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Linda Steer, *Appropriated Photographs in French Surrealist Periodicals, 1924-1939*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017. x + 180 pp. 23 b/w illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$165.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-4094-3730-7

Review by Raymond Spiteri, Victoria University of Wellington.

One significant innovation in the field of surrealism studies since the 1980s is the acknowledgement of the central place of photography in surrealism. This reassessment began with the 1978 exhibition *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, which focused on the crucial role of reviews and magazines in the culture of surrealism, but it would be the 1985 exhibition *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism*, curated by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, that secured the place of photography in surrealism.[1] In particular, Krauss used photography as a fulcrum to reconsider surrealist visual arts, drawing on the writings of André Breton and Georges Bataille. From the former she viewed photography through the prism of convulsive beauty to argue that surreality is “nature convulsed into a kind of writing,” and that photography was able to document these convulsions by virtue of its privileged access to the real, while from the latter she recovered the operation of the *informe* to explore the way surrealist photography unraveled the traditional categories of western thought.[2]

Subsequent writers on surrealist photography labor in a field reconfigured by Krauss. This is the case with Linda Steer and her book on the role of appropriated photographs in several surrealist reviews. Her topic is framed by the scholarship that emerged in the wake of the renewed attention to surrealist photography, notably David Bate's *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent*, which locates surrealist photography in the broader cultural context of interwar France, and Ian Walker's *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*, which discusses the role of “straight” documentary photography in surrealism.[3]

Steer's study is marked by a tension between the fields of surrealism studies and photographic studies. The former provides the context for much of the analysis, which draws on existing scholarship for its understanding of surrealism. Steer supplements this scholarship with an analysis of the initial significance of the photographs prior to their appropriation (or what she calls, following John Tagg, their “discursive frame”).[4] Photographic studies provides much of the theoretical frame for the study, particularly the mutability of the meaning of photographic images, and a concern with the indexicality of the photographic image.

One virtue of appropriated photographs is that they have significance independent of surrealism. Unlike photographs produced by artists associated with the surrealist movement, appropriated photographs were initially produced, circulated, and made meaningful in milieus far removed from the orbit of surrealism or the interwar avant-garde. However, the process of reframing these images is always partial, and Steer analyses the discrepancy between the function of the photographic image in its initial non-surrealist frame and its subsequent surrealist one, which “produces a kind of remainder or excess to meaning” (6). Steer draws on Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of the *parergon* in *The Truth in Painting* to argue that the process of making an image surreal is “always incomplete,” unsettled by a remainder or excess that perturbs any attempt to fix its meaning. [5] In terms of her larger argument, the appropriated image reveals surrealism’s unconscious, unarticulated assumptions about photography: “the act of removal and reframing highlights the instability and mutability of the photographic meaning,” and “reveals a tension between the surrealist attempt to undermine indexicality through a gesture that, in fact, depends on it” (p. 6).

Bracketed by an introduction and conclusion, the book consists of four case studies that allow Steer to consider the transformation of meaning as a photograph shifts from its original context to a new context in a surrealist periodical. The first case study is the “Le cinquantenaire de l’hystérie,” written by André Breton and Louis Aragon, and published in the March 1928 issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*. This short tract was illustrated with six photographs by Paul Régnard from the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* depicting Augustine, one of Jean-Martin Charcot’s patients at the Salpêtrière Hospital, who achieved renown for her ability to perform the four stages of a hysterical attack. Steer traces the shift in discursive frame from the *Iconographie photographique*, where the images exemplify the positivist discourse of medical science and were organized to demonstrate the nosology of the hysterical attack as identified by Charcot, to the new setting of a surrealist review. Where medical terminology had previously managed Augustine’s sexuality, in the context of *La Révolution surréaliste* her “perceived sexuality rather than her illness becomes amplified” as Aragon and Breton “attempt to claim hysteria for surrealism” (p. 30). However, although there is a shift in discursive frame, Aragon and Breton’s text anchors the photographs’ meaning so that they still retain their evidential value: “Drawing on the photograph’s function and meaning in their original location, they continue to perform as evidence; it is a performance that depends on photography’s supposed indexicality” (p. 41). Here Steer identifies a contradiction between the “celebration of hysteria as a revolutionary act” and the “conservative reiteration of traditional gender roles” implicit in the hysterical female body and woman as muse (p. 41).

The second case study turns from *La Révolution surréaliste* to *Documents*, the “dissident” surrealist review closely associated with Georges Bataille, to discuss an image of Melanesian schoolboys appropriated from an album of photographs by Ernest Robin of New Caledonia held in the Musée d’ethnographie du Trocadéro. Steer begins by reconstructing the photograph’s original meaning in the discursive frame of ethnography and colonialism before addressing its varied significations in the pages of *Documents*. In the latter context, the meaning of the photography is unmoored through a process of juxtaposition and the persistent mismatch between image and text, which unsettles and undermines the authority of any interpretation. Robin’s photograph appeared below a film still of a chorus line of female dancers from the Hollywood film *Broadway Melody*, an “ironic juxtaposition” that serves to dismantle “the concepts of civilized and primitive” as well as “the very notions of self and other” (p. 80). This strategy echoes the wider critique of western civilization in *Documents*, which destabilized a series of oppositions (white/black, western/non-

western, civilized/savage, etc.) traditionally used to establish the superiority of western civilization over non-western cultures, so that the meaning of Robin's photography in *Documents* "remains exasperatingly and wonderfully undecidable" (p. 81).

The third case study focuses on a play by Maurice Heine published in *Minotaure*, "Regards sur l'enfer anthropoclasique" (sic), which was gruesomely illustrated by early forensic photographs of two victims of Jack the Ripper (Mary Kelly and Catherine Eddowes), and four forensic photographs of burnt bodies from the *Annales d'hygiène publique et de médecine légales*. Maurice Heine was an early specialist on the Marquis de Sade, and his text reflected this interest in sadism and extreme sexual violence. The plot of his play describes an encounter between the ghosts of Jack the Ripper, the Marquis de Sade, the Comte de Mesanges (a minor character in Sade's *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*), and the forensic pathologist Professor Paul Brouardel, who together discuss the "art" of murder. The photographs are props in this play, evidence of crimes that advance the narrative. Although the appropriation of these photographs transposes them from the positivist discourse of forensics and medical discourse to the discourse of aesthetics and art, their function within Heine's text differs from the conventional use of photographs in surrealist publications. They were "neither illustrations nor representations of surrealist aesthetic principles," but actively produced meaning, working "to develop the characters and advance the dialogue" (p. 104). However, "the appropriation of a photograph that stood as evidence in a criminal investigation and its reframing within the discourse of aesthetics and art exposes a frame that is so fragile that it cannot contain the horrific reality within it" (p. 108).

The fourth case study is a comparison of appropriated photographs in *La Révolution surréaliste* and *Documents* that address the recent past. While this comparison demonstrates the different ideologies of the two reviews, it also reveals similar attitudes to photographs as mere records. Steer examines the use of three photographs by Eugène Atget in the June 1926 issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*: a photograph of a crowd of people looking at a solar eclipse in 1912, which appeared on the issue's cover above the caption "Les dernières conversions," a photograph of a prostitute outside a shop front in Versailles, and a window display of a shop selling corsets. Atget considered his photographs as documents of a vanishing Paris; however, transposed to a surrealist review these images are reframed as art, and reveal a nostalgia for a dream of Paris (p. 120). Steer reads the caption of "Les dernières conversions" as a reference to Catholicism; this may well be one connotation, but in the context of fiscal crisis in France during 1926, "conversion" may also be a reference to the ongoing debate over the gold standard. Steer concludes her discussion of Atget's photographs by noting that "what makes surrealist photographic appropriation such a radical, meaningful gesture" is the way it utilized photography's connection to the real to "make manifest the surreal" while exposing that there is "no truth in photography" (p. 131; Steer's emphasis). The second example in this chapter is Bataille's article "Figure humaine," published in the September 1929 issue of *Documents*, and illustrated with a photograph of a turn-of-the-century provincial wedding party, and a selection of late nineteenth-century photographs of theatrical personalities (mostly by Nadar). These photographs reveal the discontinuity of human nature, for they present evidence of the monstrosity of the human form in their absurdity (p. 144).

The book concludes with a brief discussion of the legacy of surrealist appropriation in the Situationist International and Appropriation Art. Where surrealism lacked a theoretical context for its acts of appropriation, the Situationist International advanced the practice of *détournement* as a central tactic in its contestation of modern culture. Steer notes that when Guy Debord and

Gil Wolman originally published “A User’s Guide to *Détournement*” in the Belgian review *Les Lèvres nues*, they signed the text with the names of André Breton and Louis Aragon in a transgressive act of homage.[6] While appropriation and *détournement* would become part of the arsenal of the radical counter-culture, these strategies would assume a more aesthetic cast in the appropriation art of the Pictures Generation in New York during the 1980s to challenge “the modernist notion of the author/artist as sole producer, to expose gender assumptions, and desubliminate cultural stereotypes and norms” (p. 158). This is an apt endpoint for the book, since this generation of artists coincided with the reconceptualization of photography that informs the book’s argument.[7]

As noted, there is an unresolved tension between the fields of surrealism studies and photographic studies. The most original aspect of the argument is its interrogation of the indexicality of the photographic image, so it would have been rewarding to develop this theme in greater depth, asking particularly how it would qualify or challenge Krauss’s formulation of surrealist photography as “nature convulsed into a kind of writing.” This would entail reframing the argument away from appropriated photographs to consider a wider range of photographic and non-photographic images in surrealist reviews. There is also scope to engage more fully with the writings of Georges Didi-Huberman, particularly his book on Bataille and *Documents, La Ressemblance informe*, which discusses many images central to Steer’s analysis, as well as his writings on the issue of indexicality.[8] Similarly, Walter Benjamin’s superb 1929 essay “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” contains a fruitful reflection on the “image space” [*bildraum*] of surrealism that could enrich the discussion of how appropriated images function in surrealism.[9] Finally, there is scope to consider the broader culture of illustrated magazines during the interwar years. The practice of appropriating photographs was not limited to surrealist reviews, but also characteristic of many avant-garde reviews, as well as publications with a less exclusive audience. *L’Esprit moderne* immediately comes to mind, as well as *Jazz*, and the Belgian review *Variétés*.

NOTES

[1] Dawn Ades, *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978); Rosalind E. Krauss and Jane Livingstone, *L’Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985).

[2] Krauss discussed convulsive beauty in “Photography in the Service of Surrealism,” in *L’Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism*, 13-42 (the quote is p. 35); her discussion of Bataille’s *informe* is in “Corpus Delicti,” *L’Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism*, 55-100.

[3] David Bate, *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004); Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

[4] John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). Tagg was one of the supervisors of Steer’s PhD thesis, on which the current book is based.

[5] Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[6] By 1956 Breton and Aragon were sworn enemies, after Aragon broke with surrealism in 1932 to join the Parti communiste français.

[7] Krauss was one of the editors of the journal *October*, which played a key role in the early critical reception of the Pictures Generation artists like Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, and Louise Lawler.

[8] Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe: ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris: Macula, 1995); *L'Empreinte* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997); *La ressemblance par contact: Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l'empreinte* (Paris: Minit, 2008).

[9] Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, eds., *Selected Writings, 1927–1934*, vol. 2, translated by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 207–221.

Raymond Spiteri
Victoria University of Wellington
raymond.spiteri@vuw.ac.nz

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