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

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SUMMARY

It has been said that Surrealism was deeply involved with occultism and Western esotericism. Others claim that there was no such involvement or even that Surrealism was directly opposed to the occult and esoteric. In *The Occultation of Surrealism*, Tessel M. Bauduin seeks to account for such differing opinions about the supposedly occult character of Surrealism, specifically under the leadership of its founder André Breton, offering a fresh view of this complex and important question that has remained unresolved until now.

Breton and his fellow Surrealists were indeed fascinated by the esoteric. Rather famous is Breton’s insistence in his *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1929) upon the need for ‘a profound, veritable occultation of Surrealism.’ This demand, together with plentiful references to, for instance, mediums, alchemy, and later, magic, usually forms the basis for assertions about Surrealism’s esotericism or occultism. The question is of course what can be determined from such statements and references about the interest of Breton and other Surrealists for Western esotericism (constructed as a general category, including movements such as occultism). Does writing about the Philosopher’s Stone mean that one is an alchemist? Obviously, content and context of a reference are very important clues towards the particulars of how and why certain esoteric currents and ideas found a place in Bretonian Surrealism. A central concern of this study is therefore a thorough and scholarly investigation of the various esotericisms in the surrealist discourse, providing insight into the changing historical context and complex trajectory of the relationship between esotericism and the Surrealism of Breton.

Surrealism’s need for an ‘occultation’ was diverse and changed over time. In the early 1920s, to start with, a young group of literary artists searched for a means to release their inner, apparently authentic, creativity. They appropriated the séance as a setting for displays of automatism or expressions of the unconscious. Along the way these proto-Surrealists were inspired by Spiritualism, dynamic psychiatry, psychical research and popular somnambulism; all developments going back to the esoteric current of mesmerism. Still, even as the Surrealists appropriated certain esoteric practices, these were divested of any esoteric and/or religious overtones; the artists aimed only at making contact with their own creative unconscious.

By the end of the 1920s the Surrealists moved out of their studios to the streets, still in pursuit of displays of authentic expressions of the creative unconscious. As this study makes clear, Surrealism treated mediums, clairvoyants, children, mental patients and non-western tribal peoples as essentially the same kind: original outsider artists, uninhibited by such things as ‘civilisation’, ‘culture’
or ‘rationality’. Whether mediums operated in a Spiritualist or medical context was considered irrelevant, as is was only the irrational artistry of their expressions that mattered. Surrealists would therefore visit clairvoyants, act as madmen, or, in the case of Breton, date the mediumistic madwoman Nadja; becoming a ‘seer’ (as they called it)—that is, a person unrestrainedly creating from their unconscious—was the goal.

Breton’s ultimate intention with Surrealism was to achieve resolution of real and surreal, waking and dreaming, rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious, in one marvellous state of surreality. To further this goal, he created a surrealist worldview based upon correspondences, establishing connections between seemingly unrelated events or things. He introduced the concept of ‘objective chance’, or coincidences that are just too good to be true and therefore indicative of surrealist correspondence, such as also exists in dreams, for instance. Myth and mythopoeia (myth making) slowly rose to prominence as important means of creating the so desired worldview, known as analogical or, importantly, as magical. The surrealist universe became filled with magically connected events, beings and things.

In the next decade the surrealist artist was turned into a full-blown magician: one who (aims to) effect change in the world through her/his art. In many respects the early 1940s were the crucible on which Breton’s burgeoning ideas about, and fascination for, esotericism were formed into one coherent whole, fully integrated into a grand surrealist project. After having come into contact with a very important publication, Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps by Auguste Viatte (1941) that outlines the deep connections between Romanticism and Western esotericism, Breton set out to reshape his movement along similar lines. Romanticism had always been an important touchstone for Surrealism, even more so during and after the Second World War. Surrealism’s neo-Romantic outlook automatically also meant a more intensive alliance with esotericism, echoing the esoteric exploits of revered late-Romantic heroes such as Hugo and Arthur Rimbaud. This tendency reached a public climax in a grand exhibition in 1947, in which esotericism played a prominent role. While a succès de scandale, this exhibition primarily exposed the deep division between the (left-oriented) Surrealists on the one hand, and other leftist intellectuals on the other, as the latter rejected esotericism as reactionary and dangerous. Breton’s alignment of his movement with esotericism alienated both him and Surrealism from the intellectual forefront. This, however, did not stop him from continuing to make alchemy and magic central surrealist concerns in the 1950s. Still, as he insisted himself, at no occasion did the Surrealists become ‘fideists’ (believers); alchemy and magic were foremost interpreted as forms of poetry and art.
Through historical analysis of the way in which specific esoteric currents were significant for Surrealism in particular ways and during certain periods of time, it becomes clear that the ‘occultation’ of Surrealism was a multi-faceted process that changed significantly over time. This study provides an in-depth history of the relationship between Bretonian Surrealism and Western esotericism. It is argued that Bretonian Surrealism was not so much ‘influenced’ by esoteric currents, but rather selectively appropriated different currents, concepts and thinkers to its own—always surrealistic—ends.