
Quentin Bajac, Clément Chéroux, Guillaume Le Gall,
Philippe-Alain Michaud, Michel Poivert, *La
Subversion des images. Surréalisme, photographie, film*

Simon Baker



Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/2999>

ISSN : 1777-5302

Éditeur

Société française de photographie

Référence électronique

Simon Baker, « Quentin Bajac, Clément Chéroux, Guillaume Le Gall, Philippe-Alain Michaud, Michel Poivert, *La Subversion des images. Surréalisme, photographie, film* », *Études photographiques* [En ligne], Notes de lecture, mis en ligne le 07 mai 2010, consulté le 13 juin 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/2999>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 13 juin 2022.

Propriété intellectuelle

Quentin Bajac, Clément Chéroux, Guillaume Le Gall, Philippe-Alain Michaud, Michel Poivert, *La Subversion des images. Surréalisme, photographie, film*

Simon Baker

RÉFÉRENCE

cat. d'exposition, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 2009, 480 pages, 44,90€.

- 1 *La Subversion des images* was an aggressive exhibition, an overwhelming assault on the senses, the cumulative result of the wealth, diversity, and intensity of the material, combined with an installation that was purposefully disorienting – a labyrinth of cut-through architecture and Kertesz-style carnival-curved, mirrored surfaces. It was also aggressive in an encyclopedic, authoritative, terminal sense and, as such, reminiscent of Georges Bataille's gnomonic prediction in his 1945 review essay *Surrealism*:

2 'They say that only what is dead can be fully understood ... the same thing could be said about surrealism. What it seems to be – or, more accurately, *what it is*, "for us" – has perhaps only a vague relation with *what it will be* if it is later considered to be a dead thing.'

3 The stake for every exhibition on surrealism in recent times, and indeed for exhibitions like *La Subversion des images*, which deal exclusively with surrealism and photography (albeit with lenses and papers used in every conceivable sense), is the forensic obligation to examine the body of the thing, to deal with the pathology of surrealism, without ever entertaining the notion that it should be allowed to die.

⁴ Since the paradigm-shifting exhibition *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, (Hayward Gallery, London, 1978), photography and surrealism have been drawn ever more closely toward their original positions. Through the form and content of that show, the curator, Dawn Ades, argued for the primacy of the printed page, as is done with the magazines and journals that were collectively authored and produced, and therefore sought to rebalance the scales away from the better known paintings and sculptures and toward obscure and marginal images, many of which were photographs, produced or merely *used* by surrealist artists and writers. And since then, inevitably, in both academic research and in exhibitions, the riddle of the surrealist photograph has exerted its strange fascination. Through *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1985) and then the inspired *L'Informe: mode d'emploi* (Centre Pompidou, 1996), Rosalind Krauss (with others) proposed a sophisticated rethinking of the complex relationship between surrealist (and dissident surrealist) philosophy and the photographic image. And then most recently, in *Undercover Surrealism* (Hayward Gallery, London, 2006), an exhibition devoted to the magazine *Documents* (and with which the author of this review was associated), the use-value of the photographic image (and the subversion thereof) was tied back into the broader context of European avant-garde publishing. *La Subversion des images* had all of this history and historiography to contend with in its attempt to produce something like the last word in exhibitions on surrealism and photography, without reading the subject its last rites. As Bataille also said, more presciently than prematurely, in 1946 (given the post-war legacy of the movement which *La Subversion des images* eschews altogether); 'today the books are in order on the shelves and the paintings adorn the walls. This is why I can say that the *great surrealism* is beginning.'

⁵ The team that put together *La Subversion des images* – under the direction of Quentin Bajac – Clément Chéroux, Guillaume Le Gall, Michel Poivert, and Philippe-Alain Michaud, set out not only to reassemble undisputed masterpieces of photographic surrealism from both public and private collections (the familiar, but nonetheless exquisite, roll-call of Man Rays, Ubacs, and Brassaï's), but to engage with the notion that not all that glittered in the surrealist lens was necessarily straightforward photographic art. The exhibition began, therefore (in deference, or reference perhaps, to Ian Walker's important book on surrealist photography, *City Gorged with Dreams*), not with a photograph, but with a painting: Joan Miro's 1925 *Peinture-Poème (ceci est la couleur de mes rêves)*. This signal of curatorial intent – philosophical enquiry, rather than historical reconstruction – set the tone for a bold thematic arrangement that sent the visitor through a maze-like sequence of spaces dedicated to distinct, but nevertheless inter-related, groups of works. In the first instance this meant meeting old friends in a room entitled 'L'action collective,' a stunning assembly of portraits, montages, and the photographs used to create them, that brought the original surrealist groups back from the mists of time and the obscurity of the printed page. As with every corner of this magnificent archaeological exposé, there were both well-known objects – vintage prints of undeniable quality that have been seen and re-seen in recent years – and their long-lost cousins, the original components of familiar images that even the most optimistic historian of the subject would have imagined had long ceased to exist.

⁶ This double aspect of the show – delivering familiarity and revelation in equal measure has to constitute its strongest characteristic – enabling both the general

public and specialist audiences to learn and to enjoy. One art historian who remembered visiting the *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* in 1978 remarked that he had understood the subject perfectly well when he had arrived, but that by the time he left the exhibition, he felt that he knew nothing at all. And there was an aspect of this same sensation on visiting *La Subversion des images* in that so much that had seemed lost, destroyed, or just soundly repressed, seemed miraculously to have reappeared, like lake-drowned corpses risen to the surface. To pursue this dark analogy a little further, Quentin Bajac and his team appeared to have found where surrealism's bodies were buried.

⁷ The installation of surrealist pornography, for example, cloaked (appropriately enough) behind the same plastic curtains found in commercial meat freezers, offered a hitherto unimagined level of unapologetically explicit libidinousness: Raoul Ubac's *Album* of close-up penetration casting the same artist's better known *Amazons* into sharp relief. And to learn that Man Ray had produced a one-handed 'Essai cinématographique: Two Women,' revealed a little more about the practical correlates of the surrealists' legendary 'Researches into Sexuality,' while at the same time reinstating the precarious tightrope connecting surrealism with its longstanding reputation for exploitative misogyny.

⁸ But such eye-openers (whether in disgust, shock, or delight) were far from being the richest lessons offered by the exhibition. In that regard one might place the balance of incredible diversity and technical facility, the ease with which street scenes, underwater close-ups (of octopi or exotic dancers), architectural details, x-rays and electricity, night scenes, nudes, entrails, and kitsch postcards could, impossibly, occupy a common cultural terrain. Of great value too was the serious way in which the curators had drawn the surrealists' principal publications, books, magazines, and even commercial advertisements, back into dialogue with the processes and practices through which they were created. The attentive visitor could not only, therefore, appreciate the unrestrained creativity of *poet-monteurs*, like André Breton, René Char, Salvador Dalí, and Dora Maar, but they could see and understand the very glue that held their work (and surrealism itself) together. It says volumes, too, about the impossible range of material gathered together that there is no space in this review even to mention most of the dazzling films included, or even begin to list those lesser known and even anonymous artists whose daring and creativity leapt off the wall.

⁹ It is, however, worth thinking for a moment about the catalogue, as beautifully designed and produced as one might expect, and as aggressive as the show it accompanied – albeit in an unexpected way – as anyone who had to carry a copy for any length of time will agree. Organized according to the same subdivisions as the exhibition, the book offers a distinct take on the material by setting it within an impressive scholarly regime, which bridges visual content and theoretical approach to great effect. As a means not only of perceiving and understanding the world (a dysfunctional alternative to the perception-conscious system), but a way of being in the world, surrealism does not always need a theoretical armature or carapace surrounding it. Surrealism, it could be argued, contains its own approach to itself, within itself: it conceals its own interpretative double somewhere within its hermetic poetry and so gets on very well in the absence of a Freudian comfort blanket or Lacanian pacifier. And it is to their great credit that the authors of the catalogue for *La Subversion des Images* have produced a series of essays that return the reader over and again to a central core

of surrealist writings (often directly contemporaneous with the images) to understand the production, circulation, consumption, and all-round *modus operandi* of lens-based surrealism.

¹⁰It is not, however, that there are no references to the expanded secondary literature; there are indeed many references to mostly francophone but some important anglophone examples of surrealist art history and theory. But in the catalogue, at its best, we are returned consistently to the words and ideas of the surrealists themselves, or to those whose writings and ideas had the greatest bearing on the visual culture of the time. Quentin Bajac's marvelous essay 'Le fantastique moderne,' for example, takes us on a tour of the surrealist unpicking of reality, everyday experience, and the importance of Atget's aesthetic, through the writings of Aragon, Breton, and Albert Valentin. And Guillaume Le Gall's 'Voir est un acte' takes on the problem of surrealist looking (and its relationship to the photographic image), with reference to the ground-breaking writings of Salvador Dalí. There are important essays on montage ('La coalescence et la suture' by Philippe-Alain Michaud); performance ('Les images du dehors' by Michel Poivert); and advertising ('Surréalisme garanti' by Clément Chéroux), which suggest new ways to bring together images about which many may have thought there was little new or interesting to be said; as well as a brilliant selection of textual sources in the Anthologie and an impressive and useful Chronologie of key dates and events.

¹¹Far more than a Bourriaud-style remixing of pre-existing material (curatorial post-production), what is offered in the catalogue, as in the show itself, are new categories that reframe and redefine the scope of their subject, pushing the boundaries of surrealism ever outwards while retaining its dark, cobwebbed corners. The key problem with the book, however, is the problem that it shares with the literature of surrealism itself in the anglophone world: in the absence of an English translation, many readers will have only the vaguest idea of its true complexity and relevance, and have to content themselves by being overwhelmed and disarmed by the seductive and subversive riches of the imagery it contains.

¹²It is quite possible, as some visitors to the show will have realized, that *La Subversion des images* will come to assume the kind of epic, iconic historical position of the great Dadashow that preceded it at the Centre Pompidou: that it too, will seem, in retrospect, to have been a once-in-a-generation opportunity to immerse oneself in the visual and conceptual language of a long-extinct avant-garde in such a way that its fossilized form, appeared, however briefly, to flutter its wings.