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Blossfeldt and Surrealism

In the summer of 2006, the Hayward Gallery in London played host to the exhibition *Undercover Surrealism*, an exploration of the ideas and images associated with the magazine *Documents*, which Georges Bataille had edited in 1929–30.¹ As well as paintings, sculptures, objects, film and music clips, the exhibition included many photographs, for *Documents* was one of those Surrealist magazines which made fundamental innovations in the ways that photographs were reproduced, creating new meanings out of their juxtaposition with each other, or with the accompanying text. Some of the photographs were made for the magazine itself: most notably by Eli Lotar and Jacques-André Boiffard; others were ‘appropriated’ from usually anonymous sources, to be celebrated or subverted. There was however one set of photographs which did not quite fit either category. Made by a contemporary photographer of some repute, they were nevertheless pictures that, when reproduced in *Documents*, carried a very different meaning from that intended by their maker.

These were five images by the German photographer Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932) which depicted details of plants enlarged so that they became monumental and allusive. They are now iconic works in any account of early twentieth century photography, but if one looks back more closely at the history of their reception, they turn out to be complex and sometimes contradictory. This article examines one aspect of that complexity: the unexpected relationship that the images have had with Surrealism, and traces it through the century by looking closely at a number of specific images and texts. However, in order to fully comprehend that story, it is necessary to place it against a larger account of how Blossfeldt’s work came to carry different meanings in different contexts.

Karl Blossfeldt’s five photographs had been published in the third issue of *Documents* in June 1929, alongside an essay by Bataille on ‘The Language of Flowers’ (Fig. 1).² The title is innocuous enough, and

the layout is reserved and formal; each of the photographs being reproduced full page with only the name of the plant as caption: *Campanula vidalii*, *Bryonia alba*, *Equisetum hiemale*, *Hordeum distichum*, *Dryopteris filix mas*. (Along with the order of magnification, Bataille also gives the French names. In English, they are: the Bell-flower, the White Bryony, the Rough Horsetail, Barley and the Common Male Fern.)

This essay also begins quietly with a discussion of the relationship between flowers and love. Even as this extends beyond the sentimental association of red roses into more sexual connotations, Bataille is hardly courting controversy. The concept that flowers are sexual objects was far from new; when Carl Linnaeus published his *Species Plantarum* in 1753, ‘he chose sexuality as the key’, classifying plants by their male and female ‘genitals’ (the stamen and stigma, respectively). As Jenny Uglow noted, ‘There was no escaping the link between Linnaean botany and sex’.³

In the second half of his essay, however, Bataille shifts his tone. The amatory connotations become disturbing: ‘even the most beautiful flowers are spoiled in their centres by hairy sexual organs’, and he describes with relish the disintegration of floral beauty: ‘Risen from the stench of the manure pile – even though it seemed for a moment to have escaped it in a flight of angelic and lyrical purity – the flower seems to relapse abruptly into its original squalor: the most ideal is rapidly reduced to a wisp of aerial manure’.⁴ Finally, he contrasts the glorious head of the flower with its support below ground: ‘in order to destroy this favourable impression, nothing less is necessary than the impossible and fantastic vision of roots swarming under the surface, nauseating and naked like a victim’.⁵

As elsewhere in his writings, Bataille here draws out the symbiosis ‘between cultivation and hidden obscenity, sanctity and sacrilege’;⁶ the ineluctable connection between the high and the low. To emphasise his point with a flourish, he ended his essay with a story

LE LANGAGE DES FLEURS

Il est vain d'insister uniquement dans l'aspect des choses les signes intelligibles qui permettent de distinguer divers éléments les uns des autres. Ce qui frappe des yeux humains ne distingue pas seulement le commencement des relations entre les divers objets, mais aussi bien tel que d'un aspect décisif et inséparable. C'est ainsi que la vue d'une fleur épanouie, il est vrai, la présence de cette partie définie d'une plante ; mais il est impossible de l'arrêter à ce résultat superficiel : en effet, la vue de cette fleur provoque dans l'esprit des relations beaucoup plus conséquentes de fait qu'elle exprime une situation définie de la nature végétale. Ce que résout la configuration et la couleur de la corolle, ce que traduisent les sillons du pollen ou la traïctoire du pistil, ne peut sans doute pas être exprimé adéquatement à l'aide du langage ; toutefois, il est inutile de s'agiter, comme on le fait généralement, cette incompréhensible présence réelle, et de se jeter comme une absurdité contre certaines tentatives d'interprétation symboliques.

Que le langage des juxtapositions du langage des fleurs aient un caractère formel et superficiel, c'est là ce qu'un poète n'aurait pas osé omettre de rappeler la liste traditionnelle. Elle présente certes épanouie, le caractère épique ou l'absorbant anémone, ou au sein trop facile, l'émotion la raison. Il ne s'agit pas véritablement d'une dimension du sens secret des fleurs, et l'on découvre immédiatement la possibilité here comme en la légende qu'il a suffi d'utiliser. On cherche d'ailleurs au sein des rapprochements qui s'établissent d'une façon fugitive de l'intelligence obscure des choses qui est en question. Une image, en somme, que l'émotion soit l'emblème de la tristesse, le symbole de l'orgueil des dieux, le réceptacle de l'indifférence... Il peut apparaître de constater que de telles approximations peuvent être rapprochées à volonté, et il suffit de réserver une importance prépondérante à des interprétations beaucoup plus simples : ainsi celles qui lient la rose et l'oubliette à l'amour. Non, sans doute, que ces deux fleurs véritablement puissent désigner l'amour (sauf à croire qu'il y a là une correspondance plus exacte l'économie formelle que l'est dite à l'inspiration cette plante). C'est sans doute avec droit que l'on se trouble, espérant par une fleur aussi loquace, c'est à la fleur un général, planté en la terre en telle ou telle des fleurs, ce n'est en tout d'attribuer l'étrange préférence de dicter la présence de l'amour.

Mais cette interprétation unique de sensibles peu surprenante : en effet, l'émotion peut être donc dit l'émotion comme la fonction essentielle de la fleur. Ainsi, la symbolisation serait dite, et accrue, à une propriété distincte, non à l'aspect frappant objectivement le sensibilité humaine. Elle n'a aussi chose qu'une valeur purement subjective. Les hommes au moins approuvèrent l'ordre des fleurs et leurs associations du fait que, de part et d'autre, il s'agit de observations précieuses la connaissance. La seule chose non sensible dans les interprétations psychanalytiques conclues d'ailleurs une explication de cet ordre. Le fait, c'est presque toujours un rapprochement arbitraire qui rend compte de l'origine des associations dans les choses. On connaît suffisamment, sans doute, le sens donné à des objets selon ce qu'ils sont perçus en eux.

On se délasserait ainsi à bien coup sûr d'une opinion relative laquelle les formes ent-

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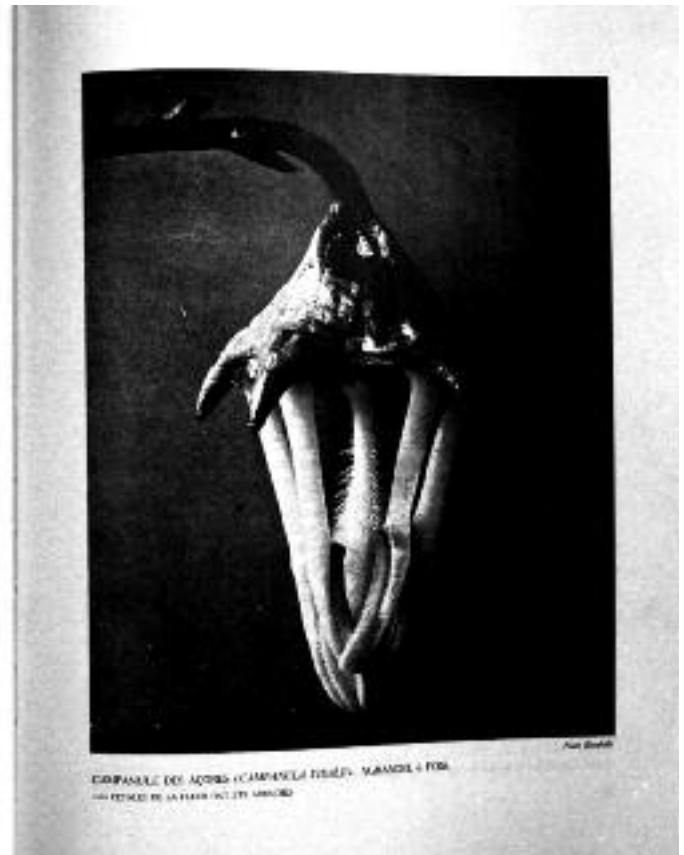


Fig. 1: Spread from *Documents*, June 1929, with essay by Georges Bataille and photograph by Karl Blossfeldt.

concerning the Marquis de Sade who, ‘locked up with madmen ... had the most beautiful roses brought to him only to pluck off their petals and toss them into a ditch filled with liquid manure’.⁷ It was this reference that particularly irritated André Breton when he launched his attack on Bataille in the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* of 1930; for Breton, Bataille’s insistence on the baseness of existence offered no sort of transience but only degradation: ‘It remains none the less true that the rose, stripped of its petals, remains *the rose* ...’⁸

Where does Blossfeldt fit into all of this? After all, he had photographed plants, not flowers; structure not florescence, and he never showed the roots. (This had in fact been one point of criticism about his photographs if they were to be seen as accurate images of how plants worked.) Since Bataille makes no reference at all to the photographs, one can only guess at his intention in reproducing them. One might initially suppose that his selection of pictures was made to support his argument and indeed, his first image shows the uncurling innards of a *Campanula vidalii* (Bell-flower), the ‘hairy sexual organs’ of which he had written.

Yet he also reproduced one of Blossfeldt’s most delicate photographs of the sinuous tendrils of the

Bryona alba (White Bryony). It is more likely, then, that Bataille was setting up Blossfeldt’s images in opposition to his argument. Both botanically and artistically, these photographs represented the idealism to which he was violently opposed and his main aim in reproducing Blossfeldt’s photographs was to silently, but effectively, destroy their pretensions to purity and beauty, whether of scientific exactitude or formal precision. ‘Bataille’s attitude to images and their uses ... constitutes a profound challenge to the viewer to move beyond the obvious and the acceptable in favour of an uncomfortable alternative; a movement, as he describes it, ‘from high to low’.⁹ Whatever Bataille’s intentions, however, the ultimate effect of this siting of Blossfeldt’s images in *Documents* was to emphasise what was uncanny and strange about them; to suddenly make the pictures seem ‘surreal’.

In *Undercover Surrealism*, the five pictures by Blossfeldt were placed at about the midway point of the exhibition and their presentation in a row on a wall was as sober as it had been in the magazine. However, an extract from Bataille’s text sat to their right and the pictures on either side of them circled round one of Bataille’s key concepts: the *formless*. To the left was a

photo by Boiffard of a squashed fly while on the other side, there were other natural history images by Jean Painlevé – close-ups of crustacea this time – which also undermined our usual sense of their physical presence. In this context, the formal logic of the plants (and indeed of the photographs) started to look much less stable.

However, one of the most intriguing and poignant objects in this space was in the glass case in front of the five Blossfeldt images. Surrounded by manuscripts, photographs, pamphlets and magazines, was a battered brown envelope. Stamped and postmarked, ‘Rue de la Boétie, 15.30, 17 - 8’, it was addressed from *Documents* to ‘Monsieur Prof Blossfeld [sic], 6 Stefanstr, Berlin Suedende, Allemagne’.¹⁰ On the afternoon of 17 August 1929, then, Bataille in Paris sent this envelope to Blossfeldt in Berlin. There is no indication of what was in it, but the envelope is just a little too small to contain an actual copy of the magazine; perhaps, Bataille was here returning the prints that he had used for reproduction. But this started me wondering if Blossfeldt in fact ever saw the magazine, whether he could read French, and, if so, just how disconcerted (and possibly outraged) he might have been by this use of his images. However, this was not the first time that Blossfeldt’s photographs had been appropriated to support an argument quite different from his original intention to examine the plant as ‘a wholly artistic-architectonic structure’.¹¹ In order to understand just how radical Bataille’s use of these pictures was, it is necessary to backtrack; to look at the process whereby the pictures had been made and how they first became famous.

By the time of Bataille’s essay, Karl Blossfeldt was 64. Born in 1865, he had, at the age of 19, gone to Berlin to study at the Academy of the Royal Museum of Arts and Crafts.¹² In 1890 he won a scholarship to work in Italy with the drawing professor Moritz Meurer. The aim was to collect botanical samples

which would enable an understanding of the basis of design in natural forms. Blossfeldt’s initial job as a modeller was rather lowly, but it seems he started taking photographs soon after to help in this study. Returning to Berlin in 1898, he was appointed as an Instructor at the Academy where he taught ‘Modelling from Plants’ for the next 31 years. As part of this work, he slowly and surely built up his collection of about 6000 close-up photographs of plant forms, always utilising the same plate camera, a plain, flat background and a minimal number of variations in lighting. As Gert Mattenklott put it, ‘Blossfeldt was no camera enthusiast. How could he otherwise have put up with this monotony? He was a plant-lover’.¹³

Through this time, Blossfeldt’s work gradually fell more and more out of step with what was happening in German art, to the point that his classes came to be seen as something of a backwater. This changed, however, in 1926, when his photographs were exhibited for the first time outside of their original pedagogical framework. It is uncertain how they came to the attention of the banker, collector, gallerist and impresario Karl Nierendorf, but when he showed Blossfeldt’s work at his Berlin gallery (alongside some African sculptures), the time was right for the pictures to be seen not as retrogressive but as avant-garde.

The term *Neue Sachlichkeit* had been coined in 1923 to describe a tendency in German art that developed after the Great War and in reaction to Expressionism (*sachlichkeit* is most usually translated as *objectivity*, but it can also mean ‘reality, impartiality, detachment’¹⁴). Initially applied to the work of painters, such as Beckmann, Dix and Grosz, it was soon recognized that there were parallel shifts in the New Photography being made by Renger-Patzsch, Moholy-Nagy, Lerski and Sander. The ‘camera eye’ was to be valued for its impersonal scrutiny of surface and its ability to capture form and detail that the human eye could not see.

It was into this new context that the photographs Blossfeldt had made over the previous thirty years now emerged and were seen to exemplify many of the principles of the New Photography. Soon, they were to be found in contemporary magazines of art, design and architecture; *Uhu* for example placed Blossfeldt's picture of a 'Rough Horsetail' opposite the dome of the Marmeluke graves in Cairo to illustrate an article on 'green architecture'.¹⁵ In 1929, Blossfeldt was invited to show his work at the Bauhaus and Moholy-Nagy included Blossfeldt's photographs in the epochal exhibition *film und foto* in Stuttgart.

The widest circulation of the work came in 1928 when Nierendorf arranged with the well-known architectural publisher Wasmuth for 120 of Blossfeldt's pictures to be presented in the book *Urformen der Kunst* (Archetypal Forms of Art).¹⁶ It was this volume, severe and simple in design with a brief if inexplicit introduction by Nierendorf himself, that carried the images around the world. Foreign editions followed: *Art Forms in Nature*, published in London and New York, *Konstformer i naturen* in Stockholm and *La plante* in Paris. (It was there that Bataille most likely came across the work.)¹⁷ However, it does not seem as if Blossfeldt himself quite understood the nature of his sudden fame. When he published a second volume *Wundergarten der Natur* in 1932, his own introduction reiterated his original, conservative and functional intentions for the pictures.¹⁸ He died later the same year but by then his images had floated clear of those intentions to become iconic examples of modernist photography. In that process they exemplify the sense of photography as a medium whose signifiers can be very fluid indeed. The interwar years were a period of particular flux in the understanding of photography's status. During the same period, the images of the recently deceased Eugène Atget were shifting from being photographic documents (like Blossfeldt, Atget's stated intention was to provide 'Documents pour artis-

tes') to being a primary example of a new genre: documentary photography.¹⁹

Still, Bataille's resiting of Blossfeldt's pictures in *Documents* was very extreme indeed. To move from a functional context to the aestheticised reading of New Objectivity was one shift, but one can see how these two positionings both valued the direct, factual, formal quality of the images. The shift to a Surrealist reading of Blossfeldt's pictures as strange and unnerving is a step sideways and seems not so much an extension as a distortion of the values that underpinned the work.

Yet some early critics understood that severe formality and disturbing strangeness coincided in these pictures; that indeed the rigor and directness exacerbated the edge of fantasy. In this respect, it is interesting to look at the reviews written by two men who themselves stood astride that apparent divide between New Objectivity and Surrealism: Walter Benjamin and Paul Nash.²⁰ Their texts are double-edged. Both men spend most of their time praising Blossfeldt's pictures as examples of a new, camera-based vision, yet both seem unable to resist the element of the fantastic they contain.

A native Berliner, Walter Benjamin had experienced first hand the developments in German art in the mid 1920s, but an extended stay in Paris in 1927–28 also brought him into influential contact with Surrealism; it was then that he began work on the important essay on Surrealism that would be published in 1929.²¹ By the time his review of Blossfeldt's book, entitled *New Things about Plants* was published in *Literarische Welt* on 23 November 1928, he was living back in Berlin. In it, Benjamin largely follows Nierendorf, remarking, 'These pictures disclose an unsuspected wealth of forms and analogies which we never imagined existed in the plant world', and adding: 'Only photography is capable of revealing these'.²² He contrasts Blossfeldt's images of flowers with drawings made in the nineteenth century by Gérard Grandville,

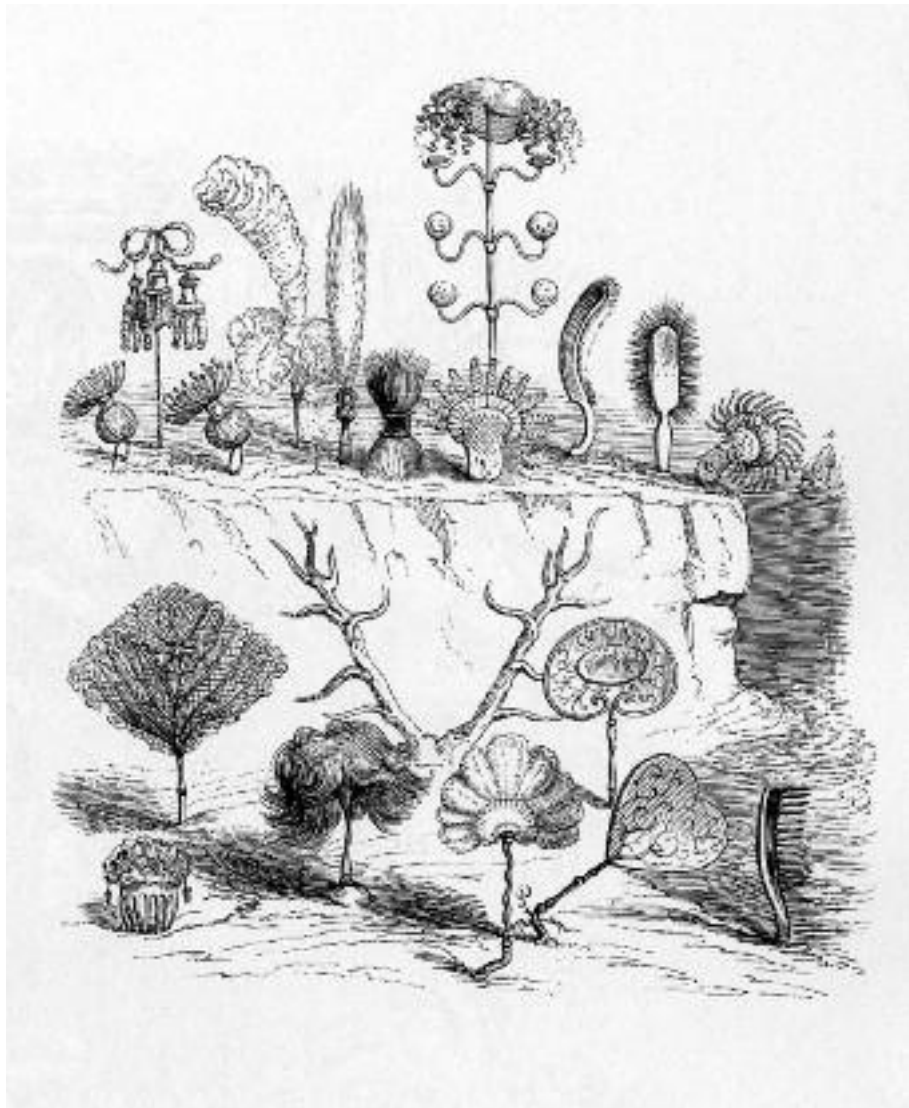


Fig. 2: Gérard Grandville: 'The marine life collection', 1844.

just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis'.²⁴ This is a notoriously ambiguous proposal, but among other things, it extends the concept of the 'camera eye' into the area of the uncanny, 'the most precise technology can give its products a magical value', and the microscopic world that Blossfeldt's images reveal is 'meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams'. For Benjamin, Blossfeldt's pictures could help to demonstrate how 'the difference between technology and magic' might be resolved and perhaps transcended.²⁵

the Parisian caricaturist who Benjamin wrote of elsewhere (Fig. 2).²³

Grandville 'showed the whole cosmos springing from the plant world' while 'Blossfeldt approaches the matter from the opposite direction – he marks these seemingly pure products of Nature with the undeniable stigma of man'.

Walter Benjamin, though, was not simply contrasting Grandville's fantasies with Blossfeldt's realism. Indeed, at the end of his review, he wrote, 'We wander among these giant plants like Lilliputians'; the fantastical element in the photographs could not, it seems, be denied. Three years later, in his essay 'A Small History of Photography' he would return to Blossfeldt's images as he formulated his concept of the 'optical unconscious': 'it is another nature that speaks to the camera than to the eye: other in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious ... It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious,

When the English painter Paul Nash wrote his review of Blossfeldt's second volume in 1932,²⁶ his own practice was being influenced by both New Objectivity and Surrealism. In 1931, his wife Margaret had bought him a camera and his first photographs, made on board ship en route to the USA, were formal arrangements of masts and funnels in the style of Renger-Patzsch. But Surrealist elements were also apparent in his painting, with influences particularly coming from de Chirico, and soon his own photography would show that influence as well.²⁷

The first half of Nash's review of Blossfeldt's book sounds a, by now, conventional note, stressing 'the peculiar power of the camera to discover formal beauty which ordinarily is hidden from the human eye'.²⁸

Nash then turns to the influence of photography on contemporary painters and the particular example he cites is that of his friend Edward Burra. In Burra's interest in 'solid, individual shapes ... a high degree of finish ... intense concentration on highlights, ... a



Fig. 3: Jindřich Štyrský: Photomontage from 'Emilie Comes to Me in a Dream', 1933. Credit: Martin Parr.

peculiar insistence upon isolated objects', he detects the influence of photography (all those effects might be connected back to Blossfeldt). Yet he could also be discussing his own work of the period, and he might have put these effects down to the influence of de Chirico as much as to photography. When he describes Burra's images as 'extraordinary fantasies', he also suggests that the result of this intense concentration on physicality was a shift into something strange and disturbing.

There are other connections between Blossfeldt's pictures and Surrealism that have been or might be proposed. The tactic of rendering the natural 'unnatural' or indeed 'hypernatural' was a common tactic in Surrealist photography; one thinks of the way that Dora Maar used excessive magnification to turn a baby armadillo into a portrait of Ubu;²⁹ or, later on, in the 1930s, the anthropomorphisation of natural forms in the photographs of the rocks at Ploumanach by Eileen Agar, or the trees in 'Monster Field' by Paul Nash. Already, in Germany in 1927, Franz Roh had connected Blossfeldt's photographs with the frottages made by Max Ernst under the title *Histoire Naturelle*.³⁰ And one might also propose some actual influence from Blossfeldt on Surrealist photography. As Dawn Ades remarked, the photographs by Man Ray and Brassai of Art Nouveau architecture, reproduced in *Minotaure* in 1933, might have been meant

'intentionally to answer' Blossfeldt's pictures in *Documents* four years earlier.³¹

There was, however, a more tangible way that Surrealist artists could work with Blossfeldt's pictures – by including them in montages. This was probably quite common, for the plants offered forms that could be easily metamorphosed. There is, for example, a montage of 1933 by the Polish artist Kazimierz Podsadecki entitled *Gestures*, in which a number of human figures: a bodybuilder, a diver, a nude model and a moustachioed thinker, raise their arms above their body and the gesture is echoed in Blossfeldt's photograph of a Monkshood shoot as it opens.³² More centrally Surrealist was the use of another Blossfeldt photograph, the well-known image of a *Horsehair* which had been reproduced in both *Uhu* and *Documents*, in photomontages by two Czech Surrealists Jindřich Štyrský and Karel Teige, also from the 1930s. Both appropriated this photograph for its erotic suggestiveness, indicating not only how well known it was but also how easily this particular symbolism could be read into it.

The image by Štyrský is one of ten that he made in 1933 for a little book titled, *Emilie Comes to Me in a Dream*.³³ In these photomontages, Štyrský deliberately pushes at the line between the erotic and the pornographic. Here, the *Horsehair* seems to stand enormous and stiff on a beachfront promenade, surrounded by a horde of tourists, while down on the beach next to the sea lie two women, their heads away from us and their legs open to display their genitalia (Fig. 3). The image is deliberately excessive, using humour to critique its sexual connotations. In his introductory text, Štyrský wrote: 'The sister of the erotic is the involuntary smile, a sense of the comic, shudder of horror. The sister of pornography, however, is always only shame, a feeling of disgrace and distaste. You will look at some of these strongly erotic photomontages with a smile of your face ...'³⁴ And indeed, the phallic reading of the plant has become so excessive as to be utterly risible.

The collage that Karel Teige made with Blossfeldt's *Horsehair* is less overt and confrontational than Štyrský's (Fig. 4). Teige was the major theorist of the Prague Surrealist group, writing extensively about many aspects of the avant-garde, including photography.³⁵ At the same time, he was privately making his own work in the area of photomontage. From the mid 1930s through to his death in 1951, he made many hundreds of these works.³⁶ Antonín Dufek referred to them as a 'diary';³⁷ certainly, they represent a highly personal, almost delirious outpouring of eroticized imagery. Teige culled pictures from the world around him to be reworked through his own psyche, though the fact that much of this reworking involved the deformation and fragmenting of the naked female body might make a contemporary viewer somewhat wary.

But there is one subset of Teige's collages that works slightly differently. In quite a few works, Teige's source material comes not from the popular media but from the field of art photography. Photographs by Štyrský, Moholy-Nagy, Florence Henri, Man Ray, Bill Brandt, Brassai and Blossfeldt are all transformed by collaged additions, often from Teige's familiar repertoire of naked torsos.³⁸ In this particular image, the now familiar *Horsehair* stands erect while a female hand reaches out to fondle it. But the space of the collage is far less coherent than that of Štyrský's image, with a row of shoe lasts, a jumble of breasts and an open mouth seemingly piled up on a sandy surface, while above a butterfly flies free.

One way to read Teige's reworkings is as a reflection back on to the original 'straight' photographs, a commentary on the latent, unconscious meanings which those images held, for him personally and for culture more generally. Between Štyrský's *Emilie* in 1933 and Teige's collages of the late 1930s, the Czech Surrealists had become interested in straight photography, and Štyrský himself had made an important body of documentary photographs.³⁹ While overtly commenting on



Fig. 4: Karel Teige: *Untitled and undated photomontage*. Collection of the National Museum of Literature, Prague.

the surrealism of everyday life, they also expressed Štyrský's own subjective impulses. Teige, we might surmise, wanted more openly to reveal the unconscious and indeed erotic forces within the documentary process.

Blossfeldt's images are, of course, still with us, and their later placement both within the history of photography and within a wider culture has continued to reveal the dual power that they carry. Studies of the photographic archive always reference Blossfeldt's work as an important example,⁴⁰ and it has in particular been seen as prefiguring the tactics of typologisation, as pre-eminently represented by the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher. James Lingwood, for example, argued that Blossfeldt's pictures 'may represent the closest formal parallel to the Bechers' project'.⁴¹

On a more popular level, the pictures have become style icons, frequently appearing on posters and postcards. The British store Habitat, for example, sells framed Blossfeldt photographs alongside their range of functional modernist furniture. The high art version of this stylishness could be found in the work of a photographer such as Robert Mapplethorpe, whose images of flowers have often been connected with Blossfeldt's. But they are, in their lighting and composition, far



Fig. 5: Joan Fontcuberta: 'Braohypoda frustrata' from *Herbarium*, 1985. © Joan Fontcuberta.

sleeker; moreover, the sexual connotations of the flowers are overt in Mapplethorpe's pictures. But then, the sense of a sexual element in Blossfeldt's own work also persists. In 1995, the Centre Pompidou in Paris staged an exhibition titled *fémininmasculin*; in the catalogue, a page of four Blossfeldt plant photos were placed opposite images of flowers by Tina Modotti, Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham and Mapplethorpe, all evidently sexual in connotation.⁴²

In the 1980s, Blossfeldt's status as a 'Modern Master' was inevitably questioned within the newly fashioned concept of postmodernism. Sherrie Levine made her reputation by copying and re-presenting the work of photographers such as Walker Evans and Edward Weston as her own – an appropriation that undermined conventional notions of authorship and ownership. It was perhaps fitting that, in one of her later series made in 1990, she went on to appropriate Blossfeldt; after all, as we have seen, his own status within modern photography was itself the result of an appropriation. 'Photography is always magical for me', said Levine, 'and this double-photography is more magical'.⁴³

In 2005, this reworking of Blossfeldt's images was taken a stage further by the young British artist Idris Khan, as part of a series in which he layered sequences of images by a previous photographer into one

photograph (other sources were the Bechers' photos of gasholders and Nicholas Nixon's portraits of the Brown Sisters). The result moves on from Levine's work as a critique of seriality in photography while also producing images that are in themselves haunting and ghostly; as Lucy Soutter remarked, Blossfeldt's photographs superimposed in this way produce 'a strange atomic mushroom'.⁴⁴ If the work of Levine and, more recently, Khan celebrate and critique Blossfeldt's reputation as a 'modern master', there had, in 1985, appeared another body of work which subjected Blossfeldt's photographs to an even sharper scrutiny, one moreover edged with surrealism: Joan Fontcuberta's *Herbarium*.⁴⁵ Born in 1955 in Barcelona, Fontcuberta had in his early work of the 1970s been explicitly inspired by Surrealism (Catalonia had of course been a fertile breeding ground for Surrealists such as Dalí and Miró). Some of his images from this period are montages while others are (apparently) straight, including a number taken in Natural History Museums which are significant for the trajectory of his later work.⁴⁶

The 28 photographs that constituted *Herbarium* were visually much simpler, following Blossfeldt's mode of presenting plant forms in tight close-up on a neutral white background. Indeed, one might at first take them to be a simple extension of Blossfeldt's work, each plant complete with Latin name, but then a closer examination of some of the images alerts one to the true nature of what one was looking at. Are not the dangling pods of *Astrophytus dicotiledoneus*, one long one with two small ones on either side, just a little too overtly phallic? Why are the thorns on *Braohypoda frustrata* stuck *into* the stem rather than emerging out of it (Fig. 5)? And does not the flower of *Lavandula angustifolia* look rather like the underside of a reptile's head (Fig. 6)?

In fact, these are all 'pseudo-plants' which, as Fontcuberta said, were 'constructed from industrial debris, pieces of plastic, bones, plant parts and animal

limbs from many different species which he would find as he roamed the industrial zones around Barcelona'.⁴⁷ Their effect is double-edged, acting as a commentary on our attitudes to both nature and photography. 'Blossfeldt', wrote Fontcuberta, 'celebrated nature and fifty years later *Herbarium* can only confirm our ironic disappointment with that same nature'.⁴⁸ As with his subsequent and more extended project *Fauna*,⁴⁹ Fontcuberta is here concerned to explore an 'artificial kind of nature', a nature which man has constructed for himself rather than merely found.

Fontcuberta's scepticism is also directed towards photography – more precisely, the use of photography to provide scientific evidence: 'I have tried to negate the assumption that photography equals realism or that it is a neutral, objective depiction of reality. For Blossfeldt, the camera was a tool to celebrate nature; for me, it is a way to create fiction.'⁵⁰ (As Fontcuberta remarked elsewhere, 'Photography no longer documents; instead it metadocuments'.)⁵¹ Yet of course, this is not a simple opposition of 'documentary' versus 'constructed'. Blossfeldt's documentation of his plants was in fact highly constructed, both through actual tampering with the plant itself and through the act of close-up photography. While Fontcuberta's fictional images still rely upon the optical fidelity of photography which seems to offer access to the actual object while simultaneously keeping us at arm's length.

There are many significant echoes of Surrealist ideas in *Herbarium*. The interest in a kind of hybrid, uncertain Nature, thoroughly impregnated with human activity, was already there in Surrealism, and Fontcuberta's reference to roaming the industrial zones around the city must remind us that the Surrealists liked to do this as well.⁵² The Surrealists also had a profoundly sceptical attitude to the claims of scientific, rational understanding, but they also donned what Michael Sand called 'the white coat of objective observation' in order to precisely undermine those claims; one might



Fig. 6: Joan Fontcuberta: 'Lavandula angustifolia' from *Herbarium*, 1985. © Joan Fontcuberta.

say of much Surrealist documentary photography what Sand says of *Herbarium*, that the pictures 'are all the more fantastical for their unadorned simplicity'.⁵³ Finally, Christian Caujolle has seen in *Herbarium* 'a subtle tribute' to Antoni Gaudí, 'whose luxuriant architecture is so often inspired by plant forms'.⁵⁴ Here, then, there may be a final twisting back on the Surrealists' own interest in Art Nouveau and its connection with Blossfeldt's photographs.

Herbarium was intended as both 'an ironic homage to' and an 'exorcism of' Karl Blossfeldt and his work and in that double-edged comment, we can see both admiration and scepticism.⁵⁵ But it perhaps also suggests that these fictional and artificial elements always were there, embedded, albeit unacknowledged, in the pictures and waiting to be drawn out. Already in Blossfeldt's own intention to find the 'archetypal forms of art', we can see a desire to impose upon the plants a reading through human culture. But, a century later, our sense of the relationship between 'nature' and 'culture' is a good deal less comfortable.

Now, of course, the history mapped here, the interventions of Nierendorf and Bataille, Benjamin and Nash, Štyrský and Teige, Levine, Khan, and finally Fontcuberta, is part of our historical understanding of Blossfeldt's work and cannot be disentangled from it.

In that process, Surrealism has played a significant role in destabilising the fixed meaning of Blossfeldt's pictures and proposing that beneath their overt meaning, there are elements that are more problematic and troubling. Yet, in returning to the photographs as they sit on the pages of *Urformen der Kunst* – as they sat on their wall in *Undercover Surrealism* – one cannot help but remark upon their resilience. None of these speculations and appropriations would have been possible if the pictures themselves were not so stark, so silent. But it is ultimately these very qualities which render the presence of these images uncanny and enduring.

Notes

1. See Dawn Ades and Simon Baker (eds.), *Undercover Surrealism*, London: Hayward Gallery, and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2006.
2. Georges Bataille, 'Le Langage des fleurs' *Documents*, 3 (June 1929), pp. 160–168; translated as 'The Language of Flowers.' In Allan Stoekel (ed.), *Georges Bataille, Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927–1939*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1985, pp. 10–14.
3. Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men*, London: Faber and Faber 2002, p. 271. As Uglow notes, this caused problems for the study of botany by ladies and children.
4. Stoekel: *Visions*, 1985, p. 12.
5. Stoekel: *Visions*, 1985, p. 13.
6. Gert Mattenklott, *Karl Blossfeldt – The Alphabet of Plants*, Munich: Schirmer 1997, p. 17.
7. Stoekel: *Visions*, 1985, p. 14.
8. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969, p. 186. Breton also questioned the veracity of the story about Sade; Bataille apparently asked the Sade expert Maurice Heine to verify it but the story turned out to be apocryphal. See: Allan Stoekel, 'A Commentary on the Texts.' In Stoekel: *Visions*, 1985, p. 258.
9. Simon Baker, 'Doctrines (The appearance of things).' In Ades and Baker: *Undercover*, 2006, pp. 39–40.
10. Illustrated in Ades and Baker: *Undercover*, 2006, p. 91, in the catalogue it is item No.6. The date given 1930 is unlikely, given Blossfeldt's photographs were reproduced in the issue for June 1929. The envelope is in the Karl Blossfeldt Archive, Zülpich.
11. From Blossfeldt's introduction to *Wundergarten der Natur* (1932) which, as stated below, was his only full statement of his intentions with this work. This translation is from Christoph Schreier, 'Nature as Art – Art as Nature.' In Ann and Jürgen Wilde (eds.), *Karl Blossfeldt: Photography*, Ostfildern: Cantz, no date, possibly 2001, p. 16. The whole of Blossfeldt's text is translated in David Elliott (ed.), *Karl Blossfeldt: Photographs*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1978.
12. For a full biography, see Jürgen Wilde, 'Karl Blossfeldt – A Photographer's Life.' In Wilde: *Blossfeldt*, 2001?, pp. 5–10.
13. Translated in Rolf Sachsse, *Karl Blossfeldt: Photographs*, Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, p. 84.
14. For an overview, see: Wieland Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit and German Realism of the Twenties*, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979. Dictionary definition of 'sachlichkeit' p. 6; Schmied writes on Neue Sachlichkeit painting pp. 7–32 and Ute Eskildsen on photography pp. 85–97.
15. Robert Breuer, 'Grüne Architektur', *Uhu*, 9 (1926); the spread is reproduced in Schmied: *Neue Sachlichkeit*, 1979, p. 87, where, however, it is dated 1929.
16. Karl Blossfeldt, *Urformen der Kunst*, Karl Nierendorf (intro.), Berlin: Verlag Ernst Wasmuth 1928.
17. Details of these and other editions are given in Wilde: *Blossfeldt*, 2001?, p. 159.
18. Karl Blossfeldt, *Wundergarten der Natur*, Berlin: Verlag für Kunstwissenschaft, 1932.
19. On the early development of Atget's reputation see: Maria Morris Hambourg, 'Atget, Precursor of Modern Documentary Photography.' In David Featherstone (ed.), *Observations*, Carmel: Friends of Photography, 1984, pp. 29–39.
20. Both Benjamin's and Nash's reviews are reprinted, along with Nierendorf's introduction to *Art Forms in Nature*, in David Mellor (ed.), *Germany: The New Photography 1927–33*, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978, pp. 17–24.
21. Translated as 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia.' In Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, London: New Left Books, 1979, pp. 225–239.
22. Walter Benjamin, 'New Things about Plants' in Mellor: *Germany*, 1978, p. 20.
23. Benjamin cites Grandville at several points in his Arcades Project and, in his 1935 outline 'Paris – The Capital of the Nineteenth Century', entitled one of the sections: 'Grandville or the World Exhibitions.' See: Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, London: Verso 1983, pp. 164–166. Susan Buck-Morss, in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989, pp. 156–157, juxtaposes one of Grandville's drawings with four Blossfeldt photographs.
24. 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie', first published *Literarische Welt*, 7 (1931), Kingsley Shorter (trans.), as 'A Small History of Photography.' In Benjamin: *One-Way Street*, 1979, p. 243.
25. On the 'optical unconscious' see the essays by Esther Leslie and Detlef Mertins in Alex Coles (ed.), *The Optic of Walter Benjamin*, London: Black Dog, 1999, pp. 196–219. For a further discussion of the concept in relation to Surrealist photography see: Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, pp. 172–173.
26. *Wundergarten der Natur* was published in Britain by Zwemmer as a second volume of *Art Forms in Nature*. Nash's review, 'Photography and Modern Art' was published in *The Listener*, 27 July 1932, p. 130. It is also reprinted in Andrew Causey

- (ed.), *Paul Nash: Writings on Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 76–78.
27. For Nash's engagement with European photography, see: Andrew Causey, *Paul Nash's Photographs: Document and Image*, London: Tate Gallery, 1973; for an analysis of the relationship of Nash's photography to Surrealism see: Ian Walker, *So Exotic, So Homemade: Surrealism, Englishness and Documentary Photography*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007, chpts. 1, 2.
 28. Paul Nash, 'Photography and Modern Art.' In Mellor *Germany*, 1978, p. 23.
 29. On this image, see: Mary Ann Caws, *Dora Maar: With and Without Picasso*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2000, pp. 78–79.
 30. Franz Roh, 'Max Ernst und die Stückungsgraphik', *Das Kunstblatt*, 11 (1927), pp. 397–400. On Roh's text see: Mattenklott: *Blossfeldt*, 1997, p. 18).
 31. Dawn Ades, 'Photography and the Surrealist Text.' In Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston (eds.), *L'Amour Fou*, Washington: Corcoran Gallery, and New York: Abbeville Press 1985, p. 179. This connection is reinforced on p. 178 where two of Blossfeldt's pictures are reproduced with two images from *Mino-taure*: a praying mantis photographed by Le Charles and one of Brassai's pictures of a Paris metro entrance. Recently, Blossfeldt's photographs were again connected with Surrealism in the exhibition *Surreal Things* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2007. A particular influence was noted at the house built by Edward James at Monkton in Sussex, where the balcony balustrade was carved in the form of curling fern fronds in probable imitation of Blossfeldt's photograph of a fern. See Ghislaine Wood (ed.), *Surreal Things*, London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2007, pp. 48–49, illustration p. 51.
 32. The photomontage, now in the Muzeum Sztuki w Lodzi, is illustrated in Stanislaw Czekalski, 'Kazimierz Podsadecki and Janusz Maria Brzeski: Photomontage between the Avant-Garde and Mass Culture', *History of Photography*, 29:3 (Autumn 2005), p. 267.
 33. Jindřich Štyrský, *Emilie přichází ke mně ve snu*, Prague: Edice 69, 1933, (edition of 69 copies). The book also contains a text by Štyrský translated in Michael Richardson (ed.), *The Dedalus Book of Surrealism: The Identity of Things*, Sawtry: Dedalus, 1993, pp. 96–101; Štyrský evokes flower-metaphors at several points but interestingly they all reference female sexuality.
 34. Quoted in translation in Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, *The Photobook: a History*, vol. I, London: Phaidon, 2004, p. 103. The source of the translation is given as Vladimir Birgus and Jan Mloch, *The Nude in Czech Photography*, Prague: Kant, 2001, p. 21.
 35. See: Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Svácha (eds.), *Karel Teige 1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999.
 36. There are over 350 photocollages by Teige in the collection of the National Museum of Literature in Prague. For a selection of 85 images see: Karel Srp, *Karel Teige*, Prague: Torst, 2001. Also see: Vojtech Lahoda, 'Karel Teige's Collages, 1935–1951: The Erotic Object, the Social Object, and Surrealist Landscape Art.' In Dluhosch and Svácha: *Karel Teige*, 1999, pp. 292–323.
 37. Antonín Dufek, 'Imaginative photography.' In Jaroslav Anđel (ed.), *Czech Modernism 1900–1945*, Houston: Houston Museum of Fine Arts, and Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1990, p. 142.
 38. Srp: *Karel Teige*, 2001 includes collages using the work of Man Ray (Nos. 21, 27 and 43 among others), Henri (44), Moholy-Nagy (50) and Brassai (62).
 39. On Štyrský's photographs see: Karel Srp, *Jindřich Štyrský*, Prague: Torst, 2001 (text in Czech/English) and Ian Walker, 'On the Needles of these Days: Czech Surrealism and Documentary Photography', *Third Text*, 67 (March 2004), pp. 103–118.
 40. For example, see: Russell Roberts, *In Visible Light: Photography and Classification in Art, Science and the Everyday*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1997.
 41. James Lingwood, 'Working the System.' In Marc Freidus (ed.), *Typologies*, Newport: Harbour Art Museums and New York: Rizzoli, 1991, p. 92. For an analysis of both the parallels and differences between Blossfeldt's images and recent typological and conceptual work see: Ulrike Meyer Stump, 'Introduction'. In Wilde: *Blossfeldt*, 2001?, pp. 16–18.
 42. See: Marie-Laure Bernadac and Bernard Marcadé (eds.), *fēmininmasculin: le sexe de l'art*, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou/ Gallimard, 1995, pp. 236–237. For an overview of flower photography see: William A. Ewing, *Flora Photographica*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1991.
 43. Interview with Jeanne Siegel, 'The Anxiety of Influence – Head On.' In *Sherrie Levine*, Zurich: Kunsthalle 1991. The exhibition included 20 photographs from the series *Untitled (After Karl Blossfeldt)*, 1990. One of them is also reproduced in Elizabeth Janus (ed.), *Veronica's Revenge*, Zurich: Scalo, 1998, p. 39.
 44. Lucy Soutter, 'The Collapsed Archive', *Source*, 49 (Winter 2006), p. 46. This is a review of Khan's exhibition at the Victoria Miro Gallery, London, 2–30 September, 2006.
 45. Joan Fontcuberta, *Herbarium*, Vilém Flusser (intro.), Göttingen: European Photography 1985.
 46. A number of these early images are illustrated in Christian Caujolle, *Joan Fontcuberta*, London: Phaidon 2001.
 47. Joan Fontcuberta, *Contranatura*. Alicante: Museo de la Universidad de Alicante, 2001, p. 24.
 48. Fontcuberta: *Contranatura*, 2001, p. 24.
 49. Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera, *Fauna*, Seville: Photo-vision y Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, 1989.
 50. Joan Fontcuberta, 'Spanish Photography: A Historical Overview.' In Betty Hahn (ed.), *Contemporary Spanish Photography*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1987, p. 12.
 51. Fontcuberta: *Contranatura*, 2001, p. 24.
 52. Walker: *City Gorged*, 2002, chpt. 6, pp. 114–143.
 53. Michael Sand, 'Unreliable Witness.' In Fontcuberta: *Contranatura*, 2001, p. 19.
 54. Caujolle: *Joan Fontcuberta*, 2001, p. 9.
 55. Hahn: *Contemporary Spanish*, 1987, p. 12.