

Communicating Vessels

Surrealism & Anarchism

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a review of

Dreams of Anarchy and the Anarchy of Dreams by Ron Sakolsky; Illustrations by Rikki Ducornet. Autonomedia 2021

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the Mad-Hatter poses the famous riddle, "Why is a raven like a writing-desk?" It is not a question that has a predefined answer, but which projects itself, through a lightning-bolt of poetic analogy, into some future resolution—one that we feel pulsing like magic just outside our current field of perception.

So, too, might we ask along with Ron Sakolsky, "Why is surrealism like anarchy?" and feel intuitively that it is not merely a question of dry historical facts and assessments, but of a pressing matter of life and death, as though we are challenged ourselves to change reality to meet its very possibility.

Sakolsky has been a longtime wanderer along the crossroads of surrealism and anarchism. He has written extensively on the topic both at the theoretical level and in many particular instances spanning everything from birds to the Masterless Men of Newfoundland folklore. But, it is in his latest book, the 630-page *Dreams of Anarchy and the Anarchy of Dreams*, that we find a definitive reckoning of these two gigantic pole stars of the emancipatory adventure writ large.

As he writes, the book is both "big and little" in scope, focusing on anarchist dimensions of surrealism, and vice versa, which nevertheless opens up a vista to the entirety of the surrealist movement itself. Hence, the freewheeling but retroactively necessary exploration of fundamental surrealist concepts: automatism, the marvelous, art, poetry, revolution. Readers only marginally acquainted with surrealism will be well taken care of by Sakolsky's thorough and readable treatment of the movement's history, and covering precursors, and core concepts, drawing on a wide variety of international research.

Throughout the book, readers will periodically also meet with Rikki Ducornet's chapter heading illustrations depicting chimerical monsters derived using surrealist automatic drawing. These are a wonderful counterpoint to the unfolding argument and illustrate the surrealist concept of analogical contrast much better than stodgy old black and white photos would have. Still, in future editions, it might be nice to get archival photos of the more obscure figures and artworks mentioned.

Being more than just a chronology of surrealism and anarchism(s), the book demonstrates that there is a fundamentally surrealist theory of anarchy better than various institutional and theoretical tendencies can. By not solely focusing on just political associations at the formal level, Sakolsky explicitly takes up the massive challenge to demonstrate surrealism's relationships to anarchism as a whole. Reverting to his affinity for birds (having written a book on birds and surrealism, it's no coincidence his surrealist journal is titled *The Oystercatcher*), Sakolsky declares: "In the most free-flying sense of visionary transcendence, anarchism and surrealism are like birds of a feather."

No stone is left unturned, and historical positions are contextualized with assessments from contemporary surrealists, anarchists, and others in an open and integrative spirit. Drawing from relevant academic and non-academic sources, Sakolsky is, after all, a surrealist himself, and so also makes free use of contemporary surrealist thinking, including generous quotations from many underground or less-accessible statements, papers, games and communications, both historical and recent. Indeed, the selection of snippets from such a wide treasury of sources interspersed among Sakolsky's poignant analysis make this big book a very lively read.

Within its 600-odd pages of passionate analysis, Sakolsky puts to bed many of the false and misleading academic truisms common to histories of surrealism. That few (and in English, very few) have even scratched the surface of surrealism's anarchist connection is evident in the reckoning of accounts with misinformed critiques of surrealism, even from anarchist sources. Demonstrating the paltriness behind cries for "anarchist realism," Sakolsky also shows how these superficial accounts of surrealism tend to misread it as an art movement, misunderstanding its fundamental impetus: to change life and transform the world.

The book goes deep into the sometimes uncomfortable political allegiances of surrealism in the 20th century. Sakolsky does not shy away from the difficult question of Parisian surrealism's relationships to the French Communist Party of the 1930s, the Third International, the collaboration with Trotsky on the Manifesto for a Free Revolutionary Art, and the French Anarchist Federation. Rather, he succeeds in tracing the surrealist priorities, which lay in the promise of a maximalist view of freedom in creativity and action, and how this reflected itself in these sometimes tense political allegiances.

Thus, Sakolsky sees surrealism's temporary failed association with the Communist Party, driven by what André Breton later critiqued as a mistaken idea of "efficiency," and shows us the true black heart of anarchy waiting in Surrealism's depths. In all cases, Sakolsky demonstrates surrealism's quest for the liberation of the imagination coming up against the often uninspired, reactionary, or outright repressive aspects of institutional groups. Above all is a concern for what Sakolsky characterizes as "the non-institutional value of automatist spontaneity"

Surrealism's eventual affinity for the utopian concept of Absolute Divergence makes allowances for neither god, nor master, nor any other concession when rigorously applied to everyday life. Along the way, Sakolsky also diverges from the simplistic academic formula of Hegel + Marx + Freud = Surrealism, unearthing a few of surrealism's less-talked about accomplices and influences—from Heraclitus to the Bonnot Gang, from Stirner to Nietzsche.

Regarding the latter, the book brings important considerations from the perspective of individualist anarchism. While surrealism has strong group tendencies, putting much of its hope on intersubjective discoveries from collective research, this is never, as Sakolsky demonstrates, at the expense of the individual participant's integrity, but only builds on that foundation towards a greater whole.

And, contrary to opinions of post-war critics of surrealism during the period when Stalinism and its cronies were very popular in France, surrealists were no "armchair revolutionaries" either, as Sakolsky shows, detailing Benjamin Péret's experiences fighting in the Durruti Column during the Spanish Revolution, the anti-Vichy activities of La Main à Plume within Nazi-occupied France, and the many fruitful cross-pollinations between the Chicago Surrealists and other political groups, such as Black Mask, the IWW, and the Situationists during the 1960s.

There is one image which the author returns to time and again in his analysis—André Breton's dialectical figure of "The Communicating Vessels." Anarchism and surrealism, in their best moments, and without either ceding their autonomy to the other, can become this, creating a fertile space of "harmonious tension" wherein the revolutionary spirit can truly take flight.

It is in "the space between" that we place all our hopes. In an equal communion between dream and reality—between political action and poetic life—the gold of the marvelous can still be discovered. In this sense, we need not take the term "anarcho-surrealism," which Sakolsky occasionally makes use of, as a distinct subgenre or type of surrealism in opposition to others. Indeed, the author's whole premise is bound in exploring anarchies inherent within the essentials of the surrealist project itself from its very beginnings.

As an adventurous account of a big adventure, *Dreams of Anarchy and the Anarchy of Dreams* is an epic, exciting and much needed antidote to the usual academic cynicism. Paired together, in an alchemical marriage of equals, surrealism and anarchism can truly deepen and enliven each other, and, Sakolsky argues, ultimately point towards the same vision.

Within the ouroboros of their interplay, the tree of insurrection bears much fruit. Franklin Rosemont, co-founder of the Chicago Surrealist Group, once said that “What remains to be done for Surrealism far outweighs what Surrealism has done.” What remains for anarchy and surrealism to do together is similarly boundless.

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