

There has always been art – at least in a Western context – which deals implicitly or explicitly with psychological disorders such as neuroses, phobias, or, generally speaking, the various symptoms of a more or less repressed sexuality. This was the case long before psychology and related disciplines made these areas a part of society's consciousness. So one must bear in mind that today we apply a particular view to our interpretation of the art that was not possible at the time it was created, and therefore the danger of overshooting the mark is always present. If we did not have the option of including subconscious processes and their attendant disorders among our reference points, our understanding of artistic practices and their reception today would generally be extremely limited.

However, when this kind of view of art is permitted, it creates many problems, as in many cases it cannot be used as a sort of blueprint or a mere instrument which will explain artistic behaviour. Probably the most obvious case of this is the bourgeois stereotype of the artist as a mad genius – or at the very least, a commuter between the spheres of the normal and the pathological. Quite apart from the currently accepted idea that any such definition interprets the borderline between the normal and the pathological in such a way that it only allows the artist to exist as a mere symptom of the designation of this border – thereby building certain redundancies into the definition – this view

ultimately strips the individual who creates art of any reflexive intention, reducing him or her to a helpless victim of pathologies. Therefore, such definitions are really only interesting for the information they provide about the defensive and reactionary fears of society at large, and about how art is exploited to give shape to those fears.

Artists have understood this all too simplified instrumentalization of a psychological level faster than any cultural theory. And they have responded to it in very different ways. In some cases, they attempted to neutralize such views by concentrating wholly on formal aspects of artistic representation: on various ways of perceiving images or figures – not forgetting the demands of the discipline, but rather by raising cognitive psychological questions instead of psychoanalytical ones. Others did exactly the opposite, acting as if they had adopted the image of the pathological artist in their works and themes – which often led to a fatal embrace of that very image. Here we are primarily looking at the Surrealists, who referred directly to Freud's theory of the unconscious and instrumentalized it in their works a few short years after it was first formulated.

Two things are important here. Firstly, it is wrong to believe that Surrealism simply transferred psychoanalysis or parts of it into the artistic sphere; that it represented any kind of extrapolation or proof of psychoanalysis as a theory. Rather, psychoanalysis was basically used as a sort of Pop

Theory in the world of art. It is applied on the surface as it were, so as to undermine the nature and the role of art and artists – a thoroughly subversive device. This relationship between a scientific discipline and art is all about pretending, about a kind of citation that was linked much later with the term “postmodern”. On the other hand, as Walter Benjamin commented, one cannot regard Surrealism as a disconnected alternative to the Modern – which was constructed on clear and reduced forms and kept in mind concepts such as abstraction and an autonomous definition of art. Rather, Surrealism and its related theories are positioned opposite the “classic” art of the Modern in such a way that they unmask its deceptive normality and attempt to bring to the surface what the Modern represses. This art takes up the dark side of the Modern and illuminates it from a different, uncanny perspective. Even its organic, complex structures – Surrealism's homage to a far older ornamentation – should not simply be seen as a reactionary rejection of the clarity of Modern form, which in turn takes us back to a pre-modern state of affairs; rather, the structures are the physical representation of another, suppressed side of this very form. This was also made manifest through the blurring of the borders between the mental and the physical and between the organic and the inorganic. The differences from psychoanalysis also make this obvious – if one looks at Freud's theoretical treatment of

fetishism, it shows that everyday objects reappear in dreams in a different, unexpected light as a result of sexual repression; that processes of change or abstraction are involved here which leave objects transformed. By contrast, in Surrealism, everyday forms and objects typically appear as just that – unchanged – thus pointing out the pathological concealed within these objects. There is no formal creation of symbols because the objects themselves have been imbued with symbolism.

The sinister side of the “other” was, for Surrealism, the normal of the “one”; that is, what the rest of the Modern movement perceived as the real. One could go so far as to say here that this development was a forerunner of what we in our present culture experience as the complete deconstruction of the concept of reality – the real in the day-to-day sense of the word; as a construct which remains ultimately unattainable, existing as a fantasy somewhere between virtual levels. This dark side of the Modern, the psychic abyss, which was adopted by Surrealism and was later expanded upon by movements as varied as Viennese Action Painting, Arte Povera and some streams of Pop Art and Concept Art, is an indication from the outset that there is a deep crisis in the ideology of the Modern, and that, ultimately, when one speaks of the Postmodern, one will have realized that the subject along with the real – as it was defined in the Modern – has long been lost.

THE BARE IMAGE

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