

The Surrealists

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Keywords

André Breton, Colonial Exhibition, Surrealism

Q. What was Surrealism?

A. The Surrealists were initially a dynamic group of radical young French poets based in Paris who, having experienced the First World War at first hand, rejected the society they returned to in France in 1919. The values of the culture seemed out of touch and irrelevant to the post-war world, so they invented away of changing that culture: Surrealism. When the leader of the movement, André Breton, died in 1966, Surrealism was over, but surrealist groups around the world continue to this day.

There are many popular ideas now about Surrealism that make it sometimes difficult to convey what it actually was. For example, Surrealism is often thought of as anything irrational or absurd, as in the adjectival use of the word 'surreal' to say 'that was surreal!' This has little to do with what preoccupied the Surrealists the most, which constantly changed as they responded to the social and political events that were happening around them..

At first, Surrealism rejected all literature of 'Realism' because it was dull and only told us what we already knew and the idea of the Surrealists was that our own internal thoughts could reveal new ways to see reality. For instance, dreams contained 'images' which could reveal something new about the personal experience of the world. Drawing on Freudian dream analysis, traditional poetry was replaced by dreams and other things such as 'automatic writing' (a more sophisticated idea of doodling where the mind 'writes' something without thinking about it). As the ideas of the Surrealists grew in popularity, they wrote a Manifesto of Surrealism in 1925 (the first of many) and other people, including artists, film-makers and photographers joined the group and a long battle started over maintaining the identity of authentic Surrealism. Also, the ideas of including 'psychic automatism' in social representations became quite quickly entangled in more direct social and political issues, when France engaged in the Moroccan 'Rif' war in 1925. The return to war led the Surrealists to integrate their ideas and thinking within a range of social and political issues and thus initiated Surrealism into French politics and cultural questions.

Q. What was the Surrealists' attitude to French colonialism?

A. The Surrealists were hostile to colonialism in principle and practice. They frequently wrote tracts against colonial conditions, war and the oppression of indigenous peoples under French colonial rule right from the Rif War in Morocco right through to the Algerian conflict in the 1950s and even to Vietnam.

Q. How did the Surrealists view the Colonial Exhibition of 1931?

A. The International Colonial Exhibition of 1931 was organized by the French Ministry of Colonies to celebrate and promote colonialism internationally, to show

that colonialism was a good thing and to encourage Europeans to go to the colonies for a better life opportunity. A huge park was built in Vincennes (some of the buildings from the Exhibition are still there) in which were built villages to show the culture of the various colonies from France, Denmark, Belgium, Italy, Holland and Portugal. (Britain did not participate in any significant way as it had already planned its own exhibition.) Then, the native inhabitants of the various countries were also brought over to Paris to inhabit the park so that the whole experience for European visitors was of a 'global village' of colonies to visit in a day. How did the Surrealists oppose the Exhibition?

The Surrealists published and distributed their own tract entitled: DO NOT VISIT THE COLONIAL EXHIBITION! Then they co-organized a counter-exhibition with the Anti-Imperialist League and the French Communist Party called The Truth of the Colonies. Their exhibition showed pictures of atrocities that had happened under colonialism, gave information about the living conditions of various colonies that were included in the Colonial Exhibition, their histories and information about their cultures. The Communist parts of the exhibition showed an alternative view, the positive steps taken by the Soviet Union to improve the living conditions of its people. Today, much of that would be regarded as propaganda, but it was intended to show an alternative model to colonialism.

Key publications by David Bate

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Further reading

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