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Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Depiction of Women in Surrealist Photography

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ABSTRACT

Surrealism, an art movement of the early twentieth century, was heavily influenced by psychoanalysis. The psychoanalytic theories that influenced Surrealism were based primarily on the research of Sigmund Freud. Freud's research began with case studies on patients with hysteria, a predominantly female diagnosed mental disorder. From his clinical observations of hysteria, Freud developed his theories on unconscious drives and psychosexual development. André Breton, the leader of the Surrealist movement, first became acquainted with Freud's ideas during the First World War. After his return to France from the war, Breton's interest in avant-garde art and distaste for Europe's high culture led him to start the Surrealist movement. Breton declared psychoanalysis the basis of Surrealism in the First Manifesto of Surrealism, believing that Freud's ideas had the potential to revolutionize culture. For the Surrealists, adopting psychoanalysis as a doctrine of change resulted in a reinforcement of sexist stereotypes and discrimination against women that was rooted in Freud's theories. While the Surrealist movement became notorious for being male dominated and misogynistic, their idealization of Freud provided justification for their prejudiced beliefs. In this paper, Salvador Dalí's photo collage, *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy*, is analyzed to exemplify the translation of psychoanalytic ideas into sexualized and fantasy-like depictions of women in Surrealist artwork. The conducted research provides insight to the repercussions that Freud and psychoanalysis had on women in the Surrealist art community.

Keywords: Surrealism; André Breton; Photography; Avant-garde art; Salvador Dalí; Feminism; Psychoanalysis; Sigmund Freud



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Susan Laxton is an Associate Professor in the Department of the History of Art. She earned her PhD in Art History from Columbia University, with a dissertation on ludic strategies in Surrealism, the subject of her first book, *Surrealism at Play* (Duke University Press, 2019). Professor Laxton has held fellowships from Princeton University, The Institute for Advanced Study, and the hellman Foundation. Her work has appeared in *Critical Inquiry*, *October* and *Papers of Surrealism*, and in a number of catalogs and anthologies that treat her main interests: photography, play, and the alternative art practices of the 20th century avant-gardes. She is currently preparing a book manuscript, *Post-Industrial Photography*, on mid-century photographic practices.



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Katherine Bottinelli is a fourth-year Psychology major and Art History minor. During her Winter 2018 quarter at UCR, she developed an interest in Surrealism

while taking Dr. Susan Laxton's seminar course on early twentieth century avant-garde photography.

With the guidance of Dr. Laxton, Katherine conducted research that combined her passions for psychology and art history. She currently works on campus as a research assistant in Dr. Cecilia Cheung's Culture and Child Development Lab and Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky's Positive Activity and Wellbeing Lab. In the future, Katherine plans to pursue a PhD in Clinical Psychology and continue exploring her interests in Art History.

INTRODUCTION

The photographic artwork of the early twentieth century Surrealist movement was defined by illusionistic images evoked from the artist's unconscious mind. Through the camera, Surrealist artists captured peculiar scenes of people and objects in faux dream realms. This way of using the camera was paradoxical, as the device's intended use to document reality was replaced with the artists' manipulation of the photograph in conjunction with psychoanalytic theory to translate their unconscious dreams into an altered reality. A visual analysis of Salvador Dalí's photo collage, *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy*, reveals the ways in which psychoanalytic theory was applied by Surrealist artists to create bizarre photographic images, often exploiting female subjects at the center of the works. From a contemporary feminist perspective, the photographed women in Surrealist works were purposely sexualized and used as passive muses of the artists' fantasies. Arguably, the misogynistic elements at the foundation of psychoanalysis had a substantial influence on Surrealist images. Freud's theories functioned as an inspiration and justification for Surrealist artists, like Salvador Dalí, to derogatorily portray women in photographic artworks.

Freud and Psychoanalysis

The version of psychoanalytic theory that influenced Surrealism was based primarily on the research of Sigmund Freud, a leading researcher in psychoanalysis. In the late nineteenth century, Freud began his psychological research through an apprenticeship under the French neurologist Jean-Marc Charcot in Paris, France.¹ Charcot was performing research on patients to understand and treat hysteria, a mental illness believed to derive from a weak neurological system and the repression of traumatic events.² Patients diagnosed with hysteria exhibited symptoms of excessive anxiety, exaggerated emotional responses, and disturbed somatic functioning. Historically, the illness was diagnosed predominantly in female patients, as the exhibited symptoms were dramatic in appearance and, for the early twentieth century, culturally seen as a manifestation of femininity. To treat his patients, Charcot used hypnosis in an attempt to bring suppressed memories from the unconscious to the conscious mind.

Freud began his own research on hysteria primarily through

clinical observations of Bertha Pappenheim, a female patient of Josef Breuer, a physician and peer of Freud. Pappenheim was given the pseudonym Anna O. by Freud and Breuer for their published book, *Studies on Hysteria* (1895).³ Clinical observations of Pappenheim, and patients with similar symptoms, led Freud and Breuer to originally hypothesize that hysteria was caused from unresolved emotions and experienced trauma. Later on in his research, Freud revised the theory to include psychic conflict related to sexuality as a primary cause.⁴ From the research on hysteria, Freud developed his original psychoanalytic theory of the mind. Freud's psychoanalysis theorizes that unconscious thoughts and motivations, rooted in primitive drives toward sex and aggression, are the underlying cause of human behavior.⁵ This definition of psychoanalysis became Freud's preliminary explanation of the psyche's mechanisms. Dream interpretation, free association, and hypnosis were some of Freud's treatment approaches used to reveal the mind's unconscious conflict. These Freudian techniques were manipulated in Surrealist art practice to exemplify the irrationality of human behavior and bring unconscious desires to visual awareness.⁶ While these psychoanalytic ideas inspired the Surrealists, the theories on hysteria and animalistic impulses, rooted in cultural misogyny, had negative repercussions on the movement's art. The repercussions translated into the movement's shocking depictions of women as sexually objectified and submissive to the viewer.

Freud's interests soon progressed toward psychosexual development, a concept that has caused considerable controversy since its first appearance in Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). Psychosexual development theorizes that humans have an instinctual libido that develops during childhood.⁷ According to the theory, humans progress through five phases of sexual development, beginning at birth and continuing after puberty. The controversial aspect of the theory, other than its reference to sexual desire in children, comes from the third phase of psychosexual development: the phallic phase. Freud states that during the phallic phase, between the ages of three and six, there is a divergence between male and female psychosexual growth.⁸ This divergence occurs when children become conscious of the biological difference between male and female genitalia, causing

the emergence of the Oedipus complex. According to the theory, females develop penis envy and resentment toward the mother for not providing her with a penis.⁹ On the contrary, males compete with the father to sexually possess the mother and subsequently develop castration anxiety, or fear of emasculation by the father.¹⁰ The fundamental misogyny in these Freudian ideas on sexuality translated into the portrayal of women in Surrealist photography as sexual objects for the viewer. The Oedipus complex acted as a justification to depict women as passive and powerless in the images, inferior to the male artist.

Surrealism Inspired by Psychoanalytic Theory

Surrealists were fascinated with Freudian ideas and established them as the basis of their artistic methods with the guidance of André Breton, the founder of the movement. While stationed as a psychiatric aide in the First World War, Breton first became interested in Freud's theories through a fellow psychiatrist interested in dream interpretation.¹¹ Through individual study, he became acquainted with Freud's observational methods and applied them in practice during interactions with his war-time patients.¹² Dream interpretation and free association became his primary interests of study and would become a fundamental part of the Surrealist method. After his departure from the war, Breton's curiosity about abstract thought and his frustrations with France's bourgeois culture led him to join the Dada movement. Dadaism, a precursor and inspiration to Surrealism, began as an avant-garde art movement in reaction to the First World War. The movement protested bourgeois society, acting against logic, reason, and aestheticism, the elements that maintained the façade of high culture.¹³ Breton combined Dadaist ideas and psychoanalytic theory to develop the foundation of Surrealism.

Breton officially launched the Surrealist movement in 1924, establishing psychoanalysis as the basis of the movement. Breton wrote the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) to declare the purpose of Surrealism as a revolutionary movement against structured culture. The manifesto defines Surrealism as "psychic automatism in its pure state," with automatism as a reference to Freud's idea of using free association to reveal the unconscious mind.¹⁴ In this founding text, Breton discusses Freud's theories on

dream interpretation as fundamental for understanding the deeper meaning of existence, as "the human explorer will be able to carry his investigation much further, authorized as he will henceforth be not to confine himself solely to the most summary realities."¹⁵ Breton's text denounces the rational standards of the bourgeois society and proposes the untamed methods of Surrealism as revolutionary modes of understanding human existence. The manifesto's denouncement of cultural standards meant acting on the inherent behaviors of the mind's unconscious desires, rather than conform to the conventional norms of social conduct. As early twentieth century European culture was progressing toward the liberation of women, the manifesto's condemning of social norms meant not allowing women to be independent of men. In Freudian terms, women were deemed inherently incompetent on their own and meant to be the physical possession of man. The manifesto's propaganda served as a guide for Surrealist practices, claiming psychoanalysis and the rejection of social structure as essential in the movement's model.

Sexism and Freud's Psychoanalysis

While Freud's theories contributed to the understanding of the human mind, his ideas had consequences that perpetuated sexism against women. In Freud and Breuer's hysteria case study on Bertha Pappenheim, from *Studies on Hysteria*, Pappenheim exhibited symptoms characteristic of the overly emotional and highly sensitive female stereotype. The disorder was studied and treated by culturally biased men whose medical status allowed for the gendered stereotype to become scientifically validated and pathologized as hysteria.¹⁶ Furthermore, the root of hysteria's etiology was thought to center in female patients' genitalia as a result of sexual repression, a diagnosis appropriate for a culture that deemed women sexually passive.¹⁷ This representation of women by Freud, an authoritative figure in the scientific community, validated the social construct of female inferiority and influenced Surrealist's perspective of women.

Freud's formulation of the unconscious mind's drives toward sex and aggression maintained the derogatory beliefs originating from hysteria case studies. Freud suggested that human desires toward sex and aggression are the main components of all human behavior, based on

an animalistic instinct to act on these tendencies.¹⁸ The theory is simultaneously a symptom and an affirmation of patriarchal society in the early twentieth century. Women were a socially vulnerable population in European society, and given his influence, Freud's ideas on sex and aggression were highly influential to the treatment and representation of women. The consequences of his ideas would be especially apparent among the Surrealist community, where misogyny was practiced and accepted. The movement was notoriously difficult for female artists to join, as the male artists that managed the movement wanted to maintain their masculine idealizations of femininity.¹⁹

Furthermore, theories on psychosexual development portray women as sexually passive and envious of their male counterparts, ideas solely hypothesized by male scientists.²⁰ Based on the evolutionary aspect of the theory, a woman's primary role is to bear the man's offspring. Her body is a vessel used to produce children in order to continue the male's bloodline. Freud claims that through the Oedipus complex the unconscious mind formulates these assigned gendered roles for sexuality, believing that they are not devised by culture, but are biologically grounded.²¹ The Oedipus complex illustrates the translation of the era's sexist ideals into scientific theories of gendered sexuality. Men have the penis, the active form of sexuality, while women have the vagina which acts passively to sheath the penis in the act of conception. The man experiences fear of castration because he does not want to become the passive woman, while the woman envies the man's penis, for she is in the role of passive female, an object only used to suffice the man's sexual and child-bearing needs. This theorized scenario strips the woman of her autonomous sexual identity. There is only the man's sexual identity and she is a secondary part to that role, as was exemplified in the Surrealist's use of the female muse.

Misogyny Rooted in the Surrealist Movement

While sexism in the Surrealist movement did not originate from Freud's theories, his credibility as a scientist strengthened and justified the misogynistic beliefs that were already in place within artistic communities. These beliefs were rooted in the sexist constructs of the era's culture, trickling over to Surrealism from previous art movements, Futurism and Dadaism, where women struggled to be seen

as credible artists. While the first wave of feminism was rising in France during the 1920s, the Surrealists, insisting on their opposition to socio-cultural conventions, saw the movement primarily as bourgeois nonsense.²² The Surrealists sought to maintain the oppression of women and continued to exploit their female subjects for the sake of creativity and the psyche's unconscious fantasies. This resulted in the hindrance of female avant-garde artists from participating in Surrealist exhibitions and publishing in Surrealist journals.²³ The principal role for a woman within the movement was as the creative stimulus for a male artist.

The female subjects in Surrealist art were dehumanized, portrayed as the muse, the seductress, and *la femme-enfant*. For example, in Breton's novel *Nadja* (1928), *Nadja* becomes the inspiration for the creative work, or the muse of the artist. In the novel, Breton writes of his love affair with *Nadja* and her demise into psychosis. *Nadja*, like the women in Surrealist photographs, becomes the focal point of the work, but her identity is never truly revealed. She is manipulated and reassigned an identity that fits with the creative narrative of Breton, the male artist. If Breton was fascinated by *Nadja*'s mental disorder, it was because he could appropriate her story for his own creative use.

Breton's use of *Nadja* for his own creative purposes was not uncommon in a movement dominated by heterosexual men seeking to transpose their sexual fantasies into reality. Often, the women in Surrealist photographs are the epitome of *la femme-enfant*: young, naïve, and pure, with child-like mystique that the Surrealists believed had the ability to provoke the unconscious and irrational thoughts of the artist.²⁴ In other cases, she becomes a seductress, sexually tempting men to view her as an object of their desires. The fantasy depictions of female subjects as nude, vulnerable, and passive all contribute to the male artist's dreams of idealized femininity. Their surreality lies not only in the irrationality of the photographs, but also in the viewer's ability to act as a voyeur, peering into a captured moment of eroticism.

Psychoanalytic Feminist Analysis of Dalí's *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy*

Misogynistic principles were rooted in the creation and maintenance of both psychoanalysis and Surrealism, with

the Surrealist movement's portrayals of women heavily influenced by Freud's sexist theories. For the purpose of this essay, *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy* (fig. 1), a photo collage by Salvador Dalí, will be analyzed to understand the application of psychoanalytic concepts in relation to Surrealist artists' portrayal of women in photography.

The Surrealists were fascinated by mental illness, exemplified by Breton's presentation of Nadja, as they believed the mentally ill to have special insight into the unconscious. Similarly, in *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy*, Dalí romanticized the *attitudes passionelles* of women clinically diagnosed with hysteria. The phrase, *attitudes passionelles*, was used by Surrealists to describe the experience of ecstasy that supposedly resulted from hysteria.²⁵ The artists saw the disorder as an ultimate form of expression, rather than a pathological occurrence. A dedication to the fiftieth anniversary of hysteria was celebrated in a two-page spread of the eleventh edition



Figure 1. Salvador Dalí, *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy*, 1933.

of *La Révolution surréaliste* (March 1928), a Surrealist publication, where the article's first line refers to the disorder as "the greatest poetic discovery of the nineteenth century."²⁶ Breton, the director of the journal, chose to include six photographs, spanning a page and a half of the article, from a female patient's case study on hysteria. Each image is of the same woman, confined to her bed, displaying different theatrical expressions and gestures that appear illogical in sequence. Superficially, the Surrealists' views on hysteria might appear reverent. But beneath the surface lies the discrimination of a marginalized population of suffering women, and the appropriation of their experiences in furtherance of the movement's agenda.

Dalí's *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy* has implications parallel to the article on hysteria published in *La Révolution surréaliste*.¹¹ The collage uses images of over twenty women in states of euphoria. The images are cropped to only show the women's faces, placing complete emphasis on the figures' expressions. Many of the female subjects in the work are photographed gazing upward with their lips slightly parted, a typical hysteria pose as documented by Charcot and Freud from their case studies.²⁷ At first glance, the work appears chaotic from the collaged photos' varying sizes and colored tints, a device that mirrors the disarray of hysteria. Despite the disorganization, the collage's content is shocking and appeals to the curiosities of the viewer. Additionally, Dalí has placed photographs of a floating chair and a decorative staff. These images of inanimate objects are irrational in the work's schema, breaking the serial iconographic structure of the collage and adding to the chaotic tone.

The viewer's gaze is first drawn by the largest image at the center of the collage, the focal point that guides the viewer through the work. The woman in the center image appears peaceful and angelic, the typical *femme-enfant*. Below her image, Dalí has placed a photo of a marble statue bearing a similar blissful expression. The placement of these two images has allowed the viewer to make the comparison of the ecstatic women to that of a statue. She appears pure, virginal, and innocent, inviting the viewer to gaze at her sexualized expression. Repeatedly, the depiction of the youthful and exuberant woman appears in multiple photos around the focal image. Each of the photos of the

women are angled to make the subject appear as though she is laying down. The women become the epitome of the passive female, controlled by their emotional state and need for sexual satisfaction. In Freudian terms, these women are the objects of desire, used primarily to fulfil the sexual fantasies of the observer.

The Freudian theme of active male and passive female emanates throughout the work. In the bottom left corner an image depicts a man examining two delirious females. It seems that the image comes from a pornographic photo that Dalí has cropped and included in the collage, placing emphasis on the figures heads. The cropping of the image takes the subjects out of their original context and assigns them a new identity. The man appears to take on the role of clinician while the women are his patients. The image draws attention to the proximity of sex and hysteria, as the photo is cropped directly from a pornographic scene of aroused women, yet appears to depict an objective clinician examining two patients. The man's posture and gaze give him an assertive appearance, while the women appear limp and timid. The single image reflects the viewer's experience of examining the provocative women throughout the collage. An act of voyeurism, or peering into a scene for one's own pleasure. The structure of the collage's grid contributes to the voyeuristic experience of viewing the women for entertainment, as the black lines act as a barrier to isolate each woman's image from the other.

Furthermore, Dalí mirrors the male figure's profile by lining up several photographs of masculine-appearing ears throughout the image. The inclusion of the ears symbolizes the patriarchy's role in the diagnosis and treatment of hysteria-stricken patients, as they listened to the patients' hysteric cries and used talk therapy as the cure. The viewer becomes the psychoanalyst for each ecstatic woman, the spectator of the mentally ill. Dalí's collage exemplifies the ways in which Freud's theories justified Surrealism's ideology of female inferiority.

CONCLUSION

The visual analysis of Dalí's *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy*, provides an illuminating example of the ways in which female subjects in Surrealist photographs are sexualized and objectified, posing as passive muses for the artists' fantasies. From a psychoanalytic feminist perspective, the sexist elements of Freud's psychoanalysis, particularly theories on unconscious drives and psychosexual development derived from hysteria research, had a substantial influence on Surrealist artists' portrayal of women. Breton advocated for Freud's theories as the basis of Surrealism, encouraging the artists to explore their existence through psychoanalytic means. As the movement was already rooted in misogyny, Freud's medical status and published works functioned as both an inspiration and justification for the artists to derogatorily portray women.

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NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud and A. A. Brill, *The History of the Psychoanalytic Movement* (New York: Nervous and Mental Disease Pub. Co., 1917), xi.
2. Julien Bogousslavsky and Sebastian Dieguez, "Sigmund Freud and Hysteria: The Etiology of Psychoanalysis," in *Hysteria: The Rise of an Enigma*, vol. 35 (Switzerland: Karger Publishers, 2014), 110.
3. *ibid.*, 111.
4. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Attacks and Exposure," in *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, trans. Alisa Hartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 161.
5. Freud and Brill 1917, xii.
6. Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 17.
7. Sigmund Freud, "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, eds. James Strachey, Anna Freud, and Carrie Lee Rothgeb (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), 174.
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9. *Ibid.*, 178.

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13. Alastair Bonnett. "Art, Ideology, and Everyday Space: Subversive Tendencies from Dada to Postmodernism," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10, no. 1 (1992): 72.
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20. Karen Horney, "The Flight of Womanhood," in *Psychoanalysis and Women: Contributions to New Theory and Therapy*, ed. Jean Baker Miller (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1973), 3.
21. Freud 1966, 179.
22. Kuenzli, 1990, 19.
23. *ibid.*
24. *ibid.*
25. Lomas 2000, 53.
26. *ibid.*
27. *ibid.*

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