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Amy Lyford, *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2007, ix + 225 pp. Notes. \$52.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 13: 978-0-520-24640-9.

Review by Carolyn J. Dean, Brown University.

Amy Lyford's book revises reductive binaries according to which the critical literature has so often assigned surrealist work to categories of either dissident or normative. Many feminist critics have argued that surrealist aesthetics reinforce dominant gender norms in spite of its innovative promise, and others believe their formal innovations offer reflexive commentary on the very normative conventions with which surrealists were said to be complicit.^[1] Lyford discusses the ideological implications of surrealist works on gender, and offers a nuanced perspective in which the relationship between aesthetics and cultural politics generates radical challenges to and yet also reinforces the status quo. Unlike most recent literature, she seeks not to examine surrealist images of women in order to ascertain to what extent they transgress or collude with normative assumptions about gender and their relation to French national identity, but to shift the focus of analysis to surrealist representations of masculinity. That is, what did the surrealists have to say about men and masculinity? The question is important, but has not to my knowledge been asked in so stark a fashion, and Lyford's subtle readings of surrealist precursors, photography, and art reveal how crucial a question it is.

Lyford takes Hal Foster's musings on the surrealists' penchant for representations of dismembered female bodies as a point of departure, but also as a model: "Indeed, the apparent sadism of the photographs raised the specter of surrealist misogyny; but it also pointed to an adjacent issue no less difficult: are these surrealist transgressions of the body related to actual transgression of the body during the period—from the mutilations of World War I to the atrocities of the Nazi regime? If so, why are these fantasies visited upon the female body? Do they partake in a putatively fascist imaginary, a peculiarly damaged ego that seeks a sense of corporeal stability in the very act of aggression against other bodies somehow deemed feminine by this subject (Jews, Communists, homosexuals, the 'masses')" (p. 10). Indeed, Lyford's book answers all of these questions in the affirmative, but with a twist: it is only by understanding the surrealists' interpretation of wounded masculinity that we can begin to understand how they both avowed and disavowed the anxiety created by male injury and emasculation after the Great War by displacing the anxiety such injury generated onto female bodies. Moreover, she argues that, in the end, surrealism participated in the triumph of consumer society and commodity fetishism because its anxiety overwhelmed its transgressive views on gender. She also claims that it contributed, however inadvertently, to fascist constructions of revised masculinity.

Lyford makes two related arguments that link individual readings of surrealist texts and images to the broader cultural context of interwar France, particularly the state's effort to reconstruct normative gender roles in order to facilitate the reintegration of men into post-war civilian life. Anxieties about the nation's alleged loss of virility were symbolized by men's perceptions of women's new-found cultural freedom in a world temporarily without male supervision (it is worth noting that mothers received the right to be legal guardians of their children in 1917 as a practical matter since men were absent). Lyford argues that surrealist work reinstates the male wounds and traumas that national and other

ideological discourses about masculinity erased. On another level, she argues that this work exposes the very process by which postwar French social and cultural ideology sought to mask the wounds of war and to reconstruct Frenchmen as—whole, rugged, and dignified—men. All five chapters in the book are organized around uncovering an alternative history of major texts, films, photographs, and biographies that art historians take to be representative of surrealist constructions of women and in some instances of surrealism itself. And all five chapters reveal the presence of a hidden history of ambivalence and anxiety about post-war masculinity now mostly repressed, ‘forgotten,’ or merely neglected even though it was constitutive of the surrealists’ refashioning of gender. Lyford’s efforts to unearth this alternative history brings back to life some of the most clichéd moments in the history of surrealism. Thus she reminds us that that the work of the surrealist hero, the Conte de Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse), *Les Chants de Maldoror*, cannot be reduced to the phrase “as beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella” (p. 19). This phrase, oft-quoted as a stand-in for surrealism, including free association, chance encounters, found objects, the miraculous re-vision of the ordinary world and the absurd that became the hallmark of the surrealist avant-garde, was embedded in a text permeated by violence done to the male body, anxiety about emasculation, and tormented identification with both genders. Lyford notes that this image itself involves the provocative meeting of a phallic object and a potentially castrating one (in the form of an object associated with women’s labor) on a “table” reserved for the dead. She reproduces Max Ernst’s illustration of the image to acquaint us with the bloodiness of this now sanitized (because overused and overly familiar) image, for the dissecting table is set up with a pail to collect the bloody run-off of the wounded or autopsied body (p. 20). Similarly, Luis Bunuel’s famous film, *L’âge d’or*, transforms a male hand caressing a woman’s face into an atrophied appendage, as if it belonged now to a man who had been mutilated in combat.

In other chapters, Lyford demonstrates how the trope of dismemberment, so often visited upon female bodies to the dismay of feminist critics, often began as a set of (now repressed or hidden) reflections on male war wounds. Several surrealists, André Breton and Louis Aragon in particular, were veterans who had been exposed to the reality of war, whether as soldiers or medics. In a particularly powerful chapter, she demonstrates how surrealism set itself against the trajectory of recovery implied by exhibits such as those at the hospital Val-de-Grâce, where the gaping facial wounds of soldiers were inserted into a narrative of surgical repair that erased, in a before-middle-and-after chronology, the wounds men suffered, restoring their handsome faces and (in other discourses on prosthetics) strong bodies. She demonstrates, by use of archival material, that even the state harbored doubts about the public reception of the prosthetics meant to restore men to themselves, and shows how the surrealists exploited fears about emasculation by continually returning in free association, artwork, and so forth, to the “man cut in two” that formed the object of an early dreamscape of Breton (p. 64). In short, the fears eventually projected onto the female body were initially expressed as concerns about the injury, fragmentation, and dissolution of the male body that were publically too provocative and privately perhaps too anxiety-inducing to reflect upon at length.

In the most literal rendering of this argument, Lyford shows how the famous photographer André Kertész’s female figures distorted by fun-house mirrors (and celebrated by art critics such as Hilton Kramer when they were “rediscovered” by the critical world after being published on a large scale in 1976) were not sui generis but mimics (albeit without clothes) of similar distortions of Kertész and a male friend who accompanied him to the Parisian amusement center, Luna Park. Kertész sought to sell his pictures of women both to a soft-core magazine and to an art magazine, both equally complicit in the objectification of the female body. In order to do so, he cropped the photos to eliminate both his own (equally distorted) presence and that of the camera: shorn of the staging and context, the women being photographed consequently appeared more objectified and complicit in their own objectification than was really the case, and the images of male distortion, in these photos and elsewhere, were forgotten. Thus Lyford represents the objectification and dismemberment of the female form, a long staple of art history, as part of the new commodity culture generated in the interwar period, but also as a significant means of repressing anxiety about male psychic and corporeal wholeness. In her view, Kertész’s

willingness to crop his photos represents both his complicity in commodity culture and his own displacement of anxiety about the male body onto female forms.

Finally, in an extensive discussion of one of the most renowned surrealist figures and one we thought we knew, Lyford makes us aware of how Man Ray's private life was inextricable from his public self, however conventional his relationship with Lee Miller, his fashion photography, and his visual codification of gender norms. She interprets an extensive set of private photos of Man Ray and Lee Miller circulated only among friends or privately published because they were pornographic, ambiguous, or too scandalous given presumptions about sexual and gender norms, to demonstrate that Man Ray was both conventional and subversive. He denied Lee Miller her due as a photographer in her own right and wanted her to be exclusively his muse, but he toyed, for example, with playing the role of model to his own gaze. In a wonderful discussion of Man Ray's self-portrait in a bathrobe, Lyford argues that he was experimenting with his own potential passivity and desire to be desired, and yet reasserted his masculinity by posing beside a picture of a self-absorbed and nude Lee Miller. In so doing he reaffirmed the relationship between the male artist and his model. Lyford emphasizes the ambivalence of these images over and over: there are pictures of implied sadomasochistic practices between Ray and Miller in which they staged their own depravity with a wink.

These readings of so many otherwise well-known surrealist works persuade us that, while dominant conventions about gender remain the norm, the surrealists nonetheless may very well have disavowed their own anxieties about male plenitude by fragmenting female forms. The overall argument is tight, richly documented, and does an excellent job of interweaving image, text, and context, no easy task. At the same time, this reviewer wished that Lyford had more effectively resolved or simply sustained a central tension in her work that replicates the tension in her subject matter (which is innovative, radical, normative, and misogynist all at once). Throughout the work she focuses on the radical potential of surrealism's revelation of wounded masculinity and begins by stating: "I propose that masculinity was implicitly the subject of the sexualized discourses of postwar reconstruction and that the surrealists manipulated dominant concepts of masculinity and femininity to question deeply held assumptions about national cultural identity" (p. 11). The text proceeds to demonstrate how surrealism does just that, as Lyford insists over and over on the normative constraints against which the surrealists were working. She alerts us to the fact that those normative constraints do not disappear in surrealist work--hence even images of ambivalent masculinity are sufficiently anxious that they often contain the very anxiety they reveal by reframing men as masculine. Nonetheless, her concluding argument comes somewhat as a surprise: "the surrealist project produced no social or cultural utopia; instead, the surrealists' feminized, marginal, or deviant images prepared the way for postwar social regulation" (p. 187). And her last sentence reads: "Thus instead of resisting social conservation by producing alternative sexualities and social roles, surrealism actually delivered the unconscious to the technocrats by reconstructing the gendered human subject. As we know, such social regulation was to become a powerful weapon in the hands of fascist ideologues" (p. 188).

Though the emphasis on marketing as a form of social regulation is implicit in the text, the chapter that leads us here is the last. It is devoted to the gender ambiguous performance of the acrobat Barbette, a man who performed in drag and revealed his 'real' gender at the end of the show to the dismay or enthusiasm of the audience. He was, predictably, a sensation, and Lyford rightly points to the carnivalesque aspect of these kinds of spectacles: they reaffirm heterosexuality and normative gender roles by playing around with them in a for-consumption performance which reaffirms gender-ambiguity as a source of entertainment and thus as something exotic and marginal. The link from this insight to fascism is forged by Lyford's reading of Drieu la Rochelle's celebration of Barbette as an ideally new and homogeneous form of human being in whom both genders are merged and elegantly forceful. That Drieu was once a surrealist fellow-traveler turned fascist is well-known: that there might be a link between his interest in the surrealists' emphasis on gender fluidity and his idealization of a new, fascist persona is an interesting idea that must be far more developed. We know that other avant-garde

groups, the Italian futurists in particular, celebrated the radical violence and masculinity in fascism, and there is surely no natural affinity of the avant-garde with the mainstream Left. It is worth remembering, however, that fascism was radical, and that while it may have celebrated normative gender roles, its emphasis on the collective and elation-filled bond with the leader was often perceived by mainstream critics to render fascists effeminate and homosexual. Robert Brasillach's collaboration in France manifested what for many intellectuals was obvious—that fascists are homosexuals. That surrealists liked so-called deviant sexuality symbolically but not in practice does not provide sufficient evidence for their contribution to social regulation, unless you wish to argue, as Georges Bataille did, that they were sell-outs who perpetuated a dynamic by which radicalism becomes chic and sold to the highest bidder. In short, if Lyford wishes to take Bataille's position against surrealism, that might be a means to link them to "social regulation," but as it stands, the link to fascism is tenuous at best, as is the link between social regulation generally and fascism. Does a contribution to social regulation add up to complicity in fascism? What is the relationship between bourgeois social regulation (including the homogenized culture of marketing and commodification) and fascism? These are important questions on which there is a voluminous literature, but Lyford sticks with Drieu alone to make her case. In a very impressive piece of work, this last underdeveloped and yet provocative argument is a conceptually murky conflation of social regulation, technocracy, fascism, and capitalism.

Lyford has done a remarkable job of demonstrating how complicated surrealism's relationship was to all forms of normative masculinity, including, implicitly, a fascist one (by virtue of their ambivalent endorsement of the very bourgeois masculinity they railed against). That her effort to link surrealism to fascism via the work of Drieu la Rochelle is less than persuasive should not distract us from her the originality and accomplishment of her work.

NOTES

[1] Jonathan Eburne has recently argued that surrealist aesthetics and politics are similarly treated as binaries although they cannot be cordoned off from one another: he refers to the familiar argument that surrealist politics were naïve and reductive and their aesthetics interesting and important. See Jonathan Eburne *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008).

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