Surrealism

**Definition:** surrealism from *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

(1925) : the principles, ideals, or practice of producing fantastic or incongruous imagery or effects in art, literature, film, or theater by means of unnatural or irrational juxtapositions and combinations

**sur•re•al•ist** \-list\ n or adj

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Summary Article: SURREALISM

From *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*

**I. Overview**

One of the principal experimental movements of the 20th c., surrealism grew from a Paris-based group of young poets and artists to a broadly international intellectual phenomenon, gaining adherents and fellow travelers throughout the world from the 1920s through the late 1960s. The word *surrealism* designates two major poetic inclinations. It refers, first, to the active, organized network of friends and collaborators who contributed to surrealist periodicals, met regularly in cafés, and signed the group's political tracts. At the same time, *surrealism* also signifies a more general tendency in poetry, plastic arts, and thought associated with experimental techniques such as automatic writing, collage, the game of "exquisite corpse," and the analysis of dreams.

For André Breton (1896-1966), a leading poet and principal theorist of the movement, the distinction between a committed surrealist practice and a generalized surrealism hinged less on the use of formal techniques than on a commitment to fusing the group's poetic ambitions with a liberatory political imperative. As Breton put it in a 1934 speech, "What Is Surrealism," the movement evolved according to an unceasing aversion to belles lettres, a wish "at all costs to avoid considering a system of thought as a refuge." Surrealism pursued instead a wide-ranging set of investigations that contributed to the intellectual as well as literary life of the 20th c. Pioneering the Fr. reception of G.W.F. Hegel and Sigmund Freud after World War I, surrealism was instrumental to mod. devels. in psychoanalysis, philosophy, and aesthetics. Surrealist poets and artists likewise participated in contemp. thinking about gender and subjectivity, as well as in the fields of ethnography and political philosophy. In spite of its predominantly Fr. origins, active surrealist groups developed—and, in some cases, continue to exist today—throughout Eastern and Western Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, and North Africa, as well as in the U.S. and Japan. Moreover, as a major intellectual movement between and after the world wars, surrealism offered both an influence and a target for later experimental groups, incl. Negritude, existentialism, *lettrisme*, Oulipo, Fluxus, situationism, magical realism, the theorists of *Tel Quel*, and, more broadly, the feminist and anticolonial movements of the post-World War II era.

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This broad yet heterodox set of resonances owes much to the availability of surrealism as a freestanding set of creative activities beyond the organized movement. Surrealism's hist. is rife with debates about the consequences of abstracting its poetic devices and creative processes from the group's political imperatives. All the same, a large number of so-called excommunicated, marginal, and dissident figures claimed to practice no less viable forms of surrealism. Other poets and artists have engaged with surrealism more obliquely, based on their interest in surrealist poets or techniques or their pursuit of the movement at a geographical or historical remove.

II. Definitions

In the words of literary critic Chénieux- Gendron, surrealism presents itself less as a concept or literary-historical school than as "a machine for integration." Refusing the divisions on which Enlightenment reason is founded—between genius and hack, art and nonart, private experience and public politics, truth and falsehood—surrealism sought to mingle imagination, expression, and desire in ways that involved all the institutions and social forms that affected mod. life.

Breton, in his first Manifeste du surréalisme (Manifesto of Surrealism, 1924), gave two provisional definitions of surrealism: the first describes a creative process, the second a philosophy of mind. Both announced a fundamental break with existing modes of communication and the conventional manner in which one perceives and accepts the exterior world. The first definition promotes the practice of "psychic automatism," the work of disclosing repressed activities of the mind through oral, written ("automatic writing"), or other means. The second definition, called "encyclopedic" by Breton, expands on the first; it describes the epistemological and social effects of the "actual functioning of thought" outlined in the first definition. According to Breton, surrealism forges an alternative network of signs and meanings capable of replacing the existing systems we take for granted; it proposes the "superior reality" of discomfiting associations, powerful dream states, sexual desire, and the disinterested play of thought.

Throughout the movement's hist., the surrealists developed numerous experimental artistic and critical strategies. In addition to automatic writing, surrealist practices included the creation of collage poems and multimedia poèmes-objets; the exploration of cities according to the dictates of chance; the collection of found objects ("readymades" and trouvailles) and found poetry; the simulation of hysterical and psychotic states; and collaborative poetic exercises such as the "exquisite corpse" game, in which hybrid phrases or images are composed by participants unaware of what the other contributions look like. More than the sum of its poetic devices, surrealism describes the project of using these and other techniques toward a renewal of the *imagination and an application "to the principal problems of life." Poetry in this context becomes a means and not an end: "Lyricism is the development of a protest," declared Breton and his colleague Paul Éluard (1895-1952) in Notes sur la poésie (1936).

III. History

Surrealism began in the same manner as it persisted for more than 50 years: through a series of encounters and upheavals that first took place in the aftermath of World War I. The young Fr. poets Breton and Louis Aragon (1897-1982), who both trained as medical students during the war, met Philippe Soupault (1897-1990), himself a war veteran, through Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918). After publishing early poems in avant-garde jour., they founded their own jour., Littérature, in 1919. This ironically titled periodical, whose early issues featured poems by Paul Valéry, André Gide, Pierre Réverdy, Léon-Paul Fargue, Max Jacob, and other older modernists, along with unpublished texts by

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Stéphane Mallarmé, Apollinaire, and Arthur Rimbaud, soon became the flagship jour. for the Parisian incarnation of Dada. With the arrival of Tristan Tzara (1896-1963) from Zurich in 1919, Parisian Dada became the gathering place for a contentious group of young poets galvanized by their contempt for France’s postwar efforts to return to bourgeois normality and in particular for the resurgence of nationalism and xenophobia in Europe.

Over the next several years, the Paris Dada group expanded to include the poets Éluard, Benjamin Péret (1899-1959), and Robert Desnos (1900-45), as well as the artists Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Man Ray, and Francis Picabia. After collaborating on the first extended work of automatic writing, Les Champs Magnétiques (The Magnetic Fields, 1919), Breton and Soupault assumed editorial control of Littérature, which became increasingly attentive to literary hist. The jour., which launched a "new series" in 1922, fused its Dada iconoclastic with surveys about the group's literary preferences. As their ranks expanded, the group began to scandalize canonical Fr. cultural figures, while championing an alternative genealogy of literary precursors excluded from official Fr. culture. This latter group included—along with the largely Germanic Dada movement itself—Ger. romantics such as Novalis, Gérard de Nerval, Achim von Arnim, and Hegel, as well as Freudian psychoanalysis; the ideologically unsettling work of the Marquis de Sade; and symbolist poets such as Charles Baudelaire, Germain Nouveau, and Rimbaud. Of particular significance to the young protosurrealist was the virtually unknown Comte de Lautréamont (pseud. of Isidore Ducasse, 1846-70), whose elaborate metaphors would deeply inform surrealist poetics, most notably the line from Les Chants de Maldoror (1869), "as beautiful as the chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table."

This increased historical self-consciousness had much to do with the protosurrealist group’s break with Dada and its subsequent emergence, in 1924, as the surrealist movement. The genealogy of visionary and subversive figures assembled by the Littérature group would form the conceptual basis for surrealist thinking and the common ground for subsequent articulations of surrealist poetics. These "precursors" were notable for the extent to which they reoriented the arts from the aesthetic to the epistemological, replacing the contemplation of beauty with an investigation into "the marvelous," defined by Aragon in 1924 as "the contradiction that reveals itself within the real."

Apollinaire himself had used the word surréaliste to qualify his satirical play Les Mamelles de Tirésias (The Breasts of Tirésias), first staged in 1917. In separating themselves rhetorically and ideologically from Dada, the surrealist group appropriated the term for the masthead of its flagship jour. La Révolution surréaliste (1924-29) and redefined it in texts such as Breton's manifesto and Aragon's "Une Vague de rêves" (A Wave of Dreams, 1924). The surrealist coalition thus formed consisted of both poets and artists incl., along with Breton, Soupault, and others, the writers Antonin Artaud, René Crevel, Michel Leiris, Raymond Queneau, Roger Vitrac, and eventually a rehabilitated Tzara. A number of artists joined forces with them— incl. Ernst, Miró, Salvador Dalí, Luis Buñuel, Yves Tanguy, and André Masson—along with a largely autonomous group of Belgian surrealists that included René Magritte, E.L.T. Mesens, and Paul Nougé. Under the leadership of Breton, there emerged a laboratory atmosphere probing lang., human relationships, objects, and sites in the contexts of psychoanalysis, ling., ethnography, alchemy, and the laws of probability. Much of the theoretical writing, poetry, accounts of experiments, and surrealist games appeared in the series of jour. that began with La Révolution Surréaliste and continued with Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution (1930-33) and Minotaure (1933-39), as well as later jour. around the world, incl. The London Bulletin (1938-40), Tropiques (1941-45), VVV(1942-44), NEON (1948-49), Médium (1953-55), Les Lèvres nues (1954-58), and Le
In 1924, the surrealist group marked the death of the novelist Anatole France with a defamatory pamphlet "A Corpse," which brought them into contact with a group of young Marxist intellectuals from the jour. Clarté who had similarly expressed their critique of jingoistic Fr. tributes to the late novelist. The ensuing collaboration would lead to a foray into organized leftist politics, stemming from the combined group's protest against Fr. colonial activity in Morocco during the Rif War (1920-26). Their increasing political involvement led to numerous disagreements and exclusions, which have often characterized accounts of this period. From 1925 through 1939, the surrealists would continually struggle to maintain their political thrust in the face of an increasingly orthodox Communist Party, as well as a gradual rightward turn in Fr. culture during the 1930s. During this period, the surrealists sought to uphold not only the subversive quality of their work but the imperative for an experimental poetics of the revolutionary Left as well. Resisting the enshrinement of socialist realism as Stalinism's official revolutionary style, the surrealists advocated for a fundamental upheaval in human consciousness that drew as much from collective poetic activity, psychoanalysis, and the unruliness of sexual desire as from Communist militancy. A second generation of active surrealists included René Char (1907-88), Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), Jules Monnerot (1909-91), A. Pieyre de Mandriargues (1909-91), Lise Deharme (1898-1980), Jehan Mayoux (1904-75), Gisèle Prassinos (b. 1920), Georges Hugnet (1906-74), Vítězslav Nezval (1900-58); and the artists Hans Bellmer, Claude Cahun, Leonora Carrington, Jindřich Štyrský, Toyen, Meret Oppenheim, and Victor Brauner.

During the 1930s and 1940s, surrealist groups emerged in other cities threatened by fascism—particularly Prague, Bucharest, Tokyo, and London. As the Nazi occupation of France forced the Parisian surrealists to disperse, the older surrealists also extended their internationalism, with Breton and others visiting and working with intellectuals in Martinique, Haiti, Mexico, Quebec, and New York. After the war, Breton's return to Paris and a major international surrealist exhibition in 1947 marked a renewal of the movement's activity in France, while incurring increasing pressure from younger intellectual movements on the Left, such as existentialism. The Breton-centered group would continue its activities with an anti-Stalinist and anticolonial emphasis, becoming particularly active in its support of Algerian independence in the 1950s. Later incarnations of the movement emphasized unconventional modes of political leftism based on ideas of collectivity derived from thinkers other than Karl Marx, such as Charles Fourier, as well as from a revised genealogy of indigenous and hermetic "precursors" from around the world. After Breton's death in 1966, the Parisian movement continued for three years before officially disbanding in 1969, though some participants contested this decision.

Alternative modes of surrealist activity continue to permeate the arts throughout Europe and Latin America, particularly in countries previously under authoritarian regimes. With a particular focus on anticolonial struggle and independence movements, the various incarnations of surrealism have remained committed to a political poetics: as Breton famously put it, "Beauty will be convulsive or it will not be." Figures in the broader surrealist diaspora include the Latin and South Am. poets César Moro (1903-56), Octavio Paz (1914-98), Aldo Pellegrini (1903-73), Braulio Arenas (1913-88), Enrique Molina (1910-97), and Enrique Gomez-Cordova (1915-95); the Franco-Egyptian poets Joyce Mansour (1928-86) and Georges Henein (191473); the Romanian poets Gherasim Luca (1913-94), Paul Celan (1920-70), and Gellu Naum (1915-2001); the U.S. writers Franklin Rosemont (1943-2009), Penelope Rosemont (b. 1942), Mary Low (1912-2007), and Ted Joans (1928-2003); the Fr. writers José Pierre (1927-99), Jean Schuster (1929-95), Nora Mitra (21-61), Gerard Legrand (1927-99), and Julien Gracq (1910-2007);
and artists such as Alexander Calder, Arshile Gorky, Matta, Wifredo Lam, Dorothea Tanning, Remedios Varo, Mimi Parent, Nelly Kaplan, Maya Deren, and Jan Švankmajer.

Since 1965, there has been extensive research on surrealism, particularly in France, the U.K., and the U.S. Much scholarly documentation has been collected in archives such as the Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet in Paris and at research forums such as the Centre de Recherche sur le Surréalisme, and disseminated in its jour. Mélusine. In the U.S., major holdings include the collections at the Museum of Modern Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art, the Getty Research Institute, the Menil Collection, and the Harry Ransom Center, as well as at the Universities of Iowa and Michigan.

See avant-garde poetics; france, poetry of; modernism.


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