through the novel, André wonders why he continues his affair with this woman, answering himself:

> When I am with her, I am nearer things which are near her.

Those ‘things’, it is implied, are surreality. As a madwoman, Nadja is in a constant state of automatism, whereby she is not only able to see surrealistically, but also to manifests surreality, thereby in turn making it easier for Breton to perceive. What’s marvellous and extra-ordinary for him, is normal for her—because she is mad and a clairvoyant too she is (thought to be) closer to that ‘state of grace’ where subjective and objective are one. Consequently she cannot see the surreal for
herself because she is surreal, or nearly so. She could never be a Surrealist, because that demands sanity of mind: it is only by being aware of the contradictions in reality that one can know the surreal in the real. Such awareness demands a form of vision that is similar to, but not exactly the same as, that of the ‘mediums and madmen’.

**Surrealist vision: blind swimmers**

We are coming closer to what surrealist vision might be. Awareness or perception, even vision, of the paradoxical nature of sur/reality is the key to it. In Surrealism, paradoxical vision, that is vision constructed out of contradictions, primarily took the form of what I would term ‘subverted vision’. The eye, or the sense of sight, is subverted in one sense or another, and such subversion of ordinary sight, I argue, paves the way for extra-ordinary vision. Below I will provide a number of examples of surrealist art works that are centred around subverted vision. They will serve as examples of the several different forms of subverted vision that are part of surrealist vision generally. They also show that Breton was certainly not alone in his concern with surrealist vision and that his fellow Surrealists felt the same need to become seers. As Ernst explains:

> A blind swimmer, I made myself a seer. I saw. And I found myself, to my surprise, in love with what I was seeing, wanting to be identified with it.168

As Ernst’s use of the construction blind/seer shows, it was primarily through such contradictions that surrealist seership operated. Essentially, this was nothing new; seeing subversively in this way (contradictorily) was already part of early Surrealism, in its intuitive period. As I have detailed, the Surrealist dreams with eyes open. Similarly, when the eyes are closed to the outside world, as happened during the sleeping sessions, they are opened to the world within.169 That this results in enhanced creativity was illustrated by Nougé in *The harvests of sleep* [plate X]. Such contradictory vision is inherited from Romanticism, where closing the eyes already signified turning the gaze inwards, shutting out the material world and looking upon an inner landscape of dreams or the imagination.170 Following the Great Precursors’ examples the Surrealists would look ‘at the outside world through cloudy eyes’—because such cloudiness of eye results in ‘clairvoyance’.171 Besides closing or clouding, other variations include covering the eyes, as in de Chirico’s *The child’s brain* [fig 35]. The Surrealists created a whole series of self-portraits with closed eyes, to stress that they wanted to become seers, perhaps to indicate that they had become seers, or possibly a bit of both. These were combined into a single collage, appropriately known as *Les yeux fermés*, published in *LRS* 12 (1929) [plate XIII].172 This photomontage was partly a response to an earlier one, *Woman is the being…* from 1924 [plate XIV], in which the (male) Surrealists have their eyes
open. The central woman in it is the anarchist Germaine Berton (1902-1942), a surrealist heroine celebrated for her violent actions, which the Surrealists believed were motivated by love and desire.\textsuperscript{173} I construct surrealist vision as the radical other of ordinary vision; therefore, the fact that the Surrealists are portrayed here with eyes \textit{open} signifies that they are \textit{dreaming}. This is supported by the quotation from Baudelaire below Berton’s portrait that functions as the montage’s title:

\textbf{Woman is the being who casts most darkness or most light in our \textit{dreams}.}\textsuperscript{174}

Dreaming with eyes open and seeing with eyes closed both allow one to look upon an internal model.\textsuperscript{175} However, another technique was required to
look upon immanent surreality, which, as I have argued above, had become one of the main surrealist concerns in the second half of the 1920s. Hence, besides the technique of contradictory open/closed vision, further means of subverting the eyes were necessary.

One way to perceive the surreal within the real is by means of alienation from reality by means of the staring gaze, as I have discussed. For the Surrealists such alienation was generated and experienced only temporarily. When applied as a technique of subversion of the eye, I would classify it as forced reflection upon the act of vision. Emphasising sight or vision to an absurd extent, for instance, is one means of achieving it, by making the eye the sole focus of an art work. Examples are Ray’s (rather sad) Eye (1930) [fig 37], and La femme visible (1925) by Ray and Ernst, which is very reminiscent of Ray’s photomontage of Nadja’s eyes [fig 38]. In this art work, however, the eyes are those of Gala Éluard, Ernst’s lover at the time. Another option is to remove the eye from the face entirely, and place it in an incongruous environment, as in the Object to be destroyed by Ray, later called Indestructible object (1922, remade 1933) [fig 39]. Such emphasising of the eye ad absurdum confronts one with the actual act of seeing, and as we observe an eye apparently observing us in turn, it may lead to alienation and certainly engenders a stare. Moreover, or perhaps as a result of that, it provokes reflection upon the faculty of sight and contemplation of alternative vision. Hence reflection upon the sense and the activity of sight is part of this mode of subverting the eye as well. It is for instance a prominent theme in Ray’s 1926 film Emak Bakia.176

Emak Bakia is structured around essential surrealist principles such as irrationalism, the dream, automatism, and the absence of a logical narrative associated with those elements; and, last but not least, vision.177 The film’s closing scene shows a woman’s face with garishly painted though curiously blank eyes. Only when she opens her real eyes does the audience see that they were painted on her eyelids [fig 40, 41].178 This scene emphasises vision as a motif, expresses the idea of seeing with eyes closed, and plays a joke on us, the spectators. Such reflection upon vision is even more prominently present in the film’s opening shot, which shows the artist filming himself in a mirror [fig 42]. It addresses the double vision inherent in cinema.179 The audience not only sees what the director sees, but moreover what the director wants it to see, and by showing the camera and himself like that, Ray brings home that the audience’s vision is subject to his.180 In addition, as if viewers were not confronted with their own act of viewing enough, a shot of an eye is superimposed upon the camera, looking them directly in, well, the eye.181 This shot is very similar to the opening of Nadja: just as André sees Nadja and sees her watching him, we look at the filmmaker filming, while his eye stares right back at us. To see is also to be seen, therefore—the act is inherently reflexive.182 It also entails a risk: as Nietzsche had famously warned, when you gaze too long into the
abyss, the abyss might also gaze into you. In desiring to look upon the Other, one may become othered oneself.

The third means of subversion of the eye (or sight) is the most radical: blinding or otherwise destroying the eye. Since blinding is the ultimate subversion of the eye, blindness is the ultimate sign of the seer. Obviously this is no uniquely surrealist concept but a historically widespread western cultural trope going back at least to such illustrious figures as Homer, Tiresias and Oedipus. This motif, which is the most prevalent of the eye’s subversions in Surrealism, is not necessarily sadistic; rather it is the fullest expression of altering vision and therefore a creative act. The more radically the mundane eye is subverted, the more visionary the mind’s eye becomes. Radical alteration of vision by way of destruction lies at the heart of the most famous cinematic surrealist scene. Only a minute into Un chien Andalou (1929), by Spanish Surrealists Louis Buñuel and Salvador Dali, we see a close-up of the face of young woman, whose eye—it appears—is slit with a razor [fig 43, 44]. This shot’s fame is certainly connected to the deep human (Freudian, even) fear of blinding, which the two filmmakers obviously exploited. The aggressive act of cutting the eye is furthermore performed by Buñuel himself, who destroys the spectators’ eye symbolically and thereby invites them to look at the rest of his film with other eyes. As Un chien Andalou was partly based on a dream Buñuel had had and partly upon free association by him and Dali, automatism and expressions of the unconscious contributed significantly to it, making the film eminently suited to being viewed with the mind’s eye.

Whereas blinding is shown as an act in Un chien Andalou, it can be presented as a fait accompli as well, as in Brauner’s Self-portrait with plucked eye [plate III]. Often it is represented symbolically, as in Ernst’s Oedipus Rex (1922) [fig 16]. The pierced walnut, held by giant, similarly pierced fingers, illustrates the blinding of Oedipus, and also refers to blinding that leads to revelation in general. Inner vision is not necessarily bound by such ‘normal’ constraints as the one-directional flow of time, as de Chirico seems to hint at by covering Apollo’s eyes with blackened (sun-) glasses in the painting entitled The premonitions of Apollo (1914) [fig 45]. Thus the blind are also seers in the sense of ‘clairvoyant’; in fact, just as the Surrealists were rather loose in their use of terms such as mediums, mad and clairvoyant, they similarly conflate seers, clairvoyants and visionaries. As we are dealing with a group of people with a very highly developed awareness of language, it is out of the question that they were simply confused or mistaken. On the contrary, I find it an obvious indication that based upon that very language they equated these terms; they took the terms literally (a seer sees, a clairvoyant sees), unhindered by spiritual or religious contexts in which such terms might be current.
Plate XIII.

[IMAGE COPYRIGHT PROTECTED]
Plate XV.
In conclusion I would say that the Surrealists considered reflection upon and subversion of the eye an important step towards becoming a seer, which explains the many instances of it in surrealist art. Exclusion, preferably violent, of visible reality leads to the revelation of another reality. This other reality is surreality, which may be internal but also an uncanny external reality. In fact, the Surrealist’s eyes are therefore closed and opened at the same time, seeing internally and externally, hence the returning emphasis upon contradictions and the constant tension between one way of seeing (for instance observatory, in the case of André) and another way (hallucinatory, in the case of Nadja). The true Surrealist ideally has double vision, as illustrated by Masson in the Janus-portrait he drew of Breton in 1941 [plate I].

The drawing also shows us what’s on Breton’s mind: woman.

Schaulust: psychic voyeurism, or woman as seen

I have argued above that in surrealist art and literature destruction of the eye should not necessarily be considered a sadistic but rather a creative act. However, there is a context in which sadism does play an important role, namely that of love/eros. Violence is an entire surrealist theme in itself, sometimes employed (metaphorically, though) in a political context, sometimes in a sexual context. In the latter case it is almost without exception directed towards the female body, and the Surrealists were avid students of the novels of the (in)famous marquis de Sade. The cut-out eye in Ray’s Object to be destroyed, for instance, was the eye of photographer Lee Miller (1907-1977), a lover and muse who had left Ray [fig 39]. By inviting the object’s destruction, Ray symbolically enacted revenge upon her. In this sense it is a sadist work, although, as Ray confronts himself with his ex-lover’s continuously watching eye (continuously ticking, too), there is certainly a masochist side to it as well. In the end Miller’s eye gained symbolic victory when Ray changed the work’s title to Indestructible object. As with the scenes in Emak Bakia, Ray is referring to reciprocity of vision: to see is to be seen as well. Here I would like to explore this notion further, as I think it provides insight into why the mad seers were thought to be similar to, but not the same as, the surrealist seers. In my opinion, surrealist vision carries strong and important erotic connotations. Almost any surrealist gaze was essentially an erotic, desirous, gaze; they craved sight as they desired to become a seer. As I will argue, gender plays an important role in surrealist vision, as it is foremost woman who is looked upon (as Bretonian Surrealism is extremely heteronormative). She is seen.

I will start with the most blatant sexual symbolism. The eye is an old symbol for the female genitalia, something which Surrealist and doctor Pierre Mabille pointed out in a 1938 article entitled ‘The Eye of the Painter’. Victor Brauner, whom the article is about, had already unequivocally drawn the eye as a woman’s
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sex in 1927 [fig 46]. Such symbolism paves the way for the eye to become a symbol for, or recipient of, erotic violence. Georges Bataille continued this tradition when he entitled his 1928 novel of bizarre sexual perversions Story of the Eye. Such sexually explicit material was certainly produced by the Bretonian group as well, but was generally circulated among insiders only.

Moving from blatant to more veiled symbolism, there is, besides a creative, also a sexual connotation to closing or covering (such as blindfolding) the eye(s): opening oneself to inner erotic desires. This is why the motif of covered eyes recurs so frequently in the works of Dali in particular. The lugubrious game (1929), for example—the painting that gained Dali admission to the Bretonian group—is filled with sexual themes and motifs, including desire, (fear of) castration, onanism, fellatio and obsession with female genitals [fig 47]. Although a scatological reference is the most controversial element of this painting, the sexual references come in a good second. The Dali-head in the middle has its eyes closed, the statue of a man on the left-hand side—itself a reference to de Chirico’s The enigma of the day [fig 36]—covers its eyes, and the figure embracing the man with soiled pants on the right-hand side covers his eyes as well. With so many sexual desires being combined in one painting and onanism moreover offered as the solution to it all (as the great hand alludes to), it is no surprise that three out of the four figures have their eyes covered or closed.

Even as eyes may be sexually symbolic, the actual act of seeing can be eroticised too. This eroticism of sight is captured in Freud’s term ‘Schaulust’: the (lustful) pleasure in seeing and in being seen (i.e., both voyeurism and exhibitionism); compare for instance Štyrský’s untitled photomontage from 1933 [fig 48]. The (male) Surrealist is not only a voyant but also a voyeur, and his desire to look upon woman is very similar to his desires to look upon an inner world and upon immanent surreality. Man sees. Woman is seen. In the context of surrealist vision, it is my argument that woman performs two distinctive and particular roles. The first is to be seen. Masson’s portrait of Breton is telling: the surrealist seer closes his eyes to focus on an internal model, and as desire is the Surrealist’s driving inner force as per Freud, that inner model may well be the female body, or Woman generally. The photomontage Les yeux fermés, already mentioned, underlines my point [plate XIII]. The visionary male Surrealists are arranged around Magritte’s painting Je ne vois pas la [femme] cachée dans le fôret, also known as La femme cachée (1929) [plate XV]. There are many interpretations of this work, ranging from it showing woman as the object of surrealist desire, to woman incarnated as myth, to woman as the (non-existent) woman according to psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981). As I see it, this photomontage represents how desire acts as the mechanism by which surrealist vision operates. Woman is not seen, she is hidden, wherefore she is evidently perceived with the inner eyes of the Surrealists, which are full of
The photomontage in which the Surrealists have their eyes open, *Woman is the being*... further supports my line of argument, as it can be interpreted in the same way [plate XIV]. To start with, woman is posited as a dream-being, one consequently seen with inner eyes. What’s more, Baudelaire’s words that woman casts the most light or shadow are from his *Artificial Paradises* (1860), a book on narcotics. Woman, as Baudelaire explained as interpreted by Jonathan Eburne, ‘is a natural source of altered consciousness’. The Surrealists, always enthusiastic about experiments with consciousness and devoted to ‘deranging their senses’ anyway, preferably by means of love, clearly would make no bones about letting their consciousness be altered by woman. This is certainly true of Breton. Breton abhorred artificial drugs, and why would one need such substances if a ‘natural’ source, woman, was always at hand, and moreover in dreams too? Thus the lust for the hidden creative self is facilitated by, sometimes even sublimed into, the lust for woman.

One last example: Aragon and Breton’s celebration of hysteria. Hysteria, a feminine madness par excellence, is posited as a poetical state, an example of bodily automatic poetry. And by whom is it embodied? Augustine: a woman, young, attractive, dressed in night-clothes, no less, and performing her hysteria in erotically suggestive poses [fig 15]. The Surrealists desired the (creative) authenticity they thought the mad possessed. It is hardly surprising that they thought so positively about madness, when they cast their Schaulustig eye upon such specimens of it. It is obvious now why Breton, in his search for surreality and for vision, cast his eyes upon another mad (and young and beautiful) woman: Nadja. The clairvoyants in their back rooms are just as desirable, and as the photograph of Mme Sacco attests [fig 17], hardly ‘dowagers’, let alone ‘down-at-heel majors’.

Surrealism itself, since it is essentially a state of mind, can also act on the mind like a drug, or so Breton asserts in a passage in the first *Manifesto*, which also includes a reference to Baudelaire:

Like drugs, it [Surrealism] creates a certain need and can push man to frightful revolts. It also is, if you like, an artificial paradise, and the taste one has for it derives from Baudelaire’s criticism for the same reason as the others.

Surrealism is a mental state and it is not always a pleasant one. Similarly, the male Surrealist’s addiction to woman can be characterised by a tension between need, revolt and paradise. Breton’s addiction to Surrealism led him to an addiction to Nadja. The affair provided him with marvellous experiences and a fresh look at quotidian places and things. By seeing Nadja, Breton also saw surreality. Even
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though his gaze upon her was not motivated by simple erotic desire for her body, it was nevertheless a gaze of *Schaulust*, of desire for the surreal and marvellous.\(^{206}\) He hardly desired her (physically); he longed for those ‘things’ that were near her and for her experience of the surreal. Breton (and by extension the other Surrealists), I argue, should be considered voyeurs of the inner model: *psychic voyeurs*. Whether Nadja is representative of Breton’s unconscious or the collective unconscious, of automatism, the marvellous, the Other or his Other—which are all interpretations one can find in scholarly studies of *Nadja*—becomes irrelevant. The essential lust is for any and all things surreal, whereby the surrealist man desires to look upon this mad woman and upon her world as well. Conley invokes Simone de Beauvoir’s statement that ‘woman is poetry itself, for men; it is not said whether she is poetry for herself’ to explain the view that by using woman as an inspirational point of departure, the male Surrealist enters more easily into the automatic state.\(^{207}\) This operates on the assumption that woman is not fully realised, that she is closer to the unconscious than man is.\(^{208}\) Possibly woman does not even have an unconscious, but simply is it. Woman, according to critical scholar Luce Irigaray (1932), ‘has no unconscious except the one man gives her.’\(^{209}\) In this way, lust for automatism, for the unconscious, for the hidden creative self, for his Other, and for woman, are all sublimated into one. After all, as Aragon had written,

> love [often a euphemism for desire in Surrealism] is a state of confusion between the real and the marvellous.

> In this state, the contradictions of being seem really essential to being.\(^{210}\)

And contradictions, as we have seen, are an intrinsic part of surrealist vision. It is in the confusion of real with surreal that surrealist love and vision meet.

Also relevant here is Breton’s photomontage self-portrait *L’écriture automatique* (1938) [fig 49]. Breton has placed himself standing at a table with—not coincidentally—an optical instrument, namely a microscope. He is the seer, obviously. Behind him, behind bars, we see a woman. She might be Nadja, who did end up behind the bars of the mental institution. It might also be woman in general, or his Other; because, as the title alleges, what we see here is a portrait of Breton in an automatic state, that is to say: taking messages from his unconscious.\(^{211}\)

*Psychic voyance, or woman the seer*

Nadja is not only seen, she also sees. If woman’s first role in Surrealism is to be seen, her second role, I argue, is to be the seer. Once again, the photomontage *Les yeux fermés* serves to illustrate this point [plate XIII]: the surrealist men have their eyes closed because they do not need to see; they have woman to do that for them. To be seen is also to become a seer. The montages of Nadja’s eyes and Gala Éluard’s
eyes—the last even entitled *The visible woman!*—typify woman from the surrealist perspective: her most important feature is her eyes [plate XI; fig 38]. If we further note that the eye also represent the feminine sex [fig 47], woman’s objectification as seen/seer is complete.\(^{212}\)

In Surrealism, men and women both are called seers and clairvoyants. Yet while men can be Surrealists, women hardly ever are; rather they are, like Nadja, surrealist. While the male Surrealist aspires to be *like* the medium, the associate of Surrealism, he never truly is; he rather remains a Surrealist. Woman, on the other hand, is almost automatically a medium, if only by virtue of being a woman. As others have shown, woman is identified in Surrealism with the irrational, the unconscious, the automatic; in short, the Other.\(^{213}\) Thus while the surrealist man has to actively make himself into a seer, woman, *any* woman, is already potentially a clairvoyant medium. Along similar lines, any woman is (and so all women are) mysterious and marvellous, all are sorceresses. This obviously facilitated Breton’s identification of Nadja as a witch years after the fact, just as he would identify other women Surrealists as witches.\(^{214}\) While all women are automatic, some are more so than others, such as hysterics, madwomen, and mediums. In Surrealism’s semi-psychiatric opinion—which was informed by doctors such as Charcot, Janet, Flournoy and Freud, most of whose therapeutic practice and scientific study was carried out with and upon women—clairvoyants, mediums and madwomen are all of a kind: more or less delusional women automatically expressing their creative unconscious while in an altered state. The automatism of the male Surrealist is ‘psychic’ and demands wilful mental action, that of woman is pathological and proceeds from her very nature. She cannot help but confuse the real and the marvellous all the time.

Nadja serves as a good example of the fact that as far as Surrealism was concerned, all women were naturally automatic. By all accounts, she was not a medium in the sense employed by Spiritualism or psychical research. She did not communicate with agents outside of herself, and while she did seem to see a crowd of the dead, she did not talk with them or show any inclination to. There is no mention in *Nadja* of séances, except for the comments about Mme Sacco’s marvellous predictions. Nadja had visions and made automatic drawings in a certain state that is not related to the paranormal. It is not, necessarily, a *normal* state; clearly she is already mentally disturbed by the beginning of the novel, and as the affair with André progresses, she teeters over the edge of sanity. For her, the supposed state of grace became one of terror and confusion. She was mad, not a medium. But as I have argued in the first part of this chapter, Breton considered the difference between mad and mediumistic to be so slight as to be irrelevant. We have seen this also in his treatment of spiritualist mediums, psychodynamic mediums, and the inmates of insane asylums as all of a kind. Therefore, because she is mad, feminine and possessed of visions too, Nadja qualifies as a medium by default. As a further
example of this, Breton compared Nadja to Hélène Smith on several occasions; indeed, he has her identifying herself as Smith in the novel.\textsuperscript{215} It follows that Breton becomes Flournoy: the observant, watchful doctor; indeed a point he would make explicitly decades later.\textsuperscript{216} Nadja is also comparable to Cheval the postman, another instance of someone ‘mediumised’, as it were, because of a quality considered essentially mediumistic, namely his naive (i.e. ‘automatic’) artistic expression. And even though Cheval was a man, he was feminised as a medium; because femininity in turn is the quality essential for persons in a full state of automatism. As I touched upon in the previous chapter, one of the reasons Breton decided to intervene in the sleeping sessions to ‘protect’ Desnos may well have been that Desnos, by identifying himself so much with mediumistic states, had crossed a gender line.\textsuperscript{217}

**Visionary alchemy**

The mad medium is nearly the perfect Surrealist. She can see in the three modes required by Breton: internally, externally, and ‘gracefully’, as it were. Her ‘fugitive visions’ are all based upon inner models, as they are results of her untethered and authentic imagination. Because of her constant state of automatism, she perceives reality as alienated, whereby she furthermore sees the surreal that is immanent in the real. And finally, both forms of vision (inner and alienated outer), as well as her condition combine to ensure that the so-desired ‘state of grace’ is her natural state. She does not, and is probably even unable to, distinguish between objective and subjective vision, between perception and representation. However, for all this the mad medium is almost like, but not quite exactly the same as, the Surrealist. Besides the matter of gender, there is another seemingly small but essential difference between them: that of passive\textsuperscript{218} and irrational versus active and rational vision. Here, finally, I would draw a comparison between this active rationality that was expected of the Surrealist, and the idea of alchemy as it was current in Surrealism in this decade.

The mad medium cannot help herself, as it were; she is a receptacle of the passive sensitive and motor automatisms that are messages from her unconscious. Conversely, the male Surrealist approaches surrealist vision from a position of conscious and wilful rationality. After all, the long derangement of the senses is rational. This is why Breton referred to this period as the ‘period of reason’, I suspect: after their ‘intuitive’ experimenting in Surrealism’s early days, the Surrealists now went about their own derangement in a rational manner, and were employing reason and rational techniques to make themselves seers. In addition to Rimbaud’s commission, they may well have also been influenced by the conclusions of asylum-doctor Prinzhorn. He stressed in *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* that however similar on the surface the contemporary artist’s alienation may be to the madman’s ‘innate primeval process of configuration’, it ‘involves conscious and rational decisions’;
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which, as he posited, is something the patients clearly lack.\textsuperscript{219} That volition and intention distinguish the artist from the madman is an assumption about insanity and creativity that was dominant in the discourses of both art and medicine, throughout the twentieth century; and evidently the Surrealists conformed to it.\textsuperscript{220} The true artist is he who imposes ‘the unity of artistic form on material that would otherwise have remained diverse, inert, chaotic, unruly, and heterogeneous.’\textsuperscript{221} Therefore, when Breton and Éluard experimented with states of mental illness in 1928-29, they did so as possessors: with volition and intention they ‘possessed’ those mind-states, rather than being possessed by them. The Surrealists are at the directional side of the rapport; unlike the mediums, who are at the receiving end of it. Hence mediums cannot but represent what they perceive, as they are unable to observe contradiction, whereas the whole surrealist universe functions upon the understanding of certain contradictions as essential and unresolvable. Even though the motive of the surrealist man may be only ‘slightly different’ from that of the medium and mad person (\textit{dixit} Max Morise), the difference is crucial.

The Surrealist confronts inner representation with the concrete forms of the real world and seeks to seize the object in its generality. As soon as this succeeds, he tries to take the supreme poetic step: excluding the external object as such and considering its nature only in its relationship with the inner world of consciousness.\textsuperscript{222} That change from external to internal is one of transmutation, an originally alchemical concept the Surrealists had inherited from Rimbaud, together with his practice of ‘alchemy of the word’. It is my opinion that in the first decade of Surrealism, before they started to investigate the concept and history of alchemy more at length, the Surrealists associated the poetical practice of ‘alchemy of the word’ with wilful creation based upon creative automatism caused by a prolonged derangement of the senses. I associate this with surrealist vision in particular because an essential element of such alchemy of the word is that it is dependent upon vision.

In his long poetic work \textit{A Season in Hell} (1873) Rimbaud included a poetry-prose piece called ‘Alchemy of the Word’, which is presented as a representation of a poetic vision or perhaps ‘mad’ hallucination he had (‘The story of one of my insanities’). It is the founding text of surrealist alchemy of the word and certainly deserves to be read in its entirety; however, a brief quotation here will suffice to give an indication of what ‘alchemy of the word’ is about:

\begin{quote}
I invented colours for the vowels! - A black, E white, I red, O blue, U green. - I made rules for the form and movement of every consonant, and I boasted of inventing, with rhythms from within me, a kind of poetry that all the senses, sooner or later, would recognize. And I alone would be its translator. \\
\end{quote}
I began it as an investigation. I turned silences and nights into words. What was unutterable, I wrote down. I made the whirling world stand still. / 

... /

The worn-out ideas of old-fashioned poetry played an important part in my alchemy of the word. /

I got used to *elementary hallucination*: I could very precisely see a mosque instead of a factory, a drum corps of angels, horse carts on the highways of the sky, a drawing room at the bottom of a lake; monsters and mysteries; a vaudeville’s title filled me with awe. And so I explained my magical sophistries by *turning words into visions*.223

If I may put it considerably less poetically, alchemy of the word refers to making unusual combinations of words or sentences to create a startling end result. A *hallucinatory* or *visionary* component is important, both to generate poetry and to maintain it: seeing visions leads to poetic words, seeing poetic words in turn leads to new visions. There is a dynamic interplay between seeing things and performing alchemy with words, which has nothing to do with creating gold from lead or some such historical alchemical process, and everything to do with the poetical construct of the ‘image’, which was a key ingredient of symbolist poetry. Together with the imagination, the eye is privileged, and this eye does not necessarily look out upon any external material world—it is the internal eye, the blind eye. Alchemy of the word operated on the basis of this words-visions-dynamic for the Surrealists, just as it did for Rimbaud.224 ‘Automatic writing undertaken with any enthusiasm leads directly to visual hallucinations’, Breton wrote in 1933, and obviously Rimbaud ‘had done the same’ with his ‘*Alchimie du Verbe*’.225 In this context ‘alchemy’ is therefore shorthand for a automatism-based transformation that is so imaginative that it seems more than the sum of its parts. This parallels the explanation provided by Ernst in his definition of ‘alchemy of the visual image’, the painter’s equivalent to alchemy of the word, which he relates here to collage:

*[Collage] is something like alchemy of the visual image [alchimie de l’image visuelle]. The miracle of the total transfiguration of beings and objects with or without modification of their physical or anatomical aspect.*226

Things do not simply change, they are transfigured, which is to become something else entirely. As so often, we encounter a concept with a distinctly religious pedigree (‘transfiguration’) that is used in a notably secularised manner in the surrealist discourse. Additionally, said transfiguration is a direct result of the fact that the separate elements are such a surprising combination, one the artist has
been able to make only because of his clairvoyance and his desire to derange his senses:

[O]ne can define collage as an alchemical composition of two or more heterogeneous elements, resulting from their unexpected reconciliation owing either to a sensitive will—by means of a love of clairvoyance—towards systematic confusion and ‘disorder of all the senses’ (Rimbaud) or to chance, or to a will favorable to chance.\(^{227}\)

Breton had praised clairvoyants such as Mme Sacco for making him confuse what has been and what might be, thereby making it real since it could be imagined. Obviously the same sort of confusion is part and parcel of the practice of the Surrealist-seer-alchemist, with the proviso that for the latter the confusion is ‘systematic’ and driven by ‘will’, albeit a ‘sensitive’ one. As we have seen by now, sight is the sense most favoured in Surrealism. Note too that the impetus for such will is a ‘love of clairvoyance’, something I have termed psychic Schaulust above.

The fact that Ernst made so many collages, in particular a famous series of three collage-novels, has led to him being called the ‘chief alchemist of the surrealist movement’.\(^{228}\) M.E. Warlick has made an extensive study of the role of alchemy as a motif and also a stylistic practice in his entire career, including his collage novels, while David Hopkins has focused mainly on the alchemical background of his paintings.\(^{229}\) Here, however, I am concerned with alchemy in a metaphorical sense. Surrealist alchemy of the word or image denotes a visionary technique whereby effect is transformed into cause—another confusion of contradictions, clearly.

An example will serve to explain. In ‘The Automatic Message’ Breton recounted the legend that Leonardo da Vinci would recommend that his pupils ‘take a long look at the cracks in the wall: “It won’t be long,” he [da Vinci] said, “before you start to see shapes, and scenes, which become clearer and clearer… Then you only have to copy what you see and flesh it out as required.” [T]his lesson’, Breton lamented, ‘would seem to have been lost.’\(^{230}\) Of course, it had not been. To name one example, the divination techniques of looking at tea-leaves or clouds were far from unknown at the time. Indeed, publisher and temporary Surrealist Tériade (pseudonym of art critic Stratis Eleftheriadis, 1897-1983) noted in the next decade how he would discover his painting upon his canvas ‘the same way that the clairvoyants would see the future in tea-leaves’.\(^{231}\) Surrealists and clairvoyant mediums both gazed (with an alienated stare, perhaps?) at patterns.\(^{232}\)

Within Surrealism itself the technique had been rediscovered by Ernst in 1925, when, driven by an ‘insupportable visual obsession’, he started gazing first at floor boards and then at the rubbings made of such boards (the technique known as grattage). Surprised by ‘the sudden intensification of my visionary capacities
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and by the *hallucinatory succession of contradictory images*, Ernst started gazing upon anything, subsequently transforming it into drawings: leaves, linen, modern painting, spool-threads.\(^{233}\) He concluded,

> I [Ernst] insist that the drawings obtained [by means of grattage and through gazing at patterns] lost more and more, through a series of suggestions and *transmutations* that offered themselves spontaneously—in the manner of that which passes for hypnagogic visions—the character of the material interrogated (the wood, for example) and took on the aspect of images of an unhoped-for precision, probably of a sort which revealed the first cause of the obsessions, or produced a simulacrum of that cause.\(^{234}\)

By now, I hope it is clear that visions—hallucinatory visions, clairvoyant visions, hypnagogic visions (which we remember from the sleeping sessions as well), etcetera—lie at the basis of a process of artistic creation that is so original and creative that it changes the essence of things, or transmutes it. Seeing something with ordinary eyes and immediately having visions with one’s inner eyes means having vision that is ‘at once imaginative and sensory’. This is a quality that poets and mediums share, Breton asserts.\(^{235}\) As I see it, it is the encounter of the surrealist inner model with surrealist painting and with the alienated gaze. The mad mediums, at least, were able to experience such imaginative/sensory vision on another level, namely the state of grace where to perceive is also to represent. The Surrealist, on the other hand, is not a passive automatic medium, but an active creative alchemist. This is why, I think, leading Surrealists such as Breton and Ernst related it to alchemy of the word and the image, a miraculous though studied and rationally undertaken process that transforms ordinary things into something extra-ordinary and therefore surreal.\(^{236}\) By now it has hopefully also become clear that as far as the Surrealists were concerned, the ‘state of grace’ should be something one would try to attain, but never actually reach; to exist in this state where opposites such as subjective and objective, real and surreal, are so much confused as to have become unified would only result in one being surrealist. The Surrealists, conversely, thrived on the contradictions, because it is only by being aware (by means of visual perception) of what is other, that one can desire it.
In conclusion

From the moment Surrealism got seriously underway as an established movement, ‘vision’ became an issue. Surrealist vision was, as I hope I have shown, a complex and multi-faceted issue. It was first sparked by the realisation that surrealist painting existed, both within Surrealism itself and as practised by the automatic mediums and outsider artists generally. To avoid the pitfalls of realism and mimesis, Breton stressed that the Surrealist should only rely upon the internal model. Obviously, this required inner vision, and the surrealist need to become a seer, to make oneself a seer even, as per Rimbaud’s dictum, emerged and was extensively and ambitiously pursued. In the end all was defined by the inner model, be it poetry or art:

There is no fundamental difference between the ambition of a poem by Paul Éluard or Benjamin Péret and the ambitions of a canvas by Max Ernst, Miró or Tanguy. Liberated from the need to reproduce forms essentially taken from the outer world, painting benefits in its turn from the only external element that no art can do without, namely inner representation, the image present to the mind.\(^237\)

Still, looking upon internal models is all very well, but by the second half of the 1920s surreality was moving from inside the mind to the outside too; that is to say, to the (psychic) perception of outside reality, which is of course a rapport that originates in the mind. Surreality turned out to be immanent. Therefore, an additional form of vision became necessary, namely one that would allow one to perceive the surreal in the real. Alienation of the real was one of the techniques for this.

Finally, this concern with vision and becoming a seer led Breton to posit the existence of a certain ‘state of grace’ where perception and representation are one. Alternatively, it is a state in which seeing sensorially and imaginatively become one. In any case, it is a transcending of the differences between two opposites, the objective and the subjective, but one that should never be reached—by the Surrealist, at any rate; the mad mediums had in fact achieved such a state, but they were mediums, not Surrealists, and for the latter it was the awareness of contradiction that was essential to their actual experience of surreality.

In the end, I wonder if Breton really considered the surrealist project to make oneself a seer successful. In ‘The Automatic Message’ he questions the visionary powers of the poet-seers that have been so inspiring to him, Rimbaud and Lautréamont. He argues for an experience of ‘illumination’ rather than of vision. What’s more, such “illumination” comes afterwards.\(^238\) As I will argue in the next chapter, an identification of experiences a posteriori as miraculous became of
considerable importance to Surrealism in the 1930s. Of course, one should not think that all the effort spent on determining, chasing and attaining vision were in any way unnecessary. Breton conceded that hallucinatory visions remained, still, the key to surrealist automatism. However, he immediately posed a new challenge: those hallucinations or ‘unverifiable visual images’, will triumph ‘by means of the aural’. To summarise the paradox: we ‘should be listening to the painters’.239 Similar paradoxes lie at the basis of surrealist vision. The surrealist seer sees because he is blind. He dreams with eyes open, and when he does, he dreams of woman, she who is seen, she who sees, and she who is the object of his desire for perceiving the surreal.

Finally, we will end here on a rather sad note. Although we will never know the historical veracity of all that transpires in the novel Nadja, real-life Nadja Léona Delcourt was indeed committed to a mental hospital. A doctor wrote Breton a letter, urging him to pay her a visit. He did not, perhaps because he thought it would not matter: ‘I do not suppose there can be much difference for Nadja between the inside of a sanatorium and the outside’.240 It seems rather unkind, but in his construction she was in a constant automatic state where inner and outer are confused anyway. Éluard and Aragon did visit Delcourt. The same month the novel Nadja was published, May 1928, she was moved to a hospital near Lille. She was never released and died there in January 1941.241 For Breton, she had already been dead a long time, and had perhaps never even really existed. The character Nadja has lived on in scholarship to this day, as a chameleonic being probably far removed from the real person; she who gazed into the abyss, and perished.