

From Dada to Lucidity: Surrealism as Pre-/Trans- Interface

By Joel Morrison

April 25, 2005

The Surrealist movement is about the liberation of the mind from its conscious rational and logical constraints, but can it be classified as either pre- or trans-rational? Or is it more of an anti-rational reaction, a peeling away from the bones of rationality and thus a fused antecedent to the postmodern distinction itself? The French word *surrealism* translates as “super-realism,” so to practice *surrealism* is to operate beyond the realm of the real, the non- or meta-logical space we all ascend (and/or descend) into nightly, with every rotation of the earth into its own shadow. In a sense, surrealism also operates by descending into a shadow, that cast by the conscious mind upon itself as it projects its light through its own forms into the unconscious. And so Surrealists operate in the shadow of consciousness and, like shamans, mediate between the two unconscious and non-rational worlds; that of the (pre-rational) animal spirits—the home of phobias, lusts, and neuroses—and that of the (transrational) sage spirit guides—the home of mystical transcension. Andre Breton, one of surrealism’s founding members, defined the movement as; “Pure psychic automatism, by which one proposes to express, either verbally, or in writing, or by any other manner, the real functioning of thought.” Surrealism is about breaking through to the real beyond the real, the super-real. Breton goes on with his definition, “(surrealism is) Dictation of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason, outside of all aesthetic and moral preoccupation.” Surrealism, then, is an operational orientation, or praxis, for translating between the conscious and the unconscious, and it included all forms of art, from poetry to painting. But Breton makes no distinction in his definition between the pre- or trans-rational. Likewise, as Dali said of his own surrealist “Paranoiac-critical” methodology, it “makes the world of delirium pass onto the plane of reality...” The world of delirium is a well-worn entry-point for the shaman, and similarly, Surrealism is Art for the purpose of making the reality beyond consciousness manifest in the rational and conscious world, and the surrealists exploit this violent clash of worlds to great effect. The purpose is to break the bindings of the rational world and let the participant float in limbo at the bifurcation point between the pre- and trans-rational worlds, e.g. from the world of infantile regression of pre-linguistic Dada (the first word a child usually utters) to the world of the transcended mystic sage.

Surrealism emerged in the wake of the earlier Dada movement which focused on a regression to pre-rational absurdities. The difference between them is a gradient rather than a distinct line, and some forms of Dadaism are easily seen as early or transitional surrealist works, the work of Max Ernst, for example. But an easy distinction could be stated thus; the Dadaist thrust was to bring about a dissolution or deconstruction of logic and rationality while Surrealism sought to reconstruct the rubble into new and higher forms of art, taking Dada to its extreme limits. Surrealism picks up where Dadaism leaves off and takes the shattered rationalism of raw absurdity and reconstructs it into dream logic representing both pre-rational forms, in taboos, phobias, psychoses, neuroses, etc, and transrational elements of mystical ascension such as Dali’s

transcendent hallucinogenic corpuscular religious imagery. Surrealism seems to be a new skin of this same underlying anti-rational, or pre-rational bud, but it represents the beginning of a flowering into deeper levels of expression, codification and exploration of its inherent trans-rational orientation and possibilities.

Ken Wilber, in his book *Integral Psychology*, writes; “consciousness can turn its attention to the material plane (using its epistemological eye of flesh), the intermediate plane (using its epistemological eye of mind), or the celestial plane (using its epistemological eye of contemplation). The material, intermediate, and celestial planes are the ontological levels; in *Eye to Eye* I refer to them using the terms sensibilia, intelligibilia, and transcendelia (i.e., the real objects in those real planes or realms). The eyes of flesh, mind, and contemplation are the epistemological levels correlated with (and disclosing) those ontological planes of sensibilia, intelligibilia, and transcendelia.” Dadaism then, dissolves the hold of intelligibilia (the eye of the mind), while Surrealism mediates between dissolved and dissociated intelligibilia and the emergent states of transcendelia (the eye of contemplation), but it generally does so through the world of sensibilia (the eye of flesh) in a hyper-realistic rendering. Lucid Art, however, takes this progression one step further and attempts to deal exclusively in transcendelia and so often sheds the eye of the flesh altogether. A good example of this style of art is that of “psychedelic artist” Alex Grey.

As Fariba Bogzaran states in his “Lucid Art and Hyperspace Lucidity,” “If the surrealists were seeking to explore the personal unconscious, lucid artists seek to explore impersonal collective consciousness. Lucid Art deals with the personal transformation of the artist. Ken Wilber gives a definition of a similar direction in art that represents transcendelia: ‘First, the development or growth of the artist’s own soul, right up to the point of union with universal Spirit and transcendence of the separate self or individual ego; and second, the artist’s depiction/expression of his spiritual dimension, particularly in such a way as to evoke similar spiritual insights on the part of the observers’ (Wilber, 210, 1990).” Salvador Dali, arguably (and self-proclaimed) the greatest of the surrealists, shows this very trend within his own work. He begins, like many artists, with drawings from life, moves into primitivistic non-rational expressions and ends with hyper-realistic and hyper-rational works of transcension embodied in the religious imagery of his social/developmental context. This tendency for transcension in himself may be why he always considered himself beyond the surrealists, or to be surrealism itself. So Dali, the quintessential surrealist, represents surrealism’s own transcension of itself. His middle period represents the main thrust of surrealism as mediator between pre- and trans-rationality, while his later forms begin to focus more on the transcendental and almost entirely eliminate his earlier use of regressive phobias and psychoses to be replaced with images of mystical transcension (transcendelia) such as that perhaps experienced by himself or St. John of the Cross. Lucid Art continues that trend toward deeper and deeper fixation with transcendelia and eliminates the translation of those states into the mythical imagery of the “eye of the mind” altogether, and tries to embody the abstract multidimensional transcendental states themselves.