

THE SHORT HISTORY OF SURREALIST PHOTOGRAPHY

Ian Walker

Based on Professorial Lecture delivered at the University of South Wales, Newport, October 8th, 2013

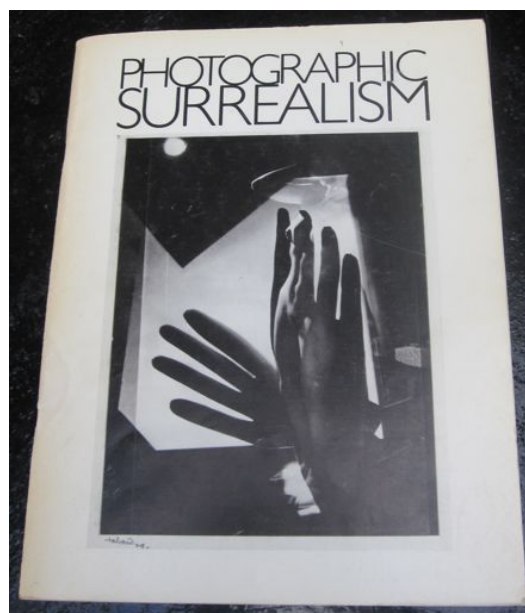
My subject here is surrealist photography, though I should emphasise that I'm using that term as a shorthand reference. Some of the photographs I'm going to discuss were made by members of one surrealist group or another, but some of them are by artists and photographers who were influenced by but not actually part of the surrealist movement. Over the past thirty years, this large and varied body of work has been the subject of intense scrutiny in books, articles and exhibitions. My first intention here is provide an overview of this area of study. But, on this occasion, I will also say something about my own position within it. So sometimes, I will be considering the subject from outside and sometimes from inside.

My starting point will be the question that is implicitly posed by my title. The surrealist movement was founded in Paris in the early 1920s and flourished in the interwar years. Yet the large and important subject of surrealist photography was not identified as such until the end of the 1970s, six decades after the founding of surrealism. Why was there this delay and why did surrealist photography become so interesting at that point in time? And is it more than coincidence that this was also the point in time when the study of the history of photography suddenly exploded in a whole range of different directions?

But first, a short history of this short history. In the winter of 2009-10, the Centre Pompidou in Paris mounted the huge exhibition, *La Subversion des images: Surréalisme, Photographie, Film*. With over 400 photographs and other artifacts on display, it was certainly the largest showing of surrealist photography yet assembled. The accompanying catalogue contained 480 pages with texts by five authors and weighed more than 7 lbs.



La Subversion des images was the culmination of thirty years of research into the relationship between surrealism and photography. During that time, books and catalogues published in Europe, the USA and elsewhere have demonstrated just how widespread surrealist photography was and is, and how important it has been, both for surrealism and for photography. Few areas of surrealist practice have received so much recent attention and, by now, any substantial account of surrealism would need to include photography alongside painting, sculpture, collage and film as the primary media with which surrealist artists have worked.



To my knowledge, the first exhibition devoted to the subject was staged in Cleveland, Ohio in 1979: *Photographic Surrealism*, curated by Nancy Hall-Duncan, who was still a graduate student at the time. The catalogue was a comparatively slim booklet – just 72 pages. But in her text, Hall-Duncan made a large claim that “photographic surrealism forms one of the most critically important but largely disregarded undercurrents in photographic history”. I want to examine both why it had been disregarded and why it is important.

We need to start by going back to the 1970s and trying to imagine the state of enquiry into the history of photography and the history of surrealism at that point in time. Let’s start with surrealism and with the two major exhibitions which, a decade apart, seemed to define surrealism for their generations. The first was *Dada and Surrealist Art*, curated by William Rubin at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1968. Rubin concentrated exclusively on painting and sculpture and, as far as it was possible with such a subject, his discussion was informed by the modernist formalism of Clement Greenberg (the dominant figure in American art criticism at that time). For Rubin, the greatest surrealist was Joan Miró, particularly in his almost abstract pictures of the mid twenties (like the one pointedly placed on the title page). He was much less comfortable with, say, the paradoxical narratives of René Magritte. But there is a problem for a stylistic definition of surrealist art if it is trying to encompass both sorts of picture. You can’t simply define surrealism by what it looks like.

If one then jumps forward a decade to the equally large exhibition *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, staged in 1978 at the Hayward Gallery in London, one can see a seismic shift in the understanding of surrealism. The exhibition showed lots of wonderful paintings, but it also included books, journals, documents, chosen objects and photographs. Surrealism was now celebrated for its very heterogeneity and eclecticism, for the ways in which it challenged classic modernism.

The major argument of the exhibition was that surrealism was best understood by examining the magazines which peppered its history, where text and image were often juxtaposed in provocative fashion. This gave a much more complex understanding of both the possibilities and the contradictions of surrealism. And of course, when one looks closely at the range of images in those surrealist journals, one realizes that many

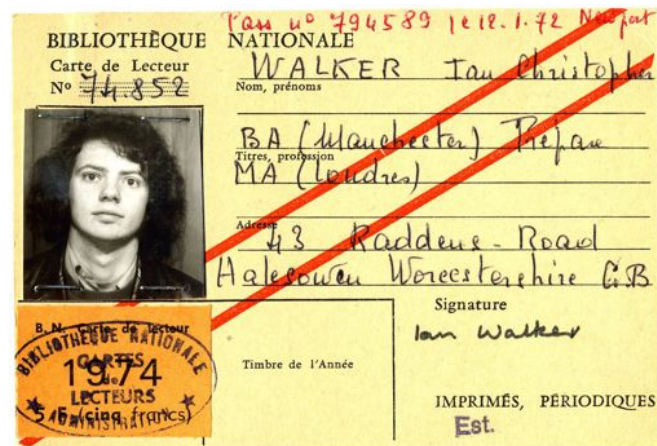
of them were photographs – for the first time, photography started to move centre stage in the understanding of surrealism.

What was happening in the shift between the MOMA exhibition in 1968 and the Hayward show in 1978 can also be rather too simply put in other more general terms: it was the shift from modernism to postmodernism. The more complex and indeed contradictory view of surrealism fitted with a more complex and contradictory view of art more generally. In 1986, Dawn Ades, who had been the major author of the catalogue for the Hayward exhibition, wrote, “It could be suggested ... that it was precisely surrealism's efficacy to have maintained a series of contradictions *without* resolution. But this is uncomfortable for a discipline [Art History] which tends to work towards a unified view of individuals and movements, and to bestow value on them according to the measure of their unity”. This was in a volume with the significant title *The New Art History*. Through the late seventies and early eighties, Art History was also changing, and it was the very lack of unity and cohesion in surrealism which came to be of compelling interest. As Simon Baker put it in 2007, surrealism ‘was not curated or assembled by a single author. It resulted from the gradual agglomeration of the diverging, often conflicting interests of individuals working both for and against the surrealist movement’.

It is not only surrealism that defies a closed and unified definition; so does photography. This was probably one of the reasons why the medium was not fully accepted into the canon of modernism and why it also came to be of great interest to artists, theorists, historians and curators at the same time that surrealism did in the late 1970s. The ‘history of photography’ had up to that point been studied in very limited ways. Some of you will have noticed that the title of this lecture contains a reference to an essay published by the great German theorist Walter Benjamin in 1931: “A Short History of Photography”. It is pungent and full of still relevant insights, but my main point here is that it is only 20 pages long; evidently, at that time, when photography was less than a century old, that’s how much time it took to tell its story. A few years later, the American curator Beaumont Newhall wrote the first book length *History of Photography* for the centenary of photography in 1939. In the early 1970s, when I was given my copy as a birthday present, it was still in print and still the major book on the subject. Looking back now, it is very much a history of

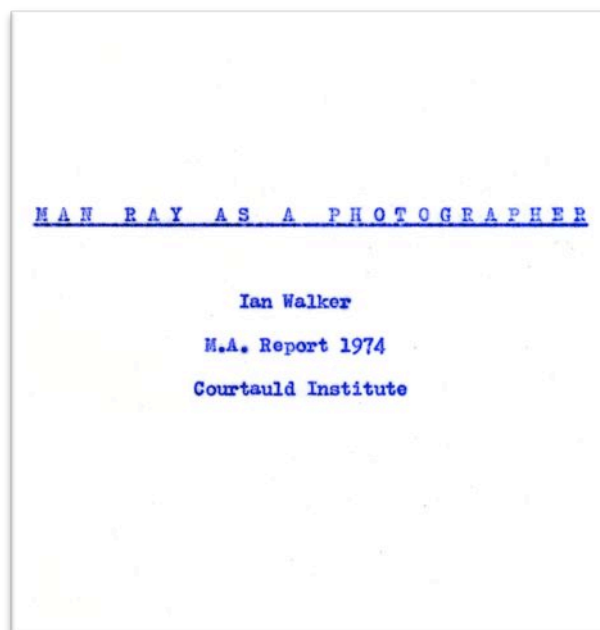
photography as an artform with its finest achievements taking place – unsurprisingly – in the USA.

But alongside the new art history in the early eighties, there was also an increased interest in the varied and complex forms of photography and an understanding that its history could not be recounted in the same linear fashion as the history of painting. Later on in the same volume in which Ades remarked on the contradictoriness of surrealism, the photographic historian Ian Jeffrey ironically commented: “A ‘history of photography’ verges on the unimaginable. Such a history, if meant to be comprehensive, would be bewilderingly tangential and discontinuous. ... Photography never lent itself readily to progressive narrative, to totalizing history, or to any sort of Great Unfolding, and in the general histories is always forced into shape, arbitrarily connected”. For example, in studying surrealist photography, one must look at wildly different sorts of objects made for very different reasons: individual images made by a ‘master photographer’ like Man Ray alongside the vestiges of popular culture: postcards, snapshots and photo booth pictures. The surrealists were always intrigued by the coming together of high and low culture, and it is an important feature of photography as well.



There is another element that I want to insert into this narrative at this point – my own relationship to this history. I want to try to conjure up what this period felt like at ground level, as it were. I studied the History of Art for my BA at Manchester University and then went to the Courtauld Institute in 1973-4 for my MA. The concentration of my studies in both places was on twentieth century art – what was

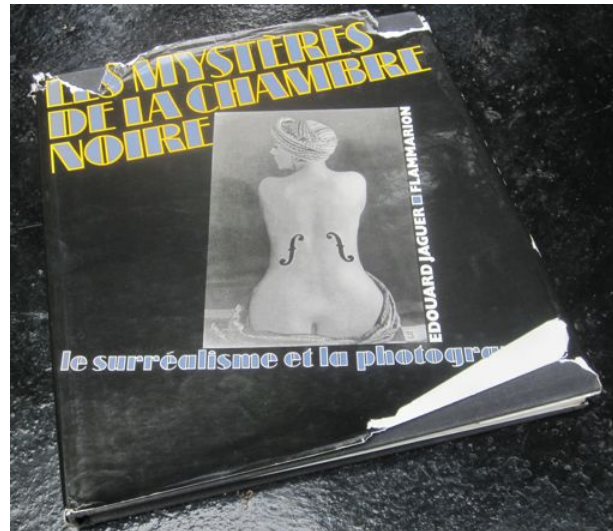
still at that point called ‘Modern Art’, even though some of it was a century old. It was a tradition to which we still felt connected. The concentration of the various courses I took was also on painting and sculpture; I don’t remember photography being mentioned at any point. Yet when I came to propose a subject for my MA dissertation, I decided to do it on Man Ray. It was, I was told, the first dissertation on photography to be undertaken at the Courtauld.



Reading this dissertation now, it seems thin and uninformed; partly that is to do with re-reading anything one has written at the age of 22, but more importantly, I think it is indicative of just how little the study of surrealist photography – or indeed photography more generally – had been developed at that point. Extraordinary as it seems, no monograph had been written on Man Ray since 1924 – now there are dozens of them. I also started getting interested in the photographers around Man Ray – figures like Eugène Atget, Brassai and André Kertész – and found that, for most of them, there was just one book available, usually a collection of pictures with a short introduction.

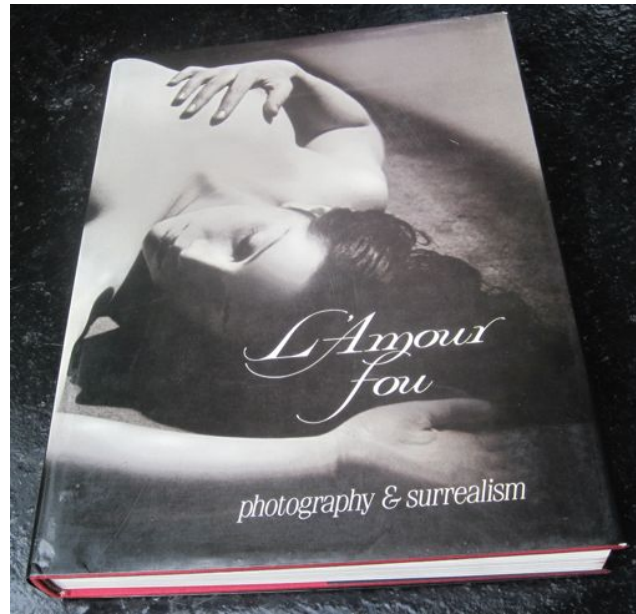
This was the start of something for me, but I didn’t yet know what. I proposed developing it into a PhD but my tutors at the Courtauld made it clear they wouldn’t be able to supervise it. I continued gathering material, spending time in libraries and archives in France, Belgium and the USA as well as here; it all went into an expanding file which grew increasingly hard to organise. And, significantly, I got a

job lecturing at Newport; I didn't know at the time how lucky I was. I was teaching Art History and had nothing formally to do with the photography course to start with, but going to lectures by David Hurn, Keith Arnatt and John Charity (and all the visiting speakers they brought in) expanded my knowledge and understanding of the medium immeasurably. Other interests, other demands took over and the desire to do a PhD drifted away.



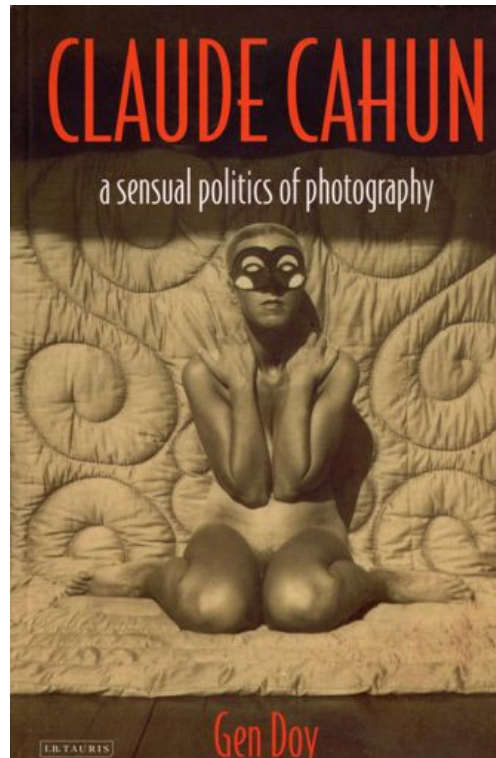
After *Photographic Surrealism* in 1979, the next important publication about surrealist photography was *Les mystères de la chambre noire*, published in Paris in 1982. Its author was Edouard Jaguer, who had been affiliated with surrealism since the war. This gave him access to a wide range of material, but also – in the minds of some reviewers – meant that his judgements were insufficiently rigorous and objective. (Nevertheless, as you can see, my copy is well-thumbed!)

Then, in 1985, there appeared the exhibition which would fully establish Surrealist photography as an important subject for contemporary scholars. It also gave my own research a jolt. This was *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism*, curated by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston for the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC. The exhibition received widespread attention for a number of reasons. One was its internationalism; as well as Washington, the show travelled to San Francisco, Paris and London. The catalogue was also a weighty and authoritative volume, produced in New York by the mainstream publisher Abbeville Press.



But the most important element in this fame – notoriety even – was the status of its guest curator Rosalind Krauss, one of the most combative and challenging art writers of the time. In her key essays in *L'Amour fou*, she set up a polemic which deliberately read the surrealism of the interwar years through the prism of 1980s post-structuralist theory. This led to some stretching of historical accuracy and an emphasis on images which bolstered Krauss's own arguments. Despite the all-encompassing implications of its subtitle, *L'Amour fou* in fact laid a heavy emphasis on surrealist photography that was manipulated, fragmented or constructed in the studio, and in the process, it misrepresented or simply excluded other, contradictory areas of work. Nevertheless, the polemical force of *L'Amour fou* was such that, for the next decade or so, it seemed to define the field of Surrealist photography.

One example of an artist whose position was established by inclusion in the exhibition was Claude Cahun. I think that, like most people, I had never heard of her before seeing her work in 1985; in the subsequent decade, it seemed to be everywhere. Her biography in the catalogue of *L'Amour fou* was extremely thin and in some places wrong. It stated that she died in a concentration camp during World War Two; in fact, she and her partner had moved to Jersey where they participated in covert anti-German activities. Though arrested, they survived and Cahun died in 1954.

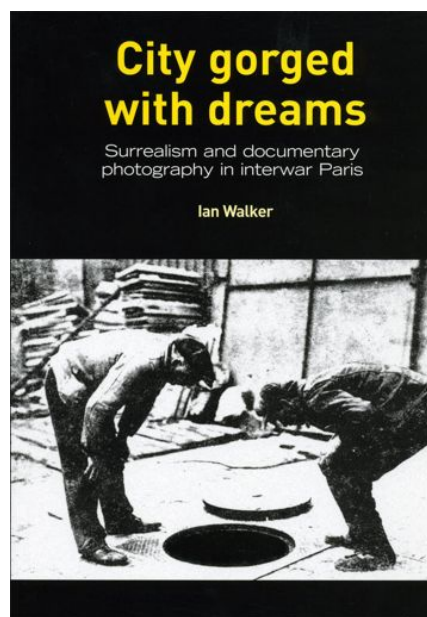


Cahun's real name was Lucy Schwob and she came from a Jewish literary family; her choice of a pseudonym was deliberately ungendered (Claude can be either a male or a female first name in French). And many of her best photographs are self-portraits which play with identity in ways that appealed to both theorists and artists in the 1980s. As Gen Doy, author of one of the books on Cahun, has remarked, writings on Cahun in the late eighties and early nineties placed emphasis on "performative aspects of the work, the staging of the self and the impossibility of knowing the 'real' Claude Cahun". It is no coincidence that this could be a description of the work of some women artists in the 1980s, most obviously that of Cindy Sherman, who also posed herself in scenarios that parodied conventional notions of femininity. Cahun's work is indeed extraordinary, but the visibility it had after *L'Amour fou* was undoubtedly because it suddenly fitted with the zeitgeist. But it is also true that it wouldn't have been quite so celebrated if it wasn't extraordinary in the first place.

L'Amour fou was also important for my own work with Surrealist photography. It made me realize that where my central interest lay was in that area of the subject which had been under-represented there. As I wrote later in my book *City Gorged with Dreams*: "*L'Amour Fou* failed to represent a whole other way of working with the medium: a Surrealist photography which, on the contrary, exploits its very

'straightness', its apparent realism, to Surrealist ends. This text has come out of a belief that this 'Surrealist documentary' photography is in fact more disruptive of conventional norms than the contrivances of darkroom manipulation, and that it deserves a more complex reading than it has previously had."

So in 1988 I enrolled for a DPhil, this time at the University of Sussex with David Mellor. In 1995, I was awarded my Doctorate for a study of "Paris as the Site of Surrealist Photography 1924-1939" and finally, in 2002, after much compression, that work was transformed into the book *City Gorged with Dreams*, published by Manchester University Press. The book made its way into the discourse around the subject and I can't deny that it was very gratifying to find it appearing in bibliographies, quoted in other books and cited in blogs.



As you can see from the book's subtitle, there are three main elements that come together in the book: surrealism, documentary and Paris. I'll just something about each of them. First the city – I have indeed found the book sometimes cited in studies of Paris and this fits with the importance of the urban environment for the first generation of surrealists. They were concerned to find moments of surrealist inspiration and disorientation not only inside their own imaginations, but also out on the street, in the ebb and flow of everyday life. In this, they stood halfway between

the ‘flânerie’ of a nineteenth century writer like Charles Baudelaire and the late twentieth century ‘psychogeography’ of the Situationists.

The title *City Gorged with Dreams* incidentally has an interesting backstory. One of Baudelaire’s poems, ‘Les Sept Vieillards’ (‘The Seven Old Men’), opens with this couplet:

Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves,
Où le spectre, en plein jour, racchroche le passant!

‘Swarming city, city full of dreams, where the ghost in broad daylight accosts the passer-by’ would be a literal translation of that. But in my reading, I came across a version by the distinguished American poet and translator Richard Howard, where he gave the first line as “Swarming city – city *gorged* with dreams”. To say the least, that word ‘gorged’ is an exaggeration, but I thought it was a wonderful phrase and borrowed it for my title (with permission from Howard’s publishers, if not from Baudelaire).

The second element in the book is of course surrealism, or to be more specific, the way that the surrealists thought about and used documentary photographs. These images abound in surrealist publications, particularly in the magazines they produced. Sometimes they are photos that have been made for the context, but more often they have been taken from elsewhere and reprinted. Their sources were very varied, from scientific images to police photos to popular postcards, but, wherever they came from, their meaning is shifted by the new surrealist context in which they find themselves. Often this effect is achieved by a new caption, or the juxtaposition with text or other images.

Let me give just one example. The photograph I used on the cover of my book was taken from the cover of an issue of the first surrealist journal *La Révolution surréaliste* (no 11: March 15, 1928). It shows two workmen looking down an open manhole. The original context of the photograph has been removed and we can never know why the two men were actually there. The picture is also accompanied by a new caption which shifts its meaning decisively: LA PROCHAINE CHAMBRE - the next room.



Immediately, one's concentration is centred on the oval of the black hole, no longer a void but an active presence in the picture, holding untold mysteries which lie down below the flat surface of the pavement. But there are several possibilities for what that room might contain. 'Chambre' is often used in French specifically to refer to the *Chambre des Députés* – the Parliament - and read thus, the image-text takes on a political and satirical tone. But perhaps one could also read an oblique relationship between the magazine's cover and the contents inside, as if the black hole led into the interior of the magazine. Issue no. 11 contained, for example, the 'Researches into Sexuality', a group discussion about sexual practices and desires. Consequently, one might envisage the 'next room' into which the men gaze so avidly as the *chambre d'amour*. Suddenly the workmen become voyeurs. Finally, and probably going too far, one might remember that the French term for a photographic darkroom is *un chambre noir*: maybe the hole is where this photo has itself come from. Of course, none of these readings is any more correct than any other, nor are they mutually exclusive. Rather, the range of meanings interpenetrate to create a complex web of possibilities.

The third element in the book is of course documentary. Where the first half generally looked at how the surrealists used documentary photographs, the second half was about how documentary photographers of the twenties and thirties in Paris related to surrealism. It gave me the chance to return to figures such as Atget, Brassai and Kertész, whose work had first sparked my interest in documentary twenty years

earlier. But I was also very conscious that, like Krauss in another area, my ideas were being deeply affected by what was happening in contemporary documentary practice.

This is what I wrote in the introduction: “Much of my time in the last few years has been taken up in thinking about the implications of postmodernism for documentary - the questions that it raises about authorship, ethical responsibility and the processes of narrative. For many years, the humanist mainstream of documentary was hardly subject to questioning. Then, through the late seventies and early eighties, it was problematised almost to the point of paralysis. In the last fifteen years, however, the genre has been reinvigorated by self-reflexivity, a refusal of mastery, an acceptance of ambiguity and a critical awareness of its own history. Documentary is now a complex and multivalent genre which seeks to comment on issues of social and cultural importance without losing sight of the position from which that commentary is made.”

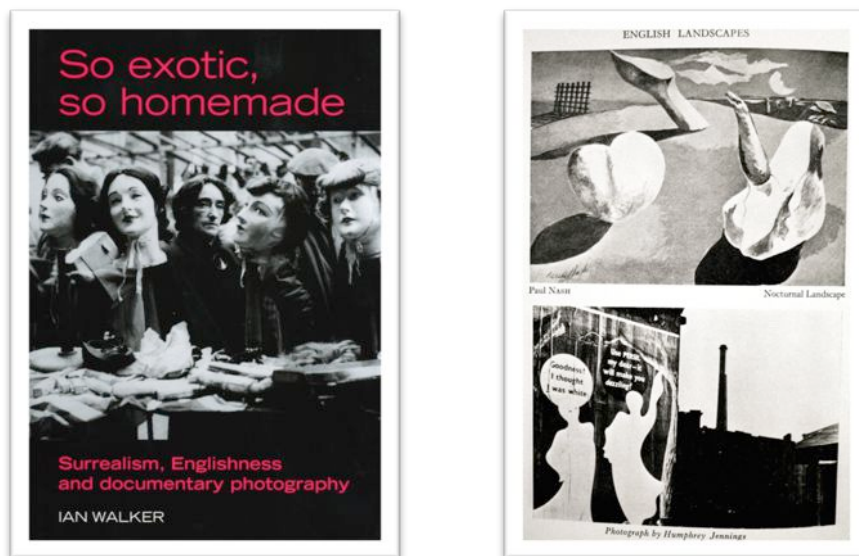


In 1996, I published an essay called “Documentary Fictions” in which I used one photograph to represent these changes (an impossible task of course). The picture I chose was by Paul Reas from his book *Flogging a Dead Horse*. This is what I wrote about it: “One image that does suggest something of what I've been proposing here was taken by Paul Reas at Beamish in Durham, one of the many industrial heritage museums which opened in the eighties (though Beamish is rather particular, being almost completely fabricated from buildings brought from elsewhere). The sun is shining on Beamish ... and, of course, it's also shining on the tourists. One visitor in

particular occupies the front of the image, a middle-aged man in a tweed jacket who films the scene with his Super 8 camera (maybe just a year or two later, even he will be using a camcorder). But whereas the scene behind is lit by the sun, this man is lit by the photographer's flash and this makes it look as if he's not in the scene at all, but rather in front of a screen on which it's projected. The effect is physically the result of a particular photographic technology, yet it can also act as a metaphor for how we in our heritagized age relate to our history, a history that like Beamish itself is often constructed as nostalgic scenery. The photographic conceit and the political meaning interlock completely.”

I was at the time very wary of claiming the same level of sophisticated reflexivity for the surrealist documentary I wrote about in the book, and I'm still not sure how far the parallel can be pushed. But I do think that, in the best documentary work made under the influence of surrealism – the early pictures of Henri Cartier-Bresson, for example – something very different was at work from what was then the mainstream of documentary: realist, humanist and socially concerned. And that such pictures also look different from how they would have looked before postmodernist thinking changed the way we think about both surrealism and documentary.

(I want in this context also to say something about the importance of being at Newport while undertaking this work. It may seem as if this research has very little to do with the day-to-day business of teaching documentary photography to contemporary students. But, for me, it connects in all sorts of ways. There could have been nowhere better than Newport to undertake this work and the context of discussion with both staff and with students has always been invigorating. It has been a very different – and much richer – experience working within the context of an art school rather than an academic art history department. It has also been important that this context has enabled me to develop my own practice as a photographer, an aspect of my work which I'm not discussing here. I want above all to emphasise the mutual connectivity of research, practice and teaching - areas of work that have for me constantly fed into each other in ways that have been challenging and rewarding.)



My subsequent publications have each contained different challenges (and different rewards) which I think can tell us something more about how the field of surrealism and photography has continued to expand. The major project I moved on to after *City Gorged with Dreams* was a parallel examination of the same conjunction of surrealism and documentary as it had happened in England. (And I should emphasise that I do mean England and not Britain.) This took a different form from the Paris book and it raised different questions.

My first illustration was a page from the magazine *London Bulletin*, edited by the Belgian surrealist E.L.T. Mesens in 1938, where he juxtaposed pictures by two member of the English Surrealist group under the heading 'English Landscapes': a painting by Paul Nash above a photograph by Humphrey Jennings. At first it is the difference that is striking. Nash's *Nocturnal Landscape* is one of his paintings based on standing stones while Jennings' photograph is of an industrial scene. Nash's painting has a southern, rural source while Jennings' photograph is industrial and (probably) northern, taken I would guess when he was involved with the Mass-Observation organization in Bolton. Yet, if you look again, you might notice how similar the biomorphic forms in Nash's landscape are to the two white ghosts in the Persil advert. How the fence in the photograph is echoed by a fence-like form in the painting, and the vertical chimney paralleled by two of the megaliths, which seem also to thrust upwards. Those are the sort of connections that a surrealist like Mesens

might bring out of such disparate sources, suggesting what they have in common as much as how they are different.

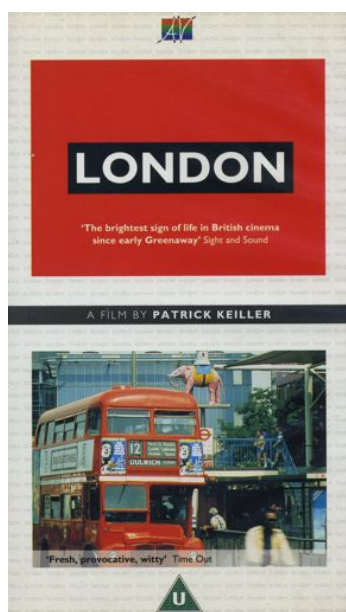
The title ‘English Landscapes’ also points to what these pictures say about England and Englishness. I found that a key theme of the book became how those were contested and problematic notions, centred for example around the contrast between north and south. In the 1930s, the contrast between the two was much more marked than now and southerners going ‘up north’ found it to be a strange and uncanny place. I also found that my own identity was brought into question, coming as I do from the Midlands, a sort of no man’s land which northerners think is in the south and southerners think is in the north.



A painting like Nash’s *Nocturnal Landscape* had a very specific source in his visit to the great stone circle at Avebury in Wiltshire in 1933. He was entranced: “The great stones were ... wonderful and disquieting, and as I saw them then, I shall always remember them’. While there, he shot a roll of photos and one image stands out. It was later entitled *Avebury Sentinel* and Nash remarked that it looked like a bloodhound, but that it was also “a *thing* which is an embodiment and most surely possesses power”.

I have always found it a very instructive part of my research into landscape

photography to visit the sites where the photographs I am studying were made and it can be a very useful experience in trying to understand the photographer's tactics. In *So Exotic, so Homemade*, I made this process explicit for the first time and included some of my own pictures to demonstrate this process. When I went to Avebury, I had a hard time finding this stone; when I did suddenly see it, I realised why. Nash had quite transformed it through the way he had photographed it. He moved in close and photographed the stone from end-on, so that it seems to be moving towards the spectator. He was lucky that the angle of the sun also helps to give a sense of animation. Photographed from the side on a dull day like the time I was there, the effect is completely lost. Nash also bent down so that the stone looms up against the flat sky and, most dramatically, he tipped the frame to add to the sense of dynamic instability. It is a very dramatic example of how the decisions taken by the photographer in the process of making the photograph can be a way of directing the spectator's understanding of the photograph's meaning.

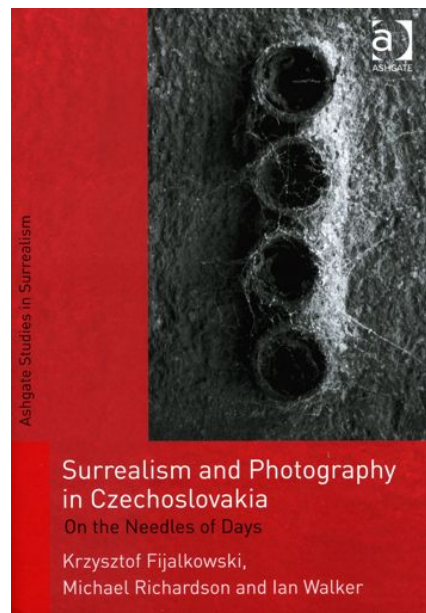


One of the arguments about Surrealism when it arrived in England in the mid-1930s was whether it was a force come from abroad to challenge the parochial local culture or whether it was in fact a reassertion of oppositional traditions that had always existed within English culture. Was it 'exotic' or was it 'homemade'? My title *So Exotic, So Homemade* in fact comes from a much more recent source: Patrick Keiller's 1994 film *London*, where it is part of a coruscating description of

contemporary Britain. This points to another way in which the English book differed from the book on Paris, with the addition of a final chapter which traced the influence of surrealism on English art and photography through the second half of the twentieth century.

Extending the timescale in this way also enabled me to look more broadly at certain perennial themes within the English version of surrealism. One obvious example was the seaside, which I describe in the book as “a place of indefiniteness and ‘inbetweenness’, between land and water, the town and the sea, culture and nature”. Paul Nash lived in Swanage in Dorset in 1934-5 and he wrote an essay about it, entitled ‘Swanage or Seaside Surrealism’ and illustrated with photos of some of the strange Victorian monuments with which the town is littered. Later, in 1937-8, the Mass-Observation group followed the people of Bolton on their annual holiday to Blackpool, where two of the group, Humphrey Spender and Julian Trevelyan, photographed some of the more fantastical elements on display. In the late 1960s, Tony Ray-Jones travelled round the seaside resorts of England to put together a remarkable and influential series of photographs; as he famously wrote: “Photography can be a mirror and reflect life as it is, but I also think that perhaps it is possible to walk like Alice, through a looking-glass, and find another kind of world with the camera”. One photographer much influenced by Ray-Jones was Martin Parr, who has returned again and again to the English seaside as a subject matter: “it’s almost as if it’s in a slight timewarp and it’s got all the contradictions I like. It’s slightly sad, slightly decaying”.

I could go on and cite many other examples of ‘seaside surrealism’. But what’s clear is that, by thus extending the timeframe, one can understand just how thoroughly surrealism has spread through our culture. One does of course have to be very careful to distinguish between work made *within* surrealism and that which is apart from it but shows its influence. But, as long as that distinction is fully acknowledged, I have found that much of the most interesting work I’ve written about has been made, not within surrealism, but rather next to it.

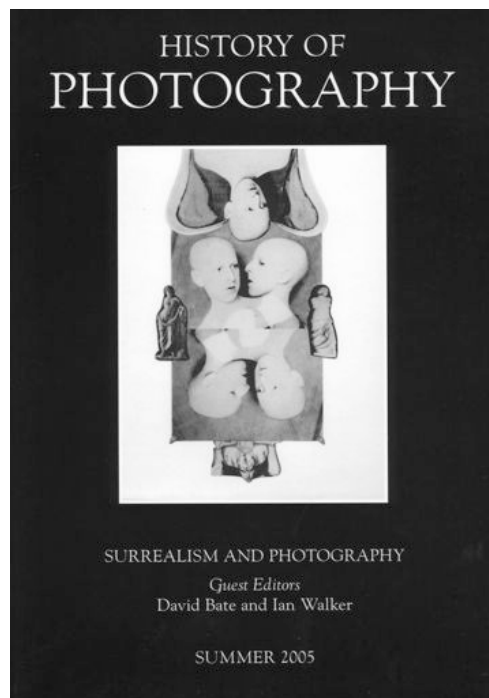
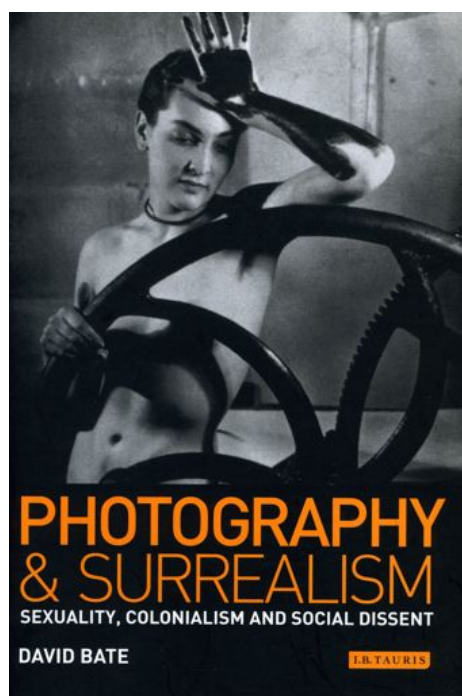


The situation is again somewhat different with the third book I have worked on. This looks at the long history of *Surrealism and Photography in Czechoslovakia* (or, as it became in 1993, the Czech Republic). I have been interested in the subject ever since I spent time in the archives in Prague and Brno in 1992-3. Czechoslovakia has been where some of the most extraordinary surrealist photography was produced, but it is scarcely known outside the country. I thought it was important to make it better known. The other remarkable thing about surrealism in Czechoslovakia / the Czech Republic is its longevity; there is still a very vital and energetic surrealist group, who meet every week in Prague, mount exhibitions and produce a journal called *Analogon* (there have now been over seventy issues).

So, like the English book, this volume covers the whole period from the founding of the Surrealist group in Prague in 1934 through to the present day. But there is more emphasis on the post-war period (when much of the most interesting work was made) and it stays closer to surrealism itself. It is remarkable just how much consistency there is in the themes that have interested Czech surrealist photographers through the last eighty years. One might look at photographs by Jindřich Štyrský from 1934, Vilém Reichmann from 1946, Emila Medková from 1959, Jíří Sever from 1966 and Roman Kubík from 1991, and see a constant interest in the decayed, the unsettled and the peripheral. The pictures were made under a range of different political regimes, but all refuse the dominant hegemony of those regimes. And again, this is a theme

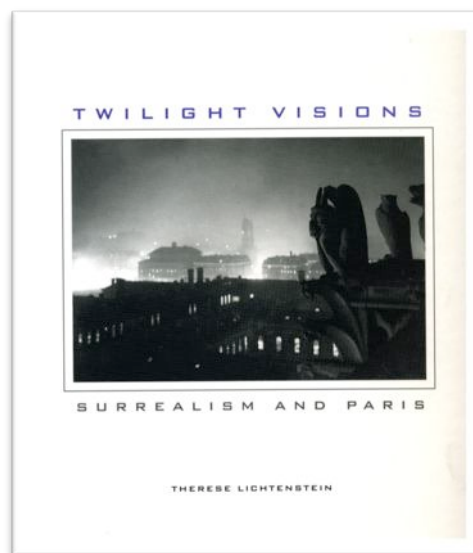
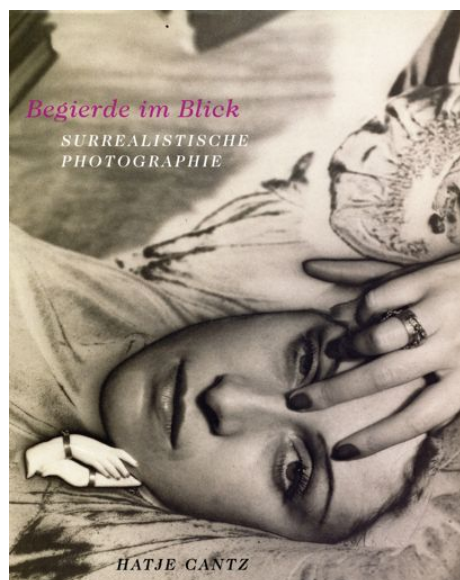
that has contemporary resonance; one recent issue of *Analogon* was on the theme of the Periphery, and this connects with much recent art, photography and writing which has explored the idea of the edgeland, wasteland, ‘no mans land’ or what the surrealists would have called ‘terrain vague’.

The other obvious thing to say about *Surrealism and Photography in Czechoslovakia* is that it is a co-authored book. With the two previous books, I have had a differing relationship with the cultures I am writing about, but at least I felt I could be confident in that relationship. But with Czech surrealism, I have been very aware that I am an outsider, I don’t speak the language and, when I have been in Prague, I have always felt like a tourist. So I developed the book with two colleagues, Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, both scholars of surrealism if not photography. And importantly, both of whom already had a well established relationship with the present day Czech surrealist group. I think between our different expertises, we were able to produce a study that is richer, more nuanced and perhaps also more confident than anything I might have been able to write on my own.



This brings me to my final point concerning the community in which one works. If on the one hand, I have worked within and out of a photographic community based at Newport, then the other community in which the books have been placed has been

more dispersed, not only in Britain, but across Europe and the USA. In the first decade of this century, a whole range of studies of surrealism and photography appeared. David Bate's *Photography and Surrealism* was published two years after *City Gorged with Dreams* and, as his subtitle 'Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent' indicates, it covered very different, indeed complementary territory. The following year, David and I co-edited a special issue of the journal *History of Photography* with a Claude Cahun picture on the cover and a wide range of essays inside. Also in 2005, the large exhibition *Begierde im Blick (Desire in the View)* was mounted in Hamburg and, in 2009, Therese Lichtenstein curated *Twilight Visions: Surrealism and Paris*, shown in Nashville, New York and Savannah, Georgia. In addition, there have also been many different studies of individual artists and photographers, all to be woven into this ever-expanding tapestry. And, finally, there is *La Subversion des Images*, shown in Paris, Winterthur in Switzerland and Madrid in 2009-10. (It's worth noting, though, that three of these publications had Man Ray pictures on their covers, just as *Les mystères de la chambre noire* and *L'Amour Fou* did. Some things in Surrealist photography do not, it seems, change.)



So this history of surrealist photography may be short, but it is evidently very complex. And it is incomplete – there is more to be researched, more to be written and indeed more photographs to be taken. But I think it will remain a hybrid and unsettled subject because that is in the nature of surrealism. And it's more broadly to

do with photography – also, it seems, impossible to define, to categorise and to control, but constantly offering us tantalizing fragments from the dual realities – internal and external – which André Breton insisted must come together to constitute surreality: “Everything leads us to believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. It would be vain to see in surrealist activity any other motive than the hope of determining this point.”

That is also not a bad aspiration for photography.