

Robert Loftus 1802827

Research in Context ADAD5003

Illustration BA honours

Louise Burston

Question 1: From the MESSAGE, MEDIUM, CONTEXT research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

Word count: 2,274

Dreams, Symbols, and Surrealism

In this essay I will be discussing surrealism, how it was influenced by research into the subconscious mind, and the differences between the branches of psychic automatism or oneiric surrealism with corresponding artists. I want to discuss this topic as I am interested in the hidden symbolism of dreams and how it relates to the surrealist movement.

Surrealism is a cultural movement founded in the early 20th century. It's best known for its quirky and sometimes even disturbing artworks which have been referenced across many mediums; ranging from fine art and illustrations, to photography and creative writing. Andre Breton, the author of the first Surrealist Manifesto (1924), said that surrealism is based in dream symbolism and psychic automatism, calling it the 'undirected play of thought'. Many of the first surrealist artists were greatly inspired by the work of Sigmund Freud and incorporated his scientific research on the meaning of dreams into their work and developed his methods of psycho analysis to create works of art.

"Surrealism is based on the belief in the omnipotence of dreams and in the undirected play of thought"

-Andre Breton, the surrealist manifesto (1924)

Surrealism officially began in 1924 when the poet Andre Breton wrote the first surrealist manifesto, but it had first popped up as a cultural and political movement in 1917. Andre Breton said Surrealism was "*psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express - verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner - the actual functioning of thought.*" By this he was saying that the surrealist artists should put aside rational and logical thinking along with common sense and let their subconscious or unconscious mind take over their creativity and leave the creative outcome to random chance. The surrealists did this by developing methods of painting, drawing, and creative writing which enabled the subconscious mind to take control and express itself (Barnes, 1996).

Many of the first surrealists were heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud and his scientific research and work into dream symbolism and the subconscious mind, particularly drawing from his book “the interpretation of dreams” (1899) which legitimised the importance of dreams as valid manifestations of human emotions and desires. Freud believed that dreams contained messages and information from our subconscious mind which is made up of forgotten or repressed memories, and that they could help us understand the workings of the mind and therefore treat mental illnesses and psychological problems. Sigmund Freud developed and used techniques known as Psychoanalysis to bring the subconscious mind to the surface. The surrealists borrowed and adapted these techniques, such as automatic writing and drawing, to allow their subconscious to create bizarre imagery. This is what became known as surrealist Psychic Automatism and included practices such as automatic handwriting, a method that was also used in the spiritualist community as a means to contact the dead. Automatic drawing (psychography) is an apparent psychic ability, such as clairvoyance, which allows words or images to be produced without conscious thought. Sceptics and psychologists have placed this idea under the ideomotor phenomenon which is the psychological reflex which causes unconscious movement, such as what happens with a Ouija board (it’s not ghosts, it’s you).

The other branch of surrealism is Known as Oneiric, or dream-like surrealism and leans more towards realism whereas automatism is more abstract. Oneiric surrealism, however, is still strange and dreamlike as its name says, with surreal landscapes and strange bird headed beings. This branch of surrealism was the most influenced by Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams.

Freud said that the interpretation of dreams is like a king’s road into the unconscious and the imagery you see in dreams is a reference to something in your life. Here are a few examples (McAndrew, 2018):

- Parental figures are represented by kings, queens or other respected figures.
- Children are small animals, such as squirrels and rats.

- Houses represent people; a house with straight, plain walls is a male whereas if the house has balconies its female.
- Birth is represented by water, whether that is you diving into it or climbing out.
- And Death is represented by a journey to unknown places.
- Freud also believed that many of the things we dream about have sexual undertones such as hats, churches and coats, but he also said that “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar” and I personally believe that a lot of Freud’s symbolism is improbable in that regard.

Oneiric surrealism is also present in the film and photography industries. One surrealist photographer is Dora Maar, sadly mostly known only as Picasso’s model, partner and muse as she was the woman in many of his ‘weeping woman’ portraits, but before she met him she was gaining popularity and a following in the surrealist circles of Paris for her photography.

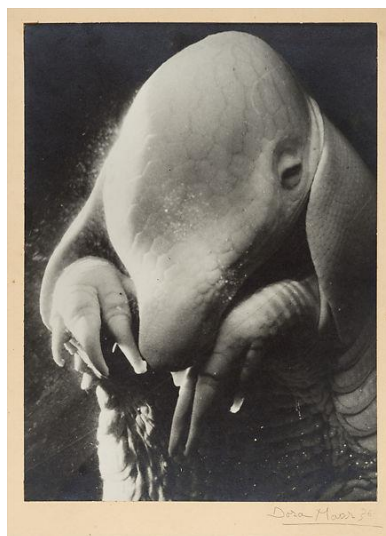


Fig 1 Père Ubu, Maar 1936

Dora Maar

The photos she took between 1930 and 1935 show how fast photography was changing due to advancements with the technology. With this new technology photo manipulation and juxtaposition

turned photography into a perfect for creating the dreamlike scenes popular in oneiric surrealism (Jobey, 2019).

Dora Maar was persuaded by Pablo Picasso to leave her photography behind and pursue painting, as he believed that all photographers were just painters wanting to be free. Her paintings followed in Picasso's footsteps in the cubist style he created and was already a master in. Some people say that the beginning of her relationship with Picasso was the end of her artistic career and it was in the 50's that she truly abandoned her photography.



Fig 2 la Grand Range, Maar 1958

Many of Maar's paintings remained unrecognised as hers until after she died until a sale in 1999 which shed light on amazing and personal art which had been hidden in her studio. When she left Picasso her paintings truly became her own, with gloomy tones and tragic work depicting the years after the war. During the 60s and 70s she experimented with abstract forms and vibrant colours and then during the 80s she moved onto painting the landscapes around her home and added strong clouds and volatile weather to dominate the scene, representing her past struggles with depression. These paintings aren't really as surreal as her previous paintings, but there is a surreal oneiric quality to them as she did in 'La Grand Range' (fig 2) she had composed abstract waves to create the hills.



Fig 2 La Nympe Echo/ the Nymph Echo, Ernst 1936

Max Ernst

Max Ernst was a painter, sculptor, poet, and graphic designer. He was a key contributor to the surrealist movement and a pioneer of Dadaism. Max Ernst was one of the first Surrealist painters to apply Sigmund Freud's dream theory to his paintings and collages in the hopes that he would better understand his subconscious mind and he was the first to use psychic automatism to create art. He used a collection of images from catalogues, illustrated books, and newspapers to create surreal collages and mixed media paintings. In figure 2, 'The Nymph Echo', we can see a visual narrative of the ancient Greek myth, with Echo in the top right corner on top of a surreal creature made up of plants. This is an oneiric painting depicting a dreamlike, or nightmarish, scene of Echo and Narcissus (depicted here as the plant monster) that in the myth died and turned to vegetation (Moma, undated).



Fig 3 Forest and Dove, Ernst 1927

His experimental approaches to art lead him to create a new technique known as frottage, the French word for rubbing, an artistic method of creating rubbings from textured surfaces such as floor boards or stone paths. He was inspired to create this technique when he saw the grains of an old wooden floor in which he saw patterns and images made from years of being walked on and scraped. He placed paper over the floor and rubbed it with graphite pencils to pick up the marks which suggested mysterious forests and abstract forms (Tate, undated).

He then went on to develop this technique into what is now known as grattage, French for scraping. With grattage a canvas is coated with oil paint and placed over textured objects such as mesh or even fish bones (as seen in figure 3). Ernst then scrapes over the paint so the raised parts are cleared of paint and he responded to the other marks by scratching away abstract shapes leaving the outcome to automatism, or as Breton says “the undirected play of thought”.



Fig 4 Tree of Life, Carrington 1960

Leonora Carrington

Leonora Carrington, 1917-2011, was first introduced to surrealism through a book given to her by her mother. During 1937 she met Max Ernst and eloped with him to Paris where she became involved with the Surrealist movement and was taught by Ernst. When World War 2 happened, Ernst was imprisoned and Leonora was left by herself. She fled to Spain where she unfortunately had a breakdown due to anxiety and depression and ended up in a mental institution after her parents intervened. After being released she married a Mexican Ambassador, Renato Leduc, and eventually found her way to Mexico where she then lived on and off for a while before settling and spending the rest of her life there. This turned out to be the best place for her creatively as even Andre Breton said Mexico is the most surreal place in the world (Breton, 1938) with its rich cultural history and contemporary art scene which inspired many of her paintings. While in Mexico, Carrington got involved with political and feminist movements. She personally focused on mental freedom but understood that it would not truly be achieved until political freedom was accomplished (Chadwick, 1986).

She has a style of surrealism that is sometimes derived from oneiric and sometimes from psychic automatism. In figure 4, 'Tree of Life' she has an etheric style with abstract forms creating faces in clouds. It is Oneiric, as she applied conscious meaning to it by including the Kabbalah's tree of life, a concept from the Kabbalah, a Jewish mystic tradition, which symbolises certain aspects of our life. The painting seems to be depicting a mythological scene with devils and angels in the background riding horses and 3 abstract men in the foreground. There are also two fantastical creatures in the bottom corners of the painting resembling chimeras, amalgamations of 2 or more animals, the most surreal of legendary monsters.



Fig 5 Are You Syrious? Carrington 1953

In figure 5 we can see that she is influenced by mythological scenes, with references to ancient Egyptian Gods and beliefs. Comparing this with her other art we can see that she didn't use Freud's Symbolism, but rather she used symbolism from ancient mythologies and esoteric traditions. The dog-like animals are a reference to the Egyptian jackal gods associated with gateways and death, along with the Dog Star, also known as Sirius. In the bottom left corner we can see a figure weaving something; this is another reference to mythological characters who weave the destiny of humanity such as the Fates of Greek myth and the Norns of Germanic mythology.

During an interview for the Tate she was asked to comment on what she was thinking whilst painting. She said that you can't intellectualise it and to try and do so would be a waste of time. Her paintings are her own feelings and emotions and subconscious thoughts.

“You’re trying to intellectualise something desperately. You’re wasting your time”

- *Leonora Carrington, Britain’s Lost Surrealist*

She is a mixture of the two surrealist branches. Oneiric in the way that she creates dreamlike scenes with esoteric and alchemical symbolism, rather than Freudian symbols, and Automatism in the way that she just paints whatever comes to mind. In fact she was never interested in Freud like many other surrealists, instead she looked into alchemy and magical realism. She also wanted to present female sexuality in a way that she saw it, instead of in the way that other, predominantly male, painters portrayed it (Chadwick, 2012).

To Conclude

Oneiric surrealism and Psychic Automatism aren’t always necessarily separate from each other and can work well together as they did with Leonora Carrington’s paintings. Even so, it is quite evident that psychic automatism wasn’t as popular as its oneiric counterpart within the visual arts (painting, illustrating, etc.). Even Andre Breton said “Oneiric values have definitely won out over the others” (Break of day, 1934). Perhaps this suggests that artists preferred to have some conscious control over what they were creating, or maybe the abstract style of art became unpopular as art became used more for advertising in the 20th century.

Even though surrealists were originally inspired by Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical techniques and his book ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’ many surrealists moved on to other things for inspiration. After all, people have been interpreting their dreams since we first had them and no one really knows if they mean anything or if Freud’s theories are correct. For example, Leonora Carrington rejected Freud and instead found inspiration and meaning ancient mythology, symbolism, and various esoteric traditions like the Kabbalah and alchemy. Some surrealists even started looking at Carl Jung’s research into the collective unconscious and archetypal imagery for inspiration whilst others just went with whatever came to mind.

Andre Breton's ideas and thoughts for surrealism created a massive cultural movement which is still being experienced today through modern mediums such as graphic design and films and it is likely that Surrealism will continue to be a popular art movement in years to come.

Bibliography

"Leonora Carrington – Britain's Lost Surrealist | Tateshots" (March 2015) YouTube Video, added by Tate[Online]. Available at <https://youtu.be/lqXePrSE1R0> [2/12/2019]

Barnes, R. (1996). *The 20th century art book*. London: Phaidon Press.

Bloom, H. (2005). *Sigmund Freud's The interpretation of dreams*. Broomall, Pa.: Chelsea House.

Breton, A. (2012). *Manifestoes of surrealism*. [Ann Arbor, Mich.]: Univ. of Michigan Press.

Chadwick, W. (1986). Leonora Carrington: Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness. *Woman's Art Journal*, 7(1), 37-42. doi:10.2307/1358235

Chadwick, W. (n.d.). *Women, art, and society*. 5th ed. Thames and Hudson.

Dillon, B. (2019). *The Voraciousness and Oddity of Dora Maar's Pictures*. [online] The New Yorker. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/the-voraciousness-and-oddity-of-dora-maars-pictures> [Accessed 6 Dec. 2019].

En.wikipedia.org. (2019). *Ideomotor phenomenon*. [online] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideomotor_phenomenon [Accessed 4 Dec. 2019].

Freud Museum London. (2019). *The Interpretation of Dreams* / Freud Museum London. [online] Available at: <https://www.freud.org.uk/learn/discover-psychoanalysis/the-interpretation-of-dreams/> [Accessed 5 Dec. 2019].

Freud, S. and Brill, A. (1997). *The interpretation of dreams*. Ware: Wordsworth.

Jobey, I. (2019). *The mesmerising art of Dora Maar* / Financial Times. [online] Ft.com. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/0ee21c42-05a6-11ea-9afa-d9e2401fa7ca> [Accessed 7 Dec. 2019].

Max-ernst.com. (2019). *Max Ernst: 50 Famous Paintings Analysis and Biography*. [online] Available at: <https://www.max-ernst.com/> [Accessed 10 Dec. 2019].

Metmuseum.org. (2019). *Père Ubu*. [online] Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/286239> [Accessed 7 Dec. 2019].

Moma.org. (2019). *MoMA / Tapping the Subconscious: Automatism and Dreams*. [online] Available at: https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/surrealism/tapping-the-subconscious-automatism-and-dreams/ [Accessed 6 Dec. 2019].

T. McAndrew, F. (2019). *The Freudian Symbolism in Your Dreams*. [online] Psychology Today. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/out-the-ooze/201801/the-freudian-symbolism-in-your-dreams> [Accessed 5 Dec. 2019].

Tate. (2019). *Automatism – Art Term* / Tate. [online] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/automatism> [Accessed 6 Dec. 2019].

Tate. (2019). *Frottage – Art Term* / Tate. [online] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/frottage> [Accessed 3 Dec. 2019].

Tate. (2019). *Grattage – Art Term* / Tate. [online] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/g/grattage> [Accessed 3 Dec. 2019].

The Art Story. (2019). *Surrealism Movement Overview*. [online] Available at:
<https://www.theartstory.org/movement/surrealism/> [Accessed 2 Dec. 2019].

The Museum of Modern Art. (2019). *Max Ernst. The Nymph Echo (La Nympe Écho). Paris 1936 / MoMA*. [online] Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79316> [Accessed 12 Dec. 2019].