

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 9 (March 2009), No. 35

Jonathan P. Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xi + 324 pp. \$35.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8014-4674-0.

Review by Robin Walz, University of Alaska Southeast.

“The simplest Surrealist act,” André Breton declared in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, “consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd.” Absurdly simple, so it seems. But when we contemplate what that sentence might possibly mean, conundrums begin to appear. We might be tempted to think that Breton is being metaphorical, yet the declaration appears in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* in which the surrealists openly embrace revolutionary Marxism. But running around in public and firing blindly and repeatedly into a crowd isn’t class warfare; it’s criminal – madness even. Then again, could such violence be the political expression of certain kinds of social and psychological rebellion? What might be the connections between “inexplicable” murders, on both individual and mass scales, and the “exquisite corpses” of surrealist parlor games? In this erudite and challenging book, comparative literature professor Jonathan Eburne places “the problem of criminality itself” at the center of the French surrealists’ philosophically critical and politically revolutionary agenda: “to seek out what could be learned from even the most appalling acts of terror, while recognizing, too, that simplicity of means did not render such acts any less difficult to comprehend” (pp. 6-7).

Eburne provides a sustained investigation into how the surrealists used crime as a recurring subject for examining their aesthetics, ethics, and revolutionary politics. From the outset, he affirms that this was not a minor preoccupation: “the group’s interest in crime was fundamental to its responses to pressing political and intellectual events of the twentieth century” (1). Over the course of the book’s eight chapters, Eburne establishes three historical stages in the movement’s understanding of the relationships between crime and surrealism. The “early” phase, which is developed over the first three chapters, concerns surrealist fascinations with popular detective fiction, sensationalist tales of murder, and press reportage of actual crimes in the 1920s, most notably assassin Germaine Berton’s trial and acquittal. Beyond celebrating criminal popular culture, Eburne emphasizes that this realm provided the group with critical material for defining the aesthetic and theoretical concerns of surrealism as distinct from the group’s earlier Paris dada activities.

In the following “red” phase of the early 1930s, the surrealists linked violent crime with anticolonial rebellion and revolutionary Marxism. In the wake of the 1925 Rif rebellion in Morocco, the surrealists began to consider the degree to which spontaneous revolt and violence born of social desperation constitutes a kind of *légitime défense*, or justifiable self-defense. Crime also seemed to express a revolutionary potential of the desire for total liberation, as exemplified in Aragon’s “Kill the cops!” refrain from “Red Front.” Pushing beyond Marxist orthodoxy, the surrealists became interested in Sade for the “physical idea of Revolution,” that is, an unconscious psychic revolt that originates in the demands of the body (p. 142). On a more poetic level, Breton and his entourage explored group surrealist writing and drawing games, such as the “exquisite corpse,” as playful ways of providing structure to the processes of a collective unconscious.

In short order, though, surrealism passed into a “noir” phase where both the reality and imagery of brutal crimes and violence were understood as conscious manifestations of repressed traumas. In “Surrealism Noir,” which is arguably the strongest chapter of the book, Eburne provides sustained interpretations of surrealist responses to the murders committed by the Papin sisters and to the parricide by Violette Nozière. What fascinated the surrealists about the savage murders committed by the domestic maids Christine and Léa Papin was the “paranoiac” explanation provided by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan; the crime was the product of the sisters’ extreme psychological disturbances unconsciously directed against their employers. For the surrealists such as René Crevel, this suggested the possibility a more generalized “psycho-dialectic” of unconscious psychological formations lashing out against forces of social repression. The political meaning of paranoiac violence emerges from the eruption of unconscious psychological forces that have become inexorably intertwined with real social conflicts. The surrealists also paid homage to Violette Nozières, the daughter who put an end to years of her father’s sexual assaults by murdering him. Rather than make Nozières a *cause célèbre*, or seek to justify her crime, the surrealists produced a pamphlet of writings and images dedicated to her. While the surrealists interpreted the political meaning of Violette’s parricide as a critique of fascism, Eburne also highlights the “spiritual liberation” (*l’libération de l’esprit*, p. 214) achieved through a surrealist rewriting of her trauma.

Eburne extends the surrealist noir period through the Second World War and into postwar reconstruction. He approaches the difficult issue of French surrealism’s relative quietism during that actual violence of war, with Breton’s self-exile in New York and Bataille’s retreat to the countryside to write *Inner Experience*, in a chapter devoted largely to surrealist painter Leonora Carrington. Eburne interprets *Down Under*, Carrington’s dark personal narrative of paranoia, rape, and psychiatric incarceration in Spain, all occurring within the context of the Nazi conquest of Europe, as a “paranoiac mirror of geopolitical catastrophe” (p. 229). In its fashion, Eburne suggests, this and several other quietist surrealist works produced during the war constitute a kind of surrealist version of engaged literature. The final chapter turns to the *noir* theme in several aspects; a renewed surrealist interest in the nineteenth-century gothic *roman noir*, Breton’s *Anthologie de l’humour noir*, Marcel Duhamel’s *La Série noire* of American hardboiled crime novels translated into French. The first crime novel by expatriated African-American Chester Himes, *La Reine de pommes* (most commonly in America as *A Rage in Harlem*), initially appeared in *La Série noire*, and is credited by Eburne for achieving a sort of “vernacular surrealism” (p. 246). By the 1950s, however, the surrealist movement under Breton’s guidance was facing serious challenges by existential and anticolonial critics such as Sartre and Fanon. Yet, Eburne concludes, surrealism continued to combine “a theoretical avant-gardism with the practical liberation of insurrectional politics” as it had for the past thirty years (p. 269).

One of the great historical virtues of *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* is the serious consideration Eburne gives to dissident surrealists who disagreed with Breton’s conception of the movement. What constituted surrealism at any given moment, Eburne insists, emerged as much from disagreements within and expulsions from the movement, as in the members’ collaborative pursuits. While some of these trajectories are well known, such as Louis Aragon’s shift from surrealism to communism, or the group of counter-surrealists who gathered around Georges Bataille’s journal *Documents*, Eburne is generous to surrealists whose contributions are often not as fully considered. Foremost among them in his book is René Crevel. While the surrealist entourage would gather around Robert Desnos to witness his “automatic writing” performances, Crevel would terrify the group in séances as a psychic medium who reenacted horrific crimes and suicides. While Breton found “little else other than Maldoror” in Crevel’s séances (p. 65), Eburne reminds us that Crevel insisted that one of the political goals of surrealism was to unleash “subterranean forces,” not only of the individual unconscious, but the “latent desires of the proletariat” as well (p. 72). Later Crevel more fully developed these ideas in “Notes toward a Psycho-dialectic,” a more theoretically rigorous treatment of the dialectical and materialist bases of the unconscious as a revolutionary force.

Expelled surrealists Philippe Soupault and Robert Desnos figure prominently in Eburne's chapter on "Dime Novel Politics." As the surrealist movement moved into the more politically engaged "red" phase, it largely abandoned popular crime culture, condemning it as mass culture riddled with bourgeois values. Against this grain, both Soupault and Desnos continued to pitch their writing to a more general readership. In the "Death of Nick Carter," Soupault inverted the meaning of the detective series by writing a surrealist crime story in which a black protagonist kills off the American hero. The notion of black rebellion against European whiteness was even more pronounced in Soupault's *Le Nègre*, which celebrated in fictionalized form the real life exploits of black jazz drummer and London drug dealer Edgar Manning. For his part, Desnos continued his activities as a newspaper journalist, including a series on "Sadistic Crimes" in *Paris-Matinal* proclaiming "extraordinary revelations" about Jack the Ripper and Jacques Vacher (the "French Ripper"). Parting ways with Breton over issues of leftist party politics and collective surrealist practices, and insisting instead upon value of individual authorship in the wider realm of cultural politics, Eburne stresses that "Desnos's emphasis on writing for a public would remain a stumbling block in surrealist thinking" (p. 138).

Yet despite these accomplishments, some problems haunt Eburne's book, particularly in the final chapters. For example, the choice of Leonora Carrington as an exemplar for what happened to the French surrealist movement during the cataclysm of the Second World War seems odd. The problem isn't that Carrington's experiences are not germane (she is the surrealist woman who was actually raped, not merely a surrealist muse), that she wasn't French (Breton was always an internationalist, and he wrote approvingly about Carrington in the surrealist journal *VVV*), or that she remained permanently in exile after the war (expatriated to Mexico). Rather, French surrealism's quietism in the face of fascist violence may not be the most critical subject to focus upon during this period (it may apply to Breton and some others, but not to Resistance fighters such as Aragon, Éluard, Desnos, and Tristan Tzara). There is also another, and perhaps more dynamic, story in the reinvigoration of surrealism during the war years in New York, through its instillation in Peggy Guggenheim's *Art of This Century* gallery, and in the production of entirely new American surrealist masterworks in following years, such as Robert Motherwell's series *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* (1948-1991).

A different kind of problem emerges in the final chapter. Much of the discussion hinges on the concept of *noir*, but that notion is as not rigorously developed as the ideas in the earlier chapters of the book. While interpretive threads may wind through nineteenth-century gothic novels, surrealist *humour noir*, and hardboiled American noir crime novels, the lines of connection are not always clearly delineated. Also, a shift in cultural registers occurs in Eburne's treatment of Chester Himes's "absurd" hardboiled crime novels. Himes is permitted a vernacular surrealist voice at the end of the book, but in the earlier chapters the participation of the surrealists is required for popular crime culture to achieve surreality.

Such criticisms are not external to Eburne's project, but bear upon one of the major agendas set out by him in the book's introduction, which proposes a reception and influence model of cultural transmission. Throughout the book, Eburne does a superb job of invoking influential figures in the genealogy of surrealism (Lautréamont, Sade, Freud, Lacan, among others), and he shows how their writings were reworked into surrealist critical theory and practice. He also does an excellent job of demonstrating how minor and dissident voices within the surrealist entourage are indispensable to a more comprehensive understanding of surrealism (as touched upon, earlier in this review). Where the promise of the influence and reception model of surrealism falls somewhat short, is in Eburne's claim that, "As major public intellectuals in France between and after the wars, they were both an influence on and target for later experimental groups" (p. 4). At moments he approaches this critical topic: in his brief discussions of the attack on French colonialism by Martiniquan students in the avant-garde journal *Légitime Défense* (recalling Breton's essay of the same title from the previous decade), debates between surrealists and existentialists over the meaning of revolutionary violence and humanism, and possible affinities between *La Série noire* and surrealism. But in a sense Sartre was right in his postwar critique of French surrealism; as a vanguard, Breton's movement was losing its revolutionary share. In this

historical context, it may have been more promising had Eburne extended the influence and reception model in relation to surrealism internationally, and to exploring affinities and departures in related movements, such as lettrism, situationism, and the neo-avant-garde. By making the concluding discussion less internal to French surrealism, the accomplishments of the movement might be demonstrated on a global scale with influential nodes beyond Paris.

Then again, a single book only accomplishes so much. Jonathan Eburne's book provides a superb, and to my mind unparalleled, treatment of the place of crime in French surrealist thought and praxis through the 1930s. That the book ends with further work remaining to be done on the reception of these ideas attests to the continuing relevance of surrealism as scholarly enterprise. *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* not only provides us with well-researched and intellectually challenging material, it opens up future research agendas as well.

Robin Walz  
University of Alaska Southeast  
rwalz@uas.alaska.edu

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172