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Alyce Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938-1968*. London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005. 240 pp. Color plates and black and white illustrations. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-500-23821-9.

Review by Mark Antliff, Duke University.

Surrealism and the Politics of Eros charts the chronological development of the French branch of the Surrealist movement through chapters devoted to a series of International Surrealist exhibitions from 1938 to 1965. While the history of French Surrealism before 1945 is well documented, the movement's evolution from the outbreak of World War II to the 1960s remains understudied: thus Mahon's intervention is an important contribution to the literature on the movement.[1]

The book begins with an analysis of the 1938 International Exhibition at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris; this chapter is followed by one on the dispersion of the French Surrealists during World War II and the re-establishment of the movement in New York City. In the opening chapter Mahon sets the 1938 Surrealist exhibition against the backdrop of the Nazi-sponsored "Degenerate Art" exhibit held in Munich the previous year, as well as the Surrealists' support of the Spanish Republic, arguing that "the 1938 exhibition began the Surrealists' radical appropriation of the public exhibition to expose repressed, national desires and fears through an uncanny manipulation of the gallery space" (p.19). In the next chapter Mahon discusses the interaction between André Breton, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, and American patrons such as Peggy Guggenheim, as well as two exhibitions that opened in New York in the fall of 1942: the "First Papers of Surrealism" organized by Breton and Duchamp, and the Surrealist display in Peggy Guggenheim's "Art of This Century" gallery.

Mahon also considers an understudied episode in the history of the movement: namely, the plight of those Surrealists who failed to escape Vichy France--most notably Hans Bellmer and Victor Brauner, but also lesser known figures like Jacques Hérold, who together with Oscar Dominquez participated in the Paris-based neo-Surrealist group *Main à Plume*. Despite the complications of life in occupied France, the *Main à Plume* collective sought to maintain contact with Breton, and they became increasingly active in the French Resistance when the political situation in France worsened in 1943. Most importantly, Mahon notes that former allies of Surrealism as well early French historians of the movement writing during and immediately after the war ignored the Surrealists' involvement in Resistance activities and condemned Breton for having fled France for the safety of the United States. The most damaging purveyor of this view was Maurice Nadeau and his highly influential *Histoire du surréalisme* (1945), which claimed that the Surrealists not only abandoned wartime France but that the movement died as a result (pp. 104-5). In subsequent chapters, Mahon convincingly counters Nadeau's mythic history of Surrealism's wartime demise by charting the resurgence of the movement following Breton's return from exile in May 1946 and the founding of the Fourth Republic (1946-58). For instance, in a chapter on the "Surrealism in 1947" exhibition, which opened at the Galerie Maeght in Paris in July 1946, Mahon analyses Breton's wartime and post-war interest in the utopian socialism of Charles Fourier and the symbolic role of the exhibition as a protest "against political prescription in art and the burgeoning call for 'authentic' subject matter in post-war France" (p. 109). Breton's maverick politics, combined with the Surrealists' internationalist orientation and continued faith in the revolutionary potential of their avant-garde aesthetics, met with fierce resistance by the French Communist Party and recent converts to Communism, such as Tristan Tzara. This attack was supplemented by that of the Existentialists, who declared the Surrealists to be ineffectual nihilists who lacked any moral or political compass (pp. 107-15).

As Mahon demonstrates, Breton and his wartime allies responded by publishing tracts condemning the French Communist Party's ambivalent stance towards the newly-formed French Republic's "imperialist war" in Indochina, as well as the strident nationalism that dominated post-war French politics. Contributors to the "Surrealism in 1947" exhibition included a mixture of veteran Surrealists and relative newcomers, most notably Victor Brauner, Enric Donati, Max Ernst, Jacques Hériod, Frederick Kiesler, Wilfredo Lam, Maria Martins, and Roberto Matta. Anti-colonialism was a long-standing political position in the Surrealist movement (as signaled by the 1931 anti-colonial exhibition, "La Verité sur les colonies"), but as Mahon demonstrates, anti-colonialism also served to define Surrealist politics in the post-war era: first with reference to French control of Indochina, and then in terms of Surrealist opposition to the Algerian war (1954-62).

Mahon argues that the Surrealists' EROS exhibition (Exposition Internationale du Surrealism), which ran from December 1959 to February 1960, was part of a concerted campaign against French policies in Algeria, and that this protest inspired the anarchist-oriented Jean-Jacques Lebel, as well as Jean Benoit (who emigrated to France from Canada in 1958), to join the movement in 1956. The Eros exhibition--which Mahon describes as a rebuff to the bourgeois values of the newly elected Charles De Gaulle--examined the eroticism of the Marquis de Sade, but did so by claiming that Sade's "revolutionary, supposedly 'obscene' philosophy" could be used as "a metaphoric means of shedding light on the political 'obscenities' of the day" (p. 149). As Mahon demonstrates, Benoit and Lebel continued to deploy Sadean and Surrealist themes in their art throughout the 1960s, while Breton's enthusiasm for the revolutionary implications of Charles Fourier's philosophy and the politics of eros was taken up by a younger generation of politicized theorists, most notably Roland Barthes and Herbert Marcuse. Thus the politics of Surrealism, exemplified by the movement's final exhibition "Absolute Deviation" of 1965 (a phrase derived from Fourier), flowed seamlessly into the politics of May 1968--a theme explored in the book's closing chapters.

Mahon's interpretation of Surrealism's wartime and post-war politics, however, could have been enriched had she brought greater historical perspective to her subject. For instance, Breton's fascination with Charles Fourier deserved consideration in light of that thinker's long-standing impact on leftists affiliated with the French avant-garde.[2] In like fashion, although Mahon's claims that the Surrealists' faith in art's revolutionary potential had an ideological correlate in "Western Marxist critical theory" (p. 14), that position arguably stands as evidence of Breton's ongoing interest in anarchist ideology.[3] For instance, Breton and his colleagues contributed to the anarchist journal *Le Libertaire* between 1951 and 1953, with Breton signaling his allegiance by proclaiming that "it was in the black mirror of anarchism that surrealism first recognized itself" (*Le Libertaire* 11 January 1952).[4] Although Breton's direct involvement with *Le Libertaire* was brief, the Surrealist movement's ability to attract artists like Jean Jacques Lebel underscores the importance of this anarchist orientation within post-war Surrealism. However such caveats are minor when compared to Alyce Mahon's overall achievement, for her book will be essential reading for any scholar interested in Surrealism's French legacy after the mid-1930s.

NOTES

[1] Notable texts include Francis Frascina, "Picasso, Surrealism, and Politics in 1937," in Silvan Levy, ed., *Surrealism: Surrealist Visuality* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), pp.125-47; Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics and the Psyche* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Donald LaCoss and Raymond Spiteri, eds., *Surrealism, Politics and Culture* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003); Beth Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon House

Publishers, 1988); and Jack Spector, *Surrealist Art and Writing, 1919-1939: The Gold of Time* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[2] On Charles Fourier's impact on French art and politics, see Neil McWilliam, *Dreams of Happiness: Social Art and the French Left, 1830-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); references to Fourier in John Hutton, *Neo-Impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994); and Margaret Werth, *The Joy of Life: The Idyllic in French Art, circa 1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[3] On Breton's early interest in anarchism, see Jack Spector, *Surrealist Art and Writing, 1919-1939: The Gold of Time* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Theresa Papanikolas, "The Cultural Politics of Paris Dada, 1916-22," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Delaware, 1999; and Theresa Papanikolas, "Towards a New Construction: Breton's Break with Dada and the Formation of Surrealism," in Donald LaCoss and Raymond Spiteri, eds., *Surrealism, Politics and Culture* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003), pp.37-51.

[4] For an article summarizing this aspect of Breton's post-war politics, see Pietro Ferrua, "Surréalisme et anarchisme: la collaboration des surréalistes au Libertaire. Organe de la Fédération anarchiste," in *Art et anarchie: actes du colloque Les dix ans de Radio-Libertaire, Paris, mai 1991* (Marseilles: La Vache folle, 1993), pp. 49-67.

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