DEREK SAYER

MAKING TROUBLE

SURREALISM AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES

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Making Trouble:
Surrealism and the Human Sciences

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Around 1905 Picasso acquires a West African mask. It is beautiful, all planes and cylinders. He discovers cubism.

—James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*

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Preface

This essay started life as the 2015 Annual Methods Lab Lecture at Goldsmiths College, University of London. It was an invitation I was more than happy to accept, not least because the Methods Lab described itself as "a laboratory for the practice of sociological imagination." My original plan had been to use the lecture as an opportunity to clarify—for myself, perhaps, as much as others—why I had given my book *Prague: Capital of the Twentieth Century* (2013) the subtitle *A Surrealist History*. Beyond a brief preliminary discussion of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, whose attempt to grasp the modern condition through a montage of images rather than a chronological narrative or a coherent argument had informed both my title and my approach, I had said very little in the book itself about questions of theory or method. *Making Trouble* has since become much more than a gloss on *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century*. As one thing led to

another the text evolved into a freewheeling exploration of what surrealism as an "instrument of knowledge" (as Paul Éluard called it) might offer the human sciences—in which I include sociology and history, the academic disciplines in which I have spent my career, as well as anthropology, whose connections with surrealism have been long recognized by James Clifford, Michael Taussig, and others. It is probably the nearest thing to an intellectual credo I am ever to write.

Like much of my work over the last two decades this book has one foot in academia and the other in the arts. It is a creative tension I have found extraordinarily productive, *which informed both Prague and its predecessor The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (1998). But I am also well aware that as far as governments, funding agencies, and university managers are concerned I am swimming against the current. The methodological vagrancy I am advocating here is not likely to help anyone win research grants, publish in top-ranked journals, or get 4-star rankings for their "outputs" in the United Kingdom's fatuously misnamed Research Excellence Framework (REF). I have written this essay at the point of my formal retirement from a university system for whose future I am deeply pessimistic, not just because of the philistine depredations of politicians on both sides of the Atlantic but because of senior academics' willingness to strike Faustian bargains with agendas driven by income-generation and impact. When Susan Sontag was asked in 1995 by *Paris Review* whether she thought that "being an academic and being a creative writer are incompatible," she replied: "Yes. Worse than incompatible. I've seen academic life destroy the best writers of my generation." Once upon a time I would have strongly disagreed with her. Nowadays I fear she was

right. Spaces for academics to be creative are fast disappearing—to our collective cultural loss.

I would like to thank Mariam Motamedi-Fraser and Nirmal Puwar for organizing the event at Goldsmiths, as well as the audience for a stimulating hour-long discussion after the lecture. Craig Campbell, Karen Engle, Ben Highmore, Mark Jackson, John Jervis, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, Randolph Lewis, Vanessa Longden, Kimberly Mair, Michael Richardson, Benjamin Tallis, Jindřich Toman, and Yoke-Sum Wong all offered comments or advice on this text. I am deeply grateful for their support. After several rejections from publishers who found my manuscript too long for an article, too short for a book, or too idiosyncratic for present-day academic tastes, I owe particular thanks to Matthew Engelke and Marshall Sahlins at Prickly Paradigm for taking on this project. I am honored to be part of what has over the years become a pioneering venue for heretical voices in the academy. I hope my book matches the standards of prickliness set by the series, as well as contributing to the case for bringing imagination back to the human sciences.

Calgary, Alberta
5 July 2016

Prologue—
New York, December 1936

"Surrealism may amuse you, it may shock you, it may scandalize you, but one thing is certain: you will not be able to ignore it," promised a Faber and Faber advertisement for André Breton's *What Is Surrealism*, a pamphlet it (wrongly) claimed the surrealist leader had "written especially for the first International Surrealist Exhibition to be held in London." Readers were assured that Breton's text revealed surrealism "not as one more little sectarian affair designed to flutter the cafes of London and Paris, but as a deliberate and even a desperate attempt to transform the world." The exhibition, which ran from 11 June to 4 July 1936 at the New Burlington Galleries in Mayfair, has been better remembered since for Sheila Legge wandering Trafalgar Square in a torn white dress and facemask covered in roses as "the phantom of sex appeal" and Salvador Dalí nearly suffocating while giving a lecture in a deep-sea diving suit intended to represent a descent into his

unconscious. But Herbert Read was nevertheless probably right that "when the foam and froth of society and the press had subsided, we were left with a serious public of scientists, artists, philosophers and socialists." Beneath the stunts and the showboating surrealism was a deeply serious intellectual movement.

The foam and froth had meantime crossed the Atlantic. "One sure thing, you aren't going to find a solitary place to hide from surrealism this winter," warned *Harper's Bazaar*. *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, which opened on 7 December 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art, "turned out to be the most discussed exhibition in New York since the Armory Show of 1913." Coney Island came to Manhattan in all its vulgarity and enchantment. *Fantastic Art* played havoc with the boundaries between high art and popular culture, indecently muddling the avant-garde and kitsch. "Inside the front door of Manhattan's Museum of Modern Art this week," began *Time*'s December 14 cover story,

> oblong slabs of glass painted with black stripes revolved steadily under a six foot pair of red lips painted by Artist Man Ray. In other galleries throughout the building were a black felt head with a necklace of cinema film and zippers for eyes; a stuffed parrot on a hollow log containing a doll's leg; a teacup, plate and spoon covered entirely with fur.

The cover featured a Man Ray photograph of Salvador Dalí with the caption: "SURREALIST SALVADOR DALÍ—A blazing pine, an archbishop, a giraffe, and a cloud of feathers went out the window."

Julien Levy, whose Madison Avenue gallery had first introduced New York to surrealism four years earlier, cashed in on the brouhaha with an "art book,

anthology, lexicon, and manifesto" (with a cover by Queens homeboy Joseph Cornell) titled *Surrealism* and an exhibition of Dalí's latest paintings. It was the Catalan artist's fourth solo show at the gallery in as many years. Dalí was the perfect poster boy for surrealism as show business. His apotheosis would come three years later at the 1939 New York World's Fair, where he refused to exhibit in the official beaux-arts spaces and instead parked his "Dreams of Venus" pavilion in the Amusement Zone alongside the Wall of Death, the Drop of Doom, and a "Cuban Village" that promised "a completely nude girl in its voodoo sacrifice routine at the first show of opening day." In hindsight, Dalí's perverse cocktail of melting watches, burning giraffes, and topless "living liquid ladies" seems better attuned to the darkening times than the Fair's facile slogan "Building the World of Tomorrow with the Tools of Today" and futuristic illusions of the Perisphere and Trylon. World War II was six months away.

Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism was a bold venture for MoMA and its curator Alfred Barr, breaking with the rationalism of the modernist canon that the museum had sought to define through its earlier exhibitions *The International Style* (1932), *The Machine Age* (1934), and *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936). Barr admitted that "*Cubism and Abstract Art* was ... diametrically opposed in both spirit and esthetic principles" to *Fantastic Art*. His cover for *Cubism and Abstract Art* charts the evolution of modern art from Japanese prints, Van Gogh, neo-impressionism, and Cézanne through cubism, futurism, and expressionism to geometric and non-geometric abstraction. *Fantastic Art* surveyed a more chaotic landscape—but one that in retrospect also offered a more prescient intimation of what the rest of the century and its arts had in store

than the "skeletal clarity and purity of [Barr's] diagram." The focus of *Fantastic Art* was not on what is new in modernity but "the deep-seated and persistent interest which human beings have in the fantastic, the irrational, the spontaneous, the marvelous, the enigmatic, and the dreamlike."

Where *Cubism and Abstract Art* had carried the torch for "a Brave New World of art ... belonging to our century and to no other," Fantastic Art located surrealism within an atavistic trajectory that led back through Blake and Goya to Arcimboldo and Hieronymus Bosch—though Barr optimistically suggested that "many of the fantastic and apparently Surrealist works of the Baroque or Renaissance are to be explained on *rational* grounds rather than on a *Surrealist* basis of subconscious and irrational expression." He also included the "art of children" and the "art of the insane" in the exhibition, noting "many children and psychopaths exist ... in a world of their own unattainable to the rest of us save in art or dreams in which the imagination lives an unfettered life." This unwittingly foreshadowed the Nazis' venomous display of drawings by children and psychiatric patients in the infamous *Degenerate "Art"* exhibition of 1938, whose intention was to show that the "specific *intellectual ideal*" of modern art was "the *idiot*, the *cretin*, and the *cripple*" ("the *Negro* and the *South Sea Islander*," the catalogue added, was its "evident *racial ideal*"). We are entering a terrain where the boundaries between an enlightened modernity and the dark ages that preceded it are uncertain. *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* could as well have been titled the return of the repressed, and maybe it should have been given what was happening at the time in Europe. It was, after all, the year of the Berlin Olympics.

Despite his own modernist predilections, Barr acknowledged "It is probable that at no time in the past four hundred years has the art of the marvelous and anti-rational been more conspicuous than at the present time." This begs the obvious question—though Barr never asked it—of what it was about the period between the two World Wars that made surrealist art so popular when on the face of it we might have expected the classical modernist perspectives championed by MoMA to be better suited to the cultural expression of the *Zeitgeist*. But surrealism always dug beneath the face of things. Barr is right to stress that surrealism is as modern a movement as cubism, futurism, or the International Style rather than merely a continuation of a universal human fascination with the fantastic. But unlike other early twentieth-century -isms, it articulates the dark side of the force, seeking to bring to consciousness what modernist grand narratives of history-as-progress—including narratives of the Cartesian rational subject, a fantasy already undermined (as the surrealists well understood) by Sigmund Freud—had suppressed. World War I let slip the demons of modernity. Dada and surrealism were responses to the resulting crisis of western culture—modernity's dissident self-consciousness, we might say. After the brief interlude of the jazz age the Great Crash of 1929 headed things downhill again until by 1936 dreamscapes of the fantastic loomed ever larger over the horizons of the real. The Holocaust and Hiroshima were waiting in the wings.

The surrealists always insisted that surrealism was an instrument of knowledge rather than just a literary or artistic movement. A central part of their critique of the white, western, bourgeois civilization they had come to despise was a sustained challenge to modern

scientific rationality as a privileged vehicle for understanding the world. In this respect they anticipated some of the core arguments of later postcolonial and feminist perspectives, seeking to provincialize the privileged standpoints from which knowledge is usually derived. *Making Trouble* explores what taking this claim seriously might entail for the human sciences. Like an earlier explorer of this terrain, Ben Highmore, I treat surrealism as "a form of social research into everyday life" and "see its products not as works of art but as documents of this social research. In this way artistic techniques such as collage become methodologies for attending to the social." In the course of this discussion I draw upon a broad array of sociological, anthropological, and cultural theorists as well as creative writers, artists, and photographers. Among them are Roland Barthes, Robert K. Merton, Paul Feyerabend, Harold Garfinkel, Emile Durkheim, Milan Kundera, Susan Sontag, Georges Bataille, James Clifford, Michel Leiris, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Aimé Césaire, Humphrey Jennings, Tom Harrisson, Walter Benjamin, Eduardo Galleano, and Horace Walpole—plus a large contingent of Dada and surrealist writers and artists. Above all there is the towering figure of André Breton. It is my hope that (to borrow a concept from Milan Kundera) we may find density in their unexpected encounters.

All were in their different ways troublemakers; all would have subscribed to Gaston Bachelard's dictum "*In the domain of thought imprudence is a method*." None would have been seen dead following the painting-by-numbers recipe for knowledge production, taken from the website of Britain's national research funding agency for the social sciences, with which this essay begins—a nadir of the contemporary

academic imagination that suggests Max Weber was right a century ago to end *The Protestant Ethic* with his fears of a future of "mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance," in which "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart" rule the roost. Bachelard held the inaugural chair in history and philosophy of sciences at the Sorbonne. It is entirely to the point, however, that I quote him here not from an academic journal but from an article published in *Inquisitions*, an avant-garde magazine edited by onetime surrealists Louis Aragon, Roger Caillois, and Tristan Tzara. The article first appeared in English—alongside Samuel Beckett's translations of Paul Éluard's poems, film scenarios for Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *The Andalusian Dog* and Joseph Cornell's *Monsieur Phot*, and illustrations from Max Ernst's collage-novel *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*—in Julien Levy's anthology *Surrealism*, published to illuminate what was going on the year Coney Island came to Manhattan.