

A Striptease in Pink Limelight: Removing the Veil between the Subjective and Objective

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The general impression one gets is that here there is a group of young people who haven't got the guts to tackle anything seriously and attempt to justify themselves by an elaborate rationalisation racket. (Jean, 1980, p.368)

This was the response from Communist-affiliated newspaper *The Daily Worker* which greeted the 1936 surrealist exhibition in London. Yet the question of practical action was not new to the surrealist movement. It had long been the aim of surrealism (in fact since the first manifesto of 1924) to resolve (or perhaps more accurately, dissolve) the contradictions that appear to plague human existence and thereby establish some form of super or 'sur' reality; the most obvious articulation of this being the sustained attempt to make more permeable the barriers between conscious and unconscious phenomena. This was in brief the surrealist revolution: to create a world that might more easily accommodate the irrational and along with it otherwise repressed or ignored desire.

It would be reasonable to deduce from the prefix 'sur' that surrealism, like most other modernist philosophies (if indeed one might suggest that such cogent articulations existed broadly), was proposing a form of transcendence. Andre Breton, however, was quick to correct such assumptions, insisting that surrealism's desire had always been to, in his words, 'deepen the foundations of the real' (1978b, p.115). It was very much at the level of lived experience that surrealism hoped to achieve the point at which 'life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, are not perceived as contradictions' (Breton, 1978b, p.129). Whatever Breton's claims, however, it is easily observable that surrealism's so-called

preoccupation with being able to effect some form of political, social and even material transformation became far more pronounced with his second surrealist manifesto of 1929.

This was the result of a number of factors, foremost amongst which was the challenge posed to surrealism by the growth of fascism in Europe and, consequently, the increasing political and ethical sway of the Communist party. In Communism surrealism encountered a discourse which questioned not only the practicability, but also the political legitimacy of its mission to bring about fundamental transformation. Indeed here we encounter the perennial paradox between the role of the artist and that of the revolutionary; the intellectual and the insurgent. This is a conundrum which the English surrealist Herbert Read attempts to resolve by arguing that it is the artist's duty to seek to bridge the apparent gulf between subjective and objective experience:

In dialectical terms we claim that there is a continual state of opposition and interaction between the world of objective fact - the sensational and social world of active and economic existence - and the world of subjective fantasy. This opposition creates a state of disquietude, a lack of spiritual equilibrium, which it is the business of the artist to resolve. He resolves the contradictions by creating a synthesis, a work of art which combines elements from both these worlds, eliminates others, but which for the moment gives us a qualitatively new experience. (1959, p.26)

In his attempt to resolve this seemingly insuperable division in both experience and in the role of revolutionary art, Breton would pen the Second Manifesto, in which he provides the surrealist response to the Communist imperative to act. Ironically, and perhaps in true surrealist fashion (one hears the echo of the *Daily Worker's* review), he lights upon the primary *theoretical* tenet of Marxism, dialectical materialism, to support his argument. In the second Manifesto he asks:

How could one accept the fact that the dialectical method is to be applied validly only to the solution of social problems? It is the whole aim of surrealism to supply it with "not at all

conflicting possibilities” of application in the most immediate conscious domain. (1978b, p.129)

Breton’s appeal to dialectical materialism as a theoretical principle common to both surrealist and Marxist practice was much aided by the arrival of a new recruit to the movement. Nadeau Comments rather extravagantly, ‘In the evening of this epoch rose the star of Salvador Dali, whose personality and activity were to cause the movement to take a new step’ (1987, p.165). Yet this description of Dali’s arrival in Paris is only somewhat less grandiose than Dali’s own.

In *The Unspeakable Confessions of Salvador Dali*, the transcription of Dali’s verbal account of his life, the chapter dedicated to evoking his encounter with the French capital is entitled: ‘How to Conquer Paris’. It begins, ‘I landed there one morning with my sister and aunt, to judge its distance and size, as a boxer does during a round of studying his opponent’ (Dali, 1976, p.74). Certainly Breton welcomed Dali’s process of ‘voluntary hallucination’, which Dali would later call his paranoid critical method, and celebrated it as the means by which the surrealists might overthrow not only that which ‘oppresses us in the moral order,’ but also that which ‘“physically”, as they say, deprives us of a clear view’ (Breton, 1978a, p.54).

Dali did not specifically name paranoia as the pathological process employed in his hallucinatory manipulation of phenomenological reality until 1930. By this point he had already laid the foundation for his paranoid critical theory by outlining his belief that there existed an imaginary vocabulary which underpinned the reality presented to perception, and that, as a result, such reality ultimately functioned symbolically. Through peeking into this realm ‘behind things’ one is confronted with the structure of one’s obsessive thoughts. This procedure threatens not only the symbolic fabric of the world but also the autonomous and seemingly resolved ego which navigates it.

Through inducing a paranoiac response to the world and its objects, Dali sought to freeze, in mid-transfer, the dialectic which furnishes perception. Paranoia for Dali constitutes a ‘will to systematize’ the stimuli of the external world. He maintains that this is in no way different from the way in which phenomena are determined and organised via convention. Yet the ego of the paranoiac would seem to be implicated in such a systematisation in a way that the non-pathological ego is not. Yet the delusion here is rather that of the non-paranoiac insofar as he is incapable of recognising the imaginary forms essential to his own construction which pass beneath the symbols he interprets and exchanges as his reality. He is the oblivious fence in a black market economy run according to the dual imperatives of repression and desire. Or perhaps he was, until postmodernism and social constructionism called upon him to recognise that even where he thought himself free, amongst his symbols, his subjectivity is, in fact, still manufactured by ‘otherness’.

In essence Dali’s method calls us to recognise that our phenomenological experience is composed of a dialectic, whereby our final perception has already covered over what Breton referred to as the ‘uninterrupted becoming of objects’ (1978b, p.137). Such a term conveys a process whereby it is through the introjection of certain images generated by our encounter with the material world that we formulate our ego, which is therefore at base, constituted by alterity. It is a process through which our being desperately seeks to systematise stimuli around its will to order, and to make of itself something concrete and discrete. As Lacan would later write, it is in achieving an ego that the individual fixes on a delusion that frees his world (through ‘free’-zing him) but which also significantly creates the contradiction between subjective and objective:

In fact, this formal fixation, which introduces a certain rupture of level between man’s organisation and his *Umwelt*, is the very condition that extends indefinitely his world and his power, by giving his objects their polyvalence and

symbolic polyphony, and also their potential as defensive armour. (1997, p.20)

The ego is unwilling to face the determinate imagery that underpins it, as this is not only a history of experience but also of the precariousness of the self, and it is a history of invasions. An encounter with such intimate imagery results in a sense of vertigo which generates a paranoiac panic in the ego. It becomes a process of unlocking from our phenomenological experience of otherness or worldliness, both the images and attendant subjectivities that underlie them. Our salvation (if it can be referred to as such) comes then from using the Other, the outside, the object, to reveal the dialectic which has resulted in an ego that is unwilling or incapable of becoming radically self-reflexive, as ultimately this will mean its dissolution. If we have lost ourselves in a mirror it is through a reflection that we might trace our way home.

Thus Dali's theory really calls upon us to acknowledge that the apparent opposition between the objective and subjective is the result of an ego that refuses to read its constitution in its perceptions, and furthermore to acknowledge that it is composed of objects, or at least that identity is profoundly bound up with the subject's encounter with alterity. It is important to remember, however, that what Dali is advocating is not merely paranoia, which would itself mean becoming trapped in a particular epoch in the individual's becoming and thus a fixation with a particular organisation of the ego and its objects in the imaginary; rather he means to obtain an open subjectivity that is free to trace its history and the relationship between materiality and consciousness.

In following the avenues of images we can re-modulate our reality and our subjectivity or vice versa, as they are in Dali's terms, 'consubstantial'. Yet Dali asks one to remember that such images are themselves only representations, but ones which may bring us closer to origins and the ideal which may well have been responsible for all

subsequent adoptive identifications, or, to put it another way, the expansion of our imaginary universe.

Dali indicates that shit, blood and putrefaction are, for him, the formative simulacra of a primary fantasy which underlie reality, and may in turn ‘eclipse *ideal* things’ by offering themselves instead (Dali, 1998b, p.118). These images go unrecognised in the tyranny of conventional or moralistic representation. It is these simulacra, however, ‘whose appearance reality painfully tries to imitate’ (1998b, p.118) as Dali puts it, and thereby it is the awareness of these determinate signifiers behind reality, which ‘leads us to the *desire* for *ideal* things’ (1998b, p.118). Such an insight is afforded by the paranoid capacity to decode the dialectic which reality presents to us.

It is in this tracing of chains of signification (suspended, not really so much below, as in and through objects) that the desire for the ideal is uncovered. Paranoid systematisation is a re-ordering of perception, and therein reality, one which manipulates the world and re-navigates the self. If one is able to remain critically aware while inducing paranoia, one can open up the play of representations which shape perceptual reality: the network of chains made up of metaphor (the images) and metonymy (the desire for the ideal which the lack that is the image invokes) which stretch across the unconscious.

To follow the breadcrumbs of such images into the unconscious does not bring one to any single *true* representation as one can never know whether the series of representations ‘has a limit or whether, as we have every reason to believe, such a limit does not exist’ (Dali, 1998b, pp.116-117), yet it does afford one some sort of greater or more authentic (un)consciousness. Dali does indicate, however, that it is possible, through repeatedly engaging with the series of representations, to get an impression of their source, namely some sort of ideal image. Thus he would have us believe that the more one attempts to bring reality closer to an authentic representation of desire, the more one ‘betrays a hatred of reality and a need

for refuge in an ideal world, just as what happens in infantile neurosis' (1998b, p.118).

Dali's paranoia attempts to uncover the full range of simulacra which successively substitute for an ideal, showing, in his pursuit of this ideal, that such a range is potentially present in any one perception. In doing so he reveals the dialectic behind a symbolic real, consisting of a series of other signs, and through association with an ideal, all signs. These associations, in their patterns, trace the line or the trajectory of our desire. Indeed the code operates precisely because it is able to link us to our original desires, yet perversely enough, its system of representation has impacted on our desire to the point where we misrecognise it.

Dali asserts that he does not know in which, if any, of the signs he uncovers the truth lies, merely that to uncover them is to encourage the desire for ideal things. This is reflected in Dali's poem 'The Grand Masturbator'. In it Dali creates a list of images populating unconscious avenues which form a regressive and imaginary topology. If one follows these lanes one finds two statues of the Grand Masturbator. The doubling of this image in some ways anticipates Lacan's mirror stage, and just as with the mirror stage, these two statues are far from reflections of one another.

One finds the second Masturbator at the end of the path, behind the first, 'he is smaller, his face softer and his adolescent beard is slightly besmirched / with real shit' (1998a, p.124) representing, perhaps, that he is closer to the sources of infantile sexuality as he bears its insignia (simulacra). Is Dali here attempting to go beyond the salutary imago of the ideal ego and locate what was left behind in the mirror? In other words is he reaching even further back to the Real? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that Dali identifies the tide of unconscious images flowing from childhood and evoked by the expressions of these figures as being 'attached to the death principle' (1998a, p.124).

Here of course Dali displays an awareness of Freud's article 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (first published in 1920) in which Freud introduced

his conception of a ‘death instinct’ or principle to accompany and rival the ‘pleasure principle’. In ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, Freud asserts that sexual instincts provide for a will to unity, ‘our sexual instincts would coincide with the Eros of the poets and philosophers which holds all living things together’ (1991, p.323). The death instinct becomes that which represents ‘the most universal endeavour of all living substance’ namely to return to the ‘quiescence of the inorganic world’ (1991, p.323).

In attaching his unconscious imagery to the death principle, Dali is suggesting that these simulacra, in their evocation of the ideal, mask and indicate a further desire - one for disintegration:

decomposition / of rotting donkeys / of rotting horses / of rotting cats / of rotting horses / of rotting mouths / of rotting chickens/ of horrible rotting roosters (1998a, p.124).

Here is the end of Dali’s travels into the imaginary realm: it is the dissolution of the ego and its incorporation not into the ideal-ego, but rather into a disunity of substances, images and objects.

The statues of the Grand Masturbator are flanked by two William Tell statues, which together have:

the sort of relationship and were distributed in such a way as to provoke a mental crisis similar to the one that can be produced in the mind by asymmetry, bringing about a false confusion with the topaz that replaces the eye in the sculpted faces, representing the moment of pleasure and an excremental heap. (1998a, p.123)

William Tell represents the castrating father in Dalian imagery (for mostly obvious reasons - although there is of course an element of implicit paternal betrayal in the story that Dali seeks to emphasize. In Dali it is the father who deprives the child of primary pleasures while appearing to rescue him from ignobility).

Here we have then a constellation of characters involved in a series of mirrored and mirroring relationships who, in an intensely personal and pathos-invoking way, recreate the moment in which we as infants project

ourselves into an alienating, if ameliorative, but ultimately traitorous image. The narcissistic and pleasurable identification with the figure of the Masturbator is inseparable from the identification with the castrating William Tell.

Thus ultimately for Dali the path of paranoia finds its way to the dissolving of the ego and the surrendering of subjectivity altogether. It may be that in erasing the ego, Dali inhabits the id as ideal ego – insofar as they are made to reflect one another. In any case, Paranoia proved for Dali a means to unite the objective and subjective; psychological and physical; conscious and unconscious; real and unreal; empirical and theoretical in a structure of cosmology which locates us in our objects and our objects in ourselves. Dali wrote in the *Unspeakable Confessions*:

I believe that the universe around us is a projection of our paranoia, an enlarged image of the world we carry within us, I think that the object our eyes isolate from the real or that we invent is a pure expression of our delirium crystallized. A simple secretion. (1976, p.144)

I have hinted throughout this paper at the influence that Dali's theory had on Lacan's conceptualisation, however it is also difficult to discuss the one without using the other, which itself is testament to their mutual influence (although I do think Dali pre-empted much of what Lacan would later 'discover'). Lacanian discourse, however, is undoubtedly more allied to academic endeavour.

Lacan, in his doctoral thesis of 1932, would also suggest paranoia as an alternative systematisation of the processes which determines normal perception. Later in his work he incorporated Dali's idea that normative reality itself, as well as identity, are paranoid constructions: that everyone follows a paranoid route to selfhood. The structure to the experience of the personality was to be found in its own formations and was not merely an automatic biological response to organic stimuli. Dali indicated to Lacan how paranoia, in its creative re-organisation of psychical and thereby

perceptual forms, afforded one the opportunity to see that such a system already provided for all conscious phenomena:

After the repeated failures of classical psychology to account for these mental phenomena, which, using a term whose expressive value is confirmed by all semantic acceptations, we call images, psychoanalysis made the first successful attempt to operate at the level of the concrete reality that they represent. This was because it set out from their formative function in the subject. (Lacan, 1997, p.11)

Dali's work and interpretation of Freud predicted Lacan's assertion that the personality, and thereby perception and interpretation, along with the reality they afford, is constituted by an original series of ideal images which are mistaken as real and projected unconsciously into the world. Lacan would also agree that this constitutes an inherently paranoiac process, however heavily disguised it might become through symbolic slippage.

George Orwell, upon reading Dali's autobiography which he refers to as 'simply a striptease act conducted in pink limelight' (1968, p.225), calls the artist as 'anti-social as a flea' (1968, p.229) and cites him as 'a symptom of the world's illness' (1968, p.232). It seems ironic then that an artist so easily dismissed as degenerate or infantile should be the source of a philosophy which has both profoundly affected psychoanalytic theory and also offered an insight into the nature of the dialectic connecting subjective and objective worlds.

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