

Surrealism, Science Fiction and Comics



10.00am – 7.00pm, Saturday 22 January 2011 (with registration from 9.30)

Kenneth Clark Lecture Theatre, The Courtauld Institute of Art
Somerset House, Strand, London WC2

ABSTRACTS AND BIOGRAPHIES

Gavin Parkinson (The Courtauld Institute of Art)

Gavin Parkinson is Lecturer in European Modernism at The Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. He is the author of Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science: Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology (Yale University Press, 2008) and The Duchamp Book (Tate Publishing, 2008), as well as articles, essays, and reviews on modernism, Surrealism, Marcel Duchamp, and Adolf Wölfli.

Barnaby Dicker (Royal Holloway, University of London, and University of Wales, Newport)

André Breton, Rodolphe Töpffer, and the Automatic Message

Automatic writing and drawing is one of the founding enterprises of Surrealism; André Breton reflecting critically upon it throughout his Surrealist life, most notably in his essay *The Automatic Message* which appeared in *Minotaure* 3-4, 1933. Opposing spiritualist automatism, which focussed on mediumistic contact with external entities, the Surrealists promoted a form of automatism that channelled the outpourings of the subconscious self. Moreover, the Surrealists carved a niche for such automatism within literature and art.

For his seven groundbreaking comic strips, published between 1833 and 1846, Rodolphe Töpffer developed a method very similar to Surrealist automatism; giving an account of his approach in his 1846 *Essay on Physiognomy*, writing that “The picture-story has the unique advantage of springing, so to speak, from intuition” and that “a single page by a man who is competent in his subject – by the mere fact that it emanates directly from his mind – is an infinitely, incomparably...reliable criterion of his moral and intellectual faculties”.

Taking up Breton’s insistence on historicising automatism, this paper will unpack Breton’s and Töpffer’s complimentary notions of automatism and show how they can illuminate one another, as well as the endurance of such methods in more recent comics, including Moebius’s *Upon a Star* (1983). The link between the comic strip format and Surrealist automatism is further strengthened by their shared concern with, and exploration of, the graphic interplay between drawing and writing. The paper will close by looking at Breton’s and Töpffer’s respective conceptions of the “page”, both as the unique object worked on by the artist/writer and as the mass-reproduced object handled by the viewer/reader.

Barnaby Dicker is Visiting Lecturer at Royal Holloway, University of London and University of Wales, Newport. He has contributed to Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal, the Journal of Media Practice and more recently to the edited collection, The Popular Avant-Garde, with an essay entitled 'Franciszka Themerson's Ubu Comic Strip: Autography, Caricature, and the Avant-Garde'.

Dan Smith (Chelsea College of Art and Design, London)

Critical Surrealism in Nemesis the Warlock

Nemesis the Warlock (running in 2000AD from 1980-1999), written by Pat Mills, is a science fiction strip unlike anything to have previously appeared in British comics. It is a story set in a distant future in which humans are irredeemably evil, and aliens are subject to genocidal crusades. The population of Earth lives in a series of enormous caverns, connected by huge tubes full of traffic. The cities are inverted skyscrapers, pointed stalactites reaching down from rock ceilings into the void below. The eponymous hero is an anarchic and morally questionable alien revolutionary, diabolic in appearance. Throughout *Nemesis* is a visual style that goes far beyond anything realised in science fiction cinema, drawing on, in particular, three extraordinary artists - Kevin O'Neill, Bryan Talbot and the late John Hicklenton - who created fantastic and disturbing imagery, with each artist focusing on a distinct period and narrative arc of the strip.

Dan Smith suggests that the legacy of Surrealism comes to the worlds of *Nemesis* through two routes. Firstly, it is clear that French comics had an enormous influence on Mills - an ongoing preoccupation evidenced by his current writing of Franco-Belgian title *Requiem Vampire Knight*. The science fiction Surrealism of *Metal Hurlant* in particular set new standards for bizarre imagery and unconventional, often erotically charged, narratives and imagery. The second route is through the New Wave of British science fiction. Associated with the magazine *New Worlds* after editorial control was handed to Michael Moorcock in 1964, British writers, including Aldiss, Ballard and Moorcock himself embraced the disruptive, experimental approach of unstable and pessimistic vistas, with a love for landscapes borrowed from Ernst and Tanguy. British science fiction writing also acquired a visual culture of Surrealism through the guidance of Brian Aldiss as editor of Penguin's science fiction publications during the 1960s.

The visual and psychic terrain of both these French and British influences has been channelled into the twisted and violent worlds of *Nemesis*. However, the translated and exaggerated forces of Surrealism offer more than spectacular imagery, full of contrasts and novelty. Rather these presences are used for extraordinary acts of both cognitive estrangement and social criticism. In *Nemesis*, Mills and his collaborators have made use of Surrealist impulses to craft a revolutionary tale for young readers.

Pawel Frelik (Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Lublin, Poland)

Cosmic Jerrybuilders and Other Renegades: The Uneasy Relationship of Surrealism and Science Fiction

While Surrealist writers and artists were obviously fascinated with the fantastic imaginary and may have drawn on science fiction (SF), the lines of influence running in the opposite direction are more complicated. On the one hand, after 1945, and especially in the 1960s and since, many science fiction authors found the Surrealist movement a potent cache of metaphors and images. This has been particularly evident in SF visual arts and cinema but also in the work of a number of writers. Two most obvious examples are Ray Bradbury and J. G. Ballard, whose Surrealist inspirations have been critically studied; others include Richard Kadrey (*Metrophage*, 1988 & *Kamikaze L'Amour*, 1995) or Lisa Goldstein (*The Dream Years*, 1985).

On the other hand, however, all these writers have figured rather uneasily in the confines of most definitions of science fiction. It is, among others, surreal imagery they employed that puzzled readers and led critics to question their 'SF-ness' – most famously in Darko Suvin's consignment of Bradbury's fiction to the monstrous subgenre of 'science fantasy' or Damon Knight's dismissals of van Vogt's fiction, attacks that were strongly tied to conscious attempts to legitimize SF. (Incidentally, van Vogt was immensely popular in France and greatly appreciated for his unorthodox imagination.) More recently, surreal imagery frequently signals the positioning of texts in the so-called 'slipstream' of science fiction.

In his paper, Frelik intends to do two things. First, he will demonstrate why Surrealism and normatively defined SF are essentially incompatible rhetorics of the fantastic, which predicated exclusionary statements as mentioned above. Secondly, he will suggest that when encountered in SF, surreal elements are both useful in discussing generic identity of SF and symptomatic of the recent changes in defining what science fiction is.

Pawel Frelik teaches at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland. His teaching, research and writing interests include science fiction, contemporary experimental fiction, unpopular culture and cross-media storytelling. He has edited two volumes of essays in the field of American Studies and, with Dave Mead, Playing the Universe: Games and Gaming in Science Fiction (2007). His recent publications include an essay in Beyond Cyberpunk (Routledge 2010). He is one of the editors of the European Journal of American Studies.

Paul Gravett (Comica Festival)

Rarebit Fiends, Bizarros and Fat Furies: How American Comic Strips and Comic Books Relate to Surrealism and Science Fiction

This paper will explore the connections and relationships of certain key writers and artists working in the American newspaper strip and comic book mass-market industries with the fields of science fiction and Surrealism during the first sixty years of the twentieth century. It will also appraise the roles of these mainstream media in disseminating and popularising an accessible form of Surrealism and science fiction to a broad public. It will start by examining certain striking imagery in Winsor McCay's *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* (1904-13), which anticipates the Surrealist film *L'Age d'Or* (1930) written by Dalí and Luis Buñuel and directed by Buñuel. Iconic scenes such as those of the cow found on a woman's bed or a man stuck to the ceiling appeared years earlier in McCay's work. Starting in the fifties, editors Julius Schwartz and Mort Weisinger came to DC Comics from science fiction and introduced many writers to the comics medium, resulting in a blend of the populist and fantastical in *Strange Adventures* and *Mystery in Space*. These same writers under Weisinger's tenure on *Superman* and his related titles created an unprecedented imaginative outpouring, enriching the character's appeal and mythos. Finally, writer-editor Richard Hughes with the deadpan artistry of Ogden Whitney achieved a highpoint in surreal comic books in *Herbie*, an odd, overweight boy whose lollipops endow him with extraordinary powers.

Lecturer, broadcaster and exhibition curator specialising in international comic art, Paul Gravett co-founded the influential British comics magazine Escape (1983-9), directed the Cartoon Art Trust (1992-2001), and since 2003 has organised Comica, the London International Comics Festival. He writes for The Times, The Guardian, The Independent, the TLS, the Art Review, Comic Heroes and others, and is the author of Manga: 60 Years of Japanese Comics (2004) and Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life (2005), co-author with Peter Stanbury of Great British Comics (2006) and Incredibly Strange Comics (2008), and editor of The Mammoth Book of Best Crime Comics (2008).

Joanna Pawlik (University of Manchester)

The Comic Book Conditions of Chicago Surrealism

The Chicago group of Surrealists formed in 1966 under the leadership of Penelope and Franklin Rosemont and the group's quest for the 'Surrealization' of America continues into the twenty-first century. Self-consciously magnifying its French counterpart's interest in the popular, Chicago Surrealism makes a feature of its recourse to 'popular accomplices' such as pulp fiction, film, cartoons, comics, and the blues. The turn to popular culture was the cornerstone of its strategy to transpose Surrealism into an American idiom and to render it combative in late capitalist America. 'Without comics,' wrote Franklin Rosemont, 'Surrealism would be very different from what it is in the US today,' indicating the privileged role of comics in Chicago Surrealism's narrativisation of its past and future. Seeking to construct a pantheon of indigenous Surrealist precursors, the group frequently cites the influence of Krazy Kat or Bugs Bunny as being on a par with that of Marx or Freud.

The comic book sources of Chicago Surrealism are varied and range from the mainstream animations of Tex Avery to the vernacular tradition epitomised by Joe Hill or Ernest Reib's contributions to the International Workers of the World visual campaigns. Either by retrieving neglected currents of radicalism and labour activism, or by identifying subversive potential within the culture industry itself, Chicago Surrealism's recourse to comics is implicated in its aim to retell America's cultural history, displacing affirmative, hegemonic accounts and instating Surrealism at its centre. The group's rigorously dialectical approach to cultural production ensures that comics not only constitute a radical past for Surrealism to harness, but play a crucial role in envisaging a transformed future. Subjecting comics to a distinctly Surrealist hermeneutic, the group argues that the medium's ability to suspend normality and entertain the marvellous serves to index class conflict and heighten class consciousness. According to Franklin Rosemont, to the extent to which comics puncture ideological illusion and address 'primordial innocence', they 'express our deepest aspiration'.

Joanna Pawlik is a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Manchester and a contributor to the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacies' three year project on *Queer Surrealism*. Her DPhil thesis (Sussex, 2008) explored legacies of Surrealism, both Bretonian and dissident, within the Beat and San Francisco Renaissance avant-gardes and she is currently working on a book-length project on the same subject. Recent or forthcoming publications include articles on the reception of Antonin Artaud in post-war American literary avant-gardes, Ted Joans and African American Surrealism, and on Brion Gysin and the Dream Machine.

Bryan Talbot (graphic novelist)

Grandville and the Anthropomorphic Tradition

Bryan Talbot discusses his graphic novels *Grandville* and *Grandville Mon Amour* and the venerable and ongoing tradition of anthropomorphic characters in illustration and comics from which they have grown, revealing references to both this tradition and to 19th century art contained in the books.

The trailer for *Grandville Mon Amour* is now online:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdBnXHD3j7Q>

Bryan Talbot's website: <http://www.bryan-talbot.com>

David Brittain (MIRIAD, Manchester Metropolitan University)

JG Ballard and Eduardo Paolozzi: Analysing the Media Landscape

The significance of Surrealism for British new wave SF is explicit in its influence on JG Ballard's prose and polemic. In the late 60s, possibly in reaction to a 'popular' Surrealism, Ballard began to theorise a harder alternative. He co-opted the artist Eduardo Paolozzi to help promote this, so inscribing his collages of the period into a new wave discourse of technology and change. These collages are usually described as Pop Art, but Brittain argues that they are also visual counterparts of Ballard's prose. As such, can they be considered as indicative of the 'visual literature' of the new wave that flourished briefly in New Worlds at this time? Little is known about this material, but that may change if Paolozzi's achievement is recognized.

David Brittain was the editor of the cultural magazine, Creative Camera between 1991 and 2001 and his research area is the relationship between artists and magazines. In 2009 he wrote an introductory essay for the book The Jet Age Compendium: Paolozzi at Ambit (published by Four Corners Books) and curated the exhibition, Eduardo Paolozzi: The Jet Age Compendium (Raven Row, London). David is Research Associate at MIRIAD, Manchester Metropolitan University and a member of International Association of Word and Image Studies.

Jeannette Baxter (Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge)

Extreme Surrealisms in the Work of Alan Burns

This paper examines the alliance of Surrealism and science-fiction in the post-war writings of Alan Burns. From the early apocalyptic novel, *Europe After the Rain* (1965), through to *Celebrations* (1967), *Babel* (1969), *Dreamamerika: A Surrealist Fantasy* (1972), and *Revolutions of the Night* (1986), Burns drew on a range of surrealist techniques (such as collage, montage, exquisite corpse), often assembling his novels out of 'found' linguistic material on large table tops. As the titles of two of his novels suggest, the work of Max Ernst features prominently in Burns's post-war project, but so, too, do the marvellous sculptures of Joan Miro, and the collages of Kurt Schwitters and Pablo Picasso: when speaking of his visual/literary methodologies, Burns frequently invokes Picasso's dictum that, 'I don't seek, I find'. Writing from the edges of the British New Wave, and consistently producing collage-texts which have been labelled 'extreme' and 'unreadable', Burns' surrealist science fictions have been largely neglected by readers and critics alike. Here, Baxter returns these 'extreme' surrealisms to the critical foreground in order to examine their significance as critiques of postwar art, literature and culture.

Jeannette Baxter is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, specialising in twentieth-century and contemporary literature. She is the author of J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship (Ashgate 2009); editor of J. G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives (Continuum 2008); co-editor of Visions and Revisions: Essays on J. G. Ballard (Palgrave 2011); and co-editor of A Literature of Restitution: Critical Essays on W. G. Sebald (Manchester 2012). She is currently working on a special issue of Women: A Cultural Review on the work of Jean Rhys.

Robert McNab (Documentary Filmmaker and independent scholar)

Pablo Picasso – Every Dog has His Day: André Breton and Benjamin Péret's Comic Strip Meant to Expose the Painter's Lifelong Opportunism

This paper will explore the 1951 illustrated biography of Picasso, written by Benjamin Péret and André Breton published in the weekly *Les Arts*. *La Vie Imagee de Pablo Picasso* is based on a sequence of 28 uniform black and white frames drawn by the professional illustrator, Paul Braig. The comic strip presents a picture of Picasso's life, from childhood to the present. It pulls no punches, regardless of the risk to its authors' career, and skewers Picasso's sainted reputation as The Great Artist of the Age. It ends with a quote from Salvador Dalí: 'He's waiting

for orders from the Politburo.' Picasso's disgraceful and sustained support for Stalin and his death camps was, as Breton and Péret point out, part of the picture.

Robert McNab is a documentary filmmaker who has worked with Sir Kenneth Clark, Robert Hughes, Albert Speer, Robert Crumb, Spitting Image, Cindy Sherman and RB Kitaj. He has won a BAFTA Award (for The Art of the Third Reich, BBC TV), a SONY Gold Radio Arts Award (for Landscape of Fear: The Arts in Vichy France, BBC Radio 4). He is the author of Ghost Ships: A Surrealist Love Triangle (Yale University Press), and has forthcoming Lost Highway: The Surrealist Explorers of Ancient America (Yale University Press).

Roger Sabin (Central St. Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, London)

Wokker: Notes on a Surrealist Comic Strip

Wokker, a comic strip about a wooden bird, was created by two working class friends from the north of England (Eric Thacker and Tony Earnshaw) and existed between the mid-1960s and the late 1980s. It had various homes in newspapers and magazines, as well as on gallery walls, and unusually in British comics history it was an expressly surrealist project. At its height, Wokker appeared in a continuing series of four-to-eight panel strips. The bird would speak in an adult way (this was not a child's toy) and would have no fixed identity. Sometimes it would be an ingénue, sometimes a mischief-maker. Each strip would have a different setting, and the cartooning would take risks with what has since become known as 'the language of comics': scene transitions, typography, and changes in scale were all utilised to disorientating effect.

But despite Wokker's ostensible similarities to some of the strips embraced by the 1960s/70s counterculture (notably Krazy Kat and some contemporary drugs-inflected strips), it never made inroads into the underground comics scene. Instead, Wokker became championed by a small coterie of fans of surrealism – among them painter Patrick Hughes and writer George Melly – and took on an alternative trajectory. Wokker had its major breakthrough at an exhibition at the ICA in 1970 (through the auspices of Melly), and thereafter was commissioned for *The Times Educational Supplement* (through 1972). This was an odd venue – but where else could it go?

The aim of this paper is to track the development of Wokker using previously unexplored private correspondence between Thacker and Earnshaw, and to ask why the strip has remained invisible in comics histories. It will probe the hierarchies of taste that existed within the worlds of comics and fine art, and question whether Wokker belongs in the newly-fashionable category of 'artists' comics'.

Roger Sabin is Reader in Popular Culture at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London. He is the author of Adult Comics: An Introduction (Routledge) and Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels (Phaidon).