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**Marjorie A. Beale**, *The Modernist Enterprise: French Elites and the Threat of Modernity, 1900-1940*. Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1999. ix + 231 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.50 (cl). ISBN #0-8047-3511-5.

**Robin Walz**, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Paris*. U. of California Press, 2000. xii + 206 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 (cl). ISBN#0-520-21619-9.

Review by Charles Rearick, University of Massachusetts/Amherst.

The surrealists would have liked the strange juxtaposition of these two very different books in one review--the strange juxtaposition wrought by such mysterious forces as chance or the timing that brought the books together on a review editor's desk. On the one hand, Robin Walz's *Pulp Surrealism* focuses on some edgy popular culture that rejected mainstream morality and all manner of respectable tradition in the early twentieth century. On the other, Marjorie Beale's book examines technocratic and social Catholic elites who tried to shore up hierarchical society and traditional morality in the era of the world wars. Walz presents a mass culture that was imaginative and "insolent," and he puts the spotlight on famous surrealists who considered that kind of popular production congruent with their own work as an artistic elite. *The Modernist Enterprise*, in contrast, features sober thinkers who saw mass culture as a "threat" and who searched for ways of countering it. They wanted order and "progress," relying heavily on an instrumentalist rationality. The surrealists went in another direction entirely, prizing mass culture's potential to destabilize normal consciousness and society--indeed to revolutionize both. Unreason and reason, revolution and order--the oppositions seem stark.

Yet some common themes and unexpected convergences emerge from these two monographs. To begin with, the surrealists and the modernizing elites sought a sweeping transformation of French society. They all saw dramatic modernization already under way in technology and mass culture, markedly so during and even before the "Great War." They all wanted to direct and shape the changes themselves, leading the masses into a better society without working through the established political system. Yet none of them embraced everything "modern." The surrealists disliked Haussmann-style urbanism, for example, judging it ruinous to *flânerie* and the free play of offbeat pleasures. Beale's business elites were even more bent on preserving basic values of traditional culture, modernizing it enough to save it.

Walz introduces the surrealist sensibility in a chapter on Louis Aragon's description of a run-down nineteenth-century arcade, the *passage de l'Opera*. In Walz's reading of that part of *Le Paysan de Paris*, Aragon was repudiating not only urbanist destructiveness, but also the standard guidebook approach to Paris, two prongs of a repressive set of forces that produced a desiccated bourgeois order. As Baedeker-in-a-new-key, Aragon saw in the Opera *passage* a survival of a colorful, vanishing Paris, offering rich possibilities of un-mediated pleasures.

Drawing on Stephen Kern's *Culture of Time and Space* (among others), Walz observes that around the turn of the century such innovations as the telephone and the mass penny press (actually one-*sou* dailies) were transforming everyday experience and conveying strangely juxtaposed perceptions and sensational

news reports—in particular, detailed accounts of suicides and murders. Some forms of mass culture, that is, were tantamount to "surrealism before the letter," providing glimpses of an exciting new existence free of old stable frameworks. Consumers of the new cultural products were, before the surrealists, sampling the delights of disorienting experiences and a novel mix of time-and-space perceptions, subject to eruptions of the bizarre and the marvelous in everyday life. As partisans of that subversive potential, writers like Aragon had only to follow those veins of mass culture to lead the masses into still more enjoyment of the surreal in the everyday urban world. The self-conscious surrealist elite assumed the role of "alchemists," who would guide the people into a poetically rich new life.

The enormously popular novels featuring the master-criminal Fantômas are the best example of "pulp surrealism." With the many masks, the quick changes and endless escapes, the rebellion against established order, amazing gadgetry and gratuitous violence—the Fantômas stories were clearly overflowing with fantasies. Walz neatly elucidates the plot devices, especially the motif of changing identities, and gives us an excellent exegesis of the written narratives as works of fiction. Walz also situates Fantômas in a context of popular literature (stories of the "gentleman burglar" Arsène Lupin and American detective Nick Carter, for example). One could further consider affinities between the ever elusive "Genius of Evil" and staples of entertainment as magic-act metamorphoses and Georges Méliès's magical films, but Walz's *Pulp Surrealism* is limited to print culture. A historical question worth further discussion concerns the appeal of Fantômas stories in a particular time, difficult though the problem of historical interpretation is: did certain fantasies respond in some specific ways to the special conditions and mentalities of the prewar period? For students of history, it seems to me, the author's fascinating comments on the meanings of Fantômas for the determinate period 1911 to 1914 (or later if movies are included) are a bit scant.

The elites of Beale's *The Modernist Enterprise*, in contrast to Walz's sources, explicitly addressed what they saw as a particular conjuncture for French society, and they clearly articulated their ideas for change. They belonged to a tradition that the surrealists scorned—that of the Enlightenment as well the social-reform tradition of Saint-Simonian and Social Catholic theorists. Although none of them wholly embraced reason and the Enlightenment project of modernity, they tended to favor mechanistic theories and "scientific" techniques for all areas of life. Eager to rationalize commercial life and advertising, they advocated strong state regulations and corporatist controls—indeed, a whole new system based on "scientific rationality." Some of the leading theorists, such as Jean-Marie Lahy and Henri Fayol, however, sought to adapt Frederick Winslow Taylor's "scientific management" to French cultural traditions, giving more attention to the worker's life (social, moral, and spiritual) beyond the workplace. Their way to modernity was to be a distinctly French way.

In both books, mass-circulation newspapers figure as a major force of modernization—for better or worse. Walz takes us back to the *fin-de-siècle* for the emergence of the sensationalist mass press and its reporting of murders and suicides. In this account the popular newspapers appear in a positive light, as they prefigured surrealism, breaking with what was considered normal, introducing new perceptions of modern life and unexpected juxtapositions of events. In reporting *faits divers* above all, Walz shows, the popular papers were surrealist "before the letter," conveying a sense of a world that was mysterious and irrational, violent and bizarre, devoid of moral and logical anchors. Two kinds of stories serve as cases in point—the crimes of the alleged serial killer Landru and the reporting of suicides. The story of Landru loses none of the sensationalist punch of the original sources as Walz explains how the press created a macabre legend out of meager shreds of information, feeding fantasy and peppering it with morbid humor. In the chapter on suicides as *faits divers*, Walz shows the popular papers and the surrealists taking bizarre pleasure in contemplating suicide—with a number of surrealist writers carrying out the act themselves. (By coincidence, suicide comes up at the end of both books: Beale's final protagonist, Jean Coutrot, took his life in spring 1941).

Beale, in contrast, forcefully presents the shortcomings of the press, as elites saw them--venality, deception, corruption, and vulgar sensationalist reporting. During and after the First World War, she recounts, advertising and business elites proposed bold new ways of overhauling product promotion and publicity, drawing on scientific work in psychology. She also deftly traces a genealogy of those ideas and thinkers back in the nineteenth century, generally lesser known thinkers working in diverse fields. Some of the early twentieth-century ideas about advertising came strikingly close to notions held by the surrealists--ideas about communicating directly through the visual arts, bypassing the conscious mind and thought processes, commanding a kind of "automatic" attention and touching off "spontaneous" behavior. One of the advertising theorists, Paul Dermée, even used the word surreal and promoted the idea before the surrealists did.

*Au bout du compte*, the two histories under review illumine two sharply divergent currents of French culture. The story of Beale's elites and their efforts to find a French way of modernizing (without Americanizing or otherwise losing national distinctiveness) leads to Vichy and concludes with the Vichy career of Jean Coutrot. But she briefly points to the work of post-1945 technocrats and *dirigiste* planners as the continuation of her story. Her book is a welcome contribution to the prehistory of those postwar programs. Walz's study also points us toward a much bigger story than he has told. Although he has restricted his study to four "microhistories" of popular culture and their overlap with the surrealists' interests, the popular fiction and journalism that he examines led to much more than the surrealist movement. His book leaves us with the 1930s surrealists' judgment that popular culture was no longer vibrant and "insolent." It is not entirely clear why that was so, if it was. Surely the significance of the four microhistories could be enhanced by some commentary on "insolent popular culture" beyond the 'twenties, pointing out recurrent surrealist and "insolent" features in pulp fiction, popular song, film, and advertising. Such commentary would further strengthen the argument about the creative importance of popular culture and the continuities between the popular and avant-garde surrealism. Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces* fills out some of the subsequent story, albeit not in the same popular-culture genres that Walz has singled out.[1]

Modernization has often been associated with disenchantment and a sense of loss, as Marjorie Beale's introduction (following Max Weber et al.) reminds us. The books by Beale and Walz bring out more forward-looking, complicated, and creative responses, forged by groups in France that found exciting possibilities in the modern. Surrealists, Social Catholics, and technocratic elites in their diverse ways looked forward to a more richly humane social order. While the aesthetic avant-garde put hope in the liberating, exalting effects of subversive fantasy, technocrats pursued "fantasies of control" and an aesthetic of machine-like order. One side sought to control public opinion, while the other wanted to free the public imagination. Those divergent ways of reinventing life come across clearly and cogently in the engaging studies under review. Although each of the two books has plenty to offer on its own, you might read them in tandem, as I have, to see in a striking new light the range of rifts and fruitful tensions that beset French encounters with modernity.

## NOTES

[1] George Melly's *Paris and the Surrealists* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), a highly personal photographic essay, brings out the continuing presence of Surrealist touches in everyday life around the city today. For print culture and "shadowy" themes, Michael Miller's *Shanghai on the Seine: Spies, Intrigue, and the French between the Wars* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994) supplements Walz's history (and bibliography). For popular songs and surrealism, see Lucienne Canteloube-Ferrieu, (Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1981). My own recent book (1997) on the era of the world wars emphasizes a mainstream culture of songs and movies to which the "insolent" and surrealist productions could be viewed as an important counterpoint.

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