

Influencing Machines...

..., Intuition Pumps, Paranoia & The Poisonous Cobra of Surrealism

Penelope Rosemont

Madness & the Surrealist Imagination

The common denominator of the sorcerer, the poet and the madman cannot be anything but magic...the flesh and blood of poetry.

–Benjamin Peret

Surrealists have celebrated madness as a means of exploring the possibilities of the human mind. Madness provides that window into how people put together reality; how thoughts are often assembled in an unusual and creative way.

Surrealism has looked to madness for inspiration, for that convulsive image that shakes up the ordinary and affects us deeply; the insight into the way the mind functions.

Paul Garon wrote in "Fate of the Obsessive Image," prepared for the 1972 Conference on Madness convened in Toronto, that "surrealists insist that the world be populated by absolutely unfettered people who can only be described in the language today as insane... [T]he early surrealists, in their cultivation of delirium, were not behaving with romantic evasion, but with desperate lucidity in their intrusion into the realm of cultural and mental insubordination..."

Neither race nor class play much of a role in the amusing new psychologies of today; they seem to think they are beyond these or perhaps realize fundamentally that mentioning this elephant in the kitchen will doom their grant money forever, so studies are kept cheerfully practical and adaptable to advertising, to propaganda and, quite possibly, to social control.

This does not mean that we should ignore them; anything about the mind, the brain, the self, is of interest to surrealists. Quite possibly this is linked to a comparison between the human brain, how it thinks and the computer; is it thinking or what?

Surrealists and Dadaists were concerned with madness quite early. Andre Breton, a founder of surrealism, and others of his friends saw WWI first hand the physical and mental suffering involved.

Jacques Vache, Breton's best friend in the army, was a suicide just as the war came to a close. In *Nadja*, Breton's novel, he speaks of the mentally ill and "the well-known lack of frontiers between madness and non-madness." *Nadja* is locked away in a mental institution though she poses no threat to anyone and lives a poetic life.

Madness has long been associated with genius, poetic and otherwise. From 1928 on, Breton and his friends immersed themselves "in the personal exploration of unconscious life." Decades later, Chicago surrealist Franklin Rosemont wrote in about the influences of Freud's new science of Psychoanalysis on them, "discoveries regarding infantile sexuality, dreams, daydreaming, slips of tongue and other chance actions (parapraxes), etc., enabled surrealists to view the poetic problems that preoccupied them in an entirely new light." They explored and tried to immerse themselves in various mental states.

Today, psychology has moved for the most part to a new phase and has re-labeled itself and repackaged itself as Neuroscience. One no longer finds the words id, ego, super-ego, etc., anywhere. In their place there is subliminal, cognitive illusion, identity, narrative bias, pattern recognition. The findings of neuroscience, bolstered by experiments, are often quite similar to surrealist games. Frederic Bartlett's whisper game study of the 1900s is used to demonstrate that people impose their own bias on any subject they attempt to remember. This game was very popular with surrealists.

Many contemporary books concern themselves with the exploration and functioning of the mind and revelations about how people make decisions and what they choose; what they desire. *Subliminal: How the Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior* by Leonard Mlodinow and *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman, concern themselves with the exploration and functioning of the mind and revelations about how people make decisions and what they choose; what they think they desire.

They have just discovered the irrational, something that is very basic to surrealism.

Mlodinow talks about the "new unconscious" to distinguish it from Freud's idea of repressed desires. The new unconscious is considered normal architecture of the brain; no deeply hidden sexual impulses here. Have you noticed neurotics are gone but every other person has Aspergers? This new science is quite applicable to advertising and social conditioning.

The Influencing Machine is a concept that goes back to 1919, used by psychoanalyst Victor Tausk. It describes the idea possessed by schizophrenics of being influenced by a "diabolical machine" that operates on their thoughts and influences their actions from a distance.

Today, our world is filled with such apparatuses of all sorts: computers, movies, music, phones, i-pads, etc. This earlier concept almost seems like a prophecy. Social conditioning begins with the foods that reward us as children and intensifies in the schools where we learn what are socially acceptable ideas, socially acceptable ways of acting, and especially socially acceptable goals; all very boring and mediocre.

Somehow, our toxic social system tries to make a distinction between murdering your neighbors and massacring people in foreign countries (Movie theater, work place, and school massacres show this doesn't seem to be working as well as it once did.)

Fredy Perlman, in his 1969 pamphlet, *The Reproduction of Daily Life*, comments with insight, that it is the everyday practical activity that reproduces a social system, "a specific social response to particular material and social conditions."

It seems that since Noam Chomsky's idea of innate syntax in linguistics, there have been studies to see what else could appear to be innate. A most interesting one is Narrative Bias, another pattern recognition.

According to popular writer David McRaney, "You make sense of life through narrative...All your assumptions about reality come together in a sort of cohesion engine that runs while you are awake and reassures you that things are going as expected."

One of his examples in his best selling, *You Are Not So Smart*, is the famous case of the Three Christs of Ypsilanti, where a social psychology professor from Michigan State University brought together three mental patients all who thought they were Jesus Christ and who persisted in their beliefs even after many meetings with each other.

McRaney concludes, "We make sense of the world through narrative (stories, myths). You and the three Christs are not so different...their delusions are just much easier to see through...you too are unaware of how unaware you are."

According to Benjamin Peret, a French surrealist, in his wonderful, "Magic, the Flesh and Blood of Poetry," says, "the sorcerer, the poet and the madman have a common denominator. But the madman, having broken off with the exterior world, drifts on the wild ocean of his imagination and we cannot see what he is looking at."

With a bit of insight into poetry, McRaney claims, "All brains are bards, all selves audiences to the tales of who they are." He came to the conclusion, "You might find it alarming to learn that neuroscience and psychology have teamed up over the last twenty years and used their combined powers to reach a strange and unsettling conclusion: the self is not real, it's just a story...created by your narrative bias."

French-Brazilian sociologist and philosopher, Michael Lowy, already had a more far reaching insight when he said, "Narratives have kept whole societies together. The great mythologies of the ancients and moderns are stories made up to make sense of things on a grand scale."

McRaney brings forward the idea of “negation delirium” from Jules Cotard, a French neurologist, who in 1870 used it to describe people who were paralyzed, but denied it. Quite applicable to a social critique in that we slave at work but are quite convinced that we are free. Buy the most advertised product, but are sure we chose it freely. We are estranged from our own desires because social desires have been implanted.

Intuition Pumps is a useful phrase coined recently by philosopher Daniel C. Dennet to describe little stories “designed to provoke a heartfelt, table-thumping intuition...about whatever thesis is being defended.” Who we are is the “stories we tell ourselves.” This could be right out of Nadja, who claimed to tell herself stories all the time.

Intuition pumps do not need to be true, they do not need to be logical, they could be quite magical for all that, but they must provoke the mind on some level

A well-known surrealist practice is the Paranoid-Critical method invented by Salvadore Dali in the 1930s. Developed from an idea of Andre Breton on the phantom object. Also, surrealist artist Max Ernst’s phantom images.

The Paranoid-Critical method was based on the idea that the brain looks for patterns unceasingly. Dali described it as “a spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the critical and systematic objectivity of the associations and interpretations of delirious phenomena.” Sounds like the surrealists had quite a few insights into how the brain works that are being explored today by psychologists.

Don’t conclude that since there is so much to be found of interest in madness that it is pleasant; it is heart-braking, it is dangerous, it devastates lives. It is, to a great extent, manufactured by our social system.

Walking down Chicago Avenue near Main street in Evanston, Ill., I encountered a book on the sidewalk. It was being tossed out by The Book Den, but it was unusual in that it was over a hundred years old; a bound copy of *Century Magazine* from 1888.

In very bad condition, true, but could be mined for the gold of collage material. Opened at random to page 758, there was an article on Russia regarding the “Effects of Solitary Confinement;” subheads: “Breaking Character” and “Delusions of the Insane Political Convicts.” They weren’t insane when they were sent to prison, but were totally destroyed by solitary confinement. What is madness in this context? Often a last and desperate attempt of the mind to make sense of the world.

I call surrealism the poisonous cobra because it still has the power to counter and fight this repressive civilization. Once you have been bitten by this snake, you never see things in the same way again. It has the power of revelation, the perilous enchantment of dreams, and all the force of liberated desire.

Penelope Rosemont met with Andre Breton and the Paris surrealist group in 1965–66. She edited and introduced *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* published by University of Texas Press in 1998. Her latest book is a memoir, *Dreams & Everyday Life: Andre Breton, Surrealism, Rebel Worker, sds & the Seven Cities of Cibola* published by Charles H. Kerr Company.

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