Realism's Antipodes: Max Ernst, Bella Li, China Miéville

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> "Modernity must be under the sign of suicide, an act which seals a heroic will…"
> —Walter Benjamin

Abstract: This essay examines Bela Li's *Argosy*, Max Ernst's collage novels and China Miéville's *The Last Days of New Paris* in relation to an ideology of realism in which the recuperation of avantgarde praxis stands in direct relation to its de-sublimation of an aesthetics of sur-realism. In Li and Miéville's solicitation of Ernst's texts, among others, there is a deep ambivalence between the economy of a *return to the origin* as avant-primitivism and its affordances as (fundamentalist) *reaction*, in which the *antipodeanism* of Li's refiguring of Surrealism describes an exemplary movement. Such antipodeanism also implies a critique of the somewhat paradoxical observation that, "As for the productions of peoples who are still subject to cultural colonialism (often caused by political oppression), even though they may be progressive in their own countries, they play a reactionary role in advanced cultural countries" (Debord, "Report on the Construction" 20).

The 1937 *Entartete "Kunst"* ("Degenerate 'Art'") exhibition—of over 650 paintings, sculptures, prints and books, staged by the Nazis at the former Munich Institute of Archaeology for the purpose of enlightening the German populace to the evils of so-called modern art—featured an intentionally chaotic array of work by children, psychiatric patients and artists ranging from Van Gogh to Chagall, but held a particular place of contempt for the German Dadaists and Surrealists: George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, Hans Richter, Rudolf Schlichter, Kurt Schwitters and Max Ernst. The exhibition served as the prelude to later spectacles of mass vandalism, like the bonfire—staged in the gardens of the Galerie nationale de Jeu de Paume in Paris, on July 27, 1942—of works by Picasso, Dalí, Klee, Léger, Miró and Ernst. The *Entartete "Kunst"* catalogue denounced the "specific intellectual ideal" of modern art as that of "the idiot, the cretin, and the cripple" and present "the Negro and the South Sea Islander" as its "evident racial ideal."[1] At the 1935 Nuremburg rally, Hitler himself proclaimed, "It is not the mission of art to wallow in filth for filth's sake, to paint the human being only in a state of putrefaction, to draw cretins as symbols of motherhood, or to present deformed idiots as representatives of manly strength" (qtd. in Farago).

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[1] The original catalogue in German can be viewed here:
http://lcc.onlineculture.co.uk/ttp/ttp.html?id=1bdcb351-e431-45a2-8fa7-4fa343bdc27f&type=book.
The book version of the catalogue in German in English is available in *Degenerate Art: The Exhibition Guide in German and English* by Fritz Kaiser (Blurb 2016).

The aggressive "primitivism" and "anti-rationalism" of Dada and Surrealism, with their unrelenting attacks on precisely the corrupted mythos and cultural "logic" that constituted National-Socialist ideology, was summed up by the organizers of *Entartete "Kunst"* (un-ironically, of course) as "madness becomes method." Drawing from Dada's assault upon the mercantile-imperialist global order that produced WWI and the jingoistic nationalisms that proliferated after Versailles, Surrealism in particular set itself the task of a social transformation on the order of collective consciousness, through a revival of the revolutionary "spirit" of the 1870s and Rimbaud's "systematic disordering of the senses." As a polemic, Surrealism positioned itself as the adversary of a totalizing Rationalism: a Rationalism that it perceived as fundamentally *irrational* at its core, like Goya's "slumber of reason" whose engendered monsters were not those works of "Entartete Kunst" denounced by the Nazis, but the very impulse to denunciation—an impulse already manifested and institutionalized far beyond the borders and racialist policies of the Third Reich.

Announced in the 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism," this "anti-rational" programme of social transformation, as conceived by its most active proponent, André Breton, was one of a profound *disillusionment*. "So strong is the belief in life," wrote Breton in the Manifesto's opening line, "in what is most fragile in life—*real* life, I mean—that in the end this belief is lost" (1). Life, the Surrealist's insisted, had been done to death by so-called realism, and by those paragons of "rationality" and "enlightenment" whose ultimate contribution to humanity was the machinery of global oppression, world war and genocide. While subsequently the path of humanity's emancipation from this deathly "realism" would be seen to lie along the path of political transformation opened up by the Bolshevik revolution (however fraught their interpretation of this would turn out to be), the principle concern of the Surrealists was with the emancipation of mind (of "man, that inveterate dreamer") and the liberation of art from the dictates of ideology: a *de facto* principle of "revolution" that would achieve its clearest formulation in the collaborative 1938 manifesto, co-authored by Breton and Trotsky, "For an Independent Revolutionary Art."[2]

While the guiding impulse of Breton's programme stemmed from the psychoanalytic writings of Freud and Breton's own field hospital work during WWI, the principle methodology of Surrealism—what ultimate set it apart from a mere theoretical prospectus—stemmed from a revived understanding of poetics (indeed, this is the point both Freud and Breton had most in common, since it is necessary to regard Freud's seminal work, *Die Traumdeutung*, as an investigation of the *poetics* of dream logic, and ultimately of consciousness itself). Midway through the 1924 manifesto, Breton famously defined Surrealism as "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" ("Manifesto of Surrealism" 26). This *actual functioning of thought* was expressed, moreover, as "an absence of any *control* exercised by reason" and "exempt from any *ethical or moral concern*" ("Manifesto of Surrealism" 26).

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[2] To deflect from the controversy surrounding Trotsky, the manifesto was in fact co-signed by Breton and Trotsky's Mexican host, Diego Rivera, though Rivera unsurprisingly played no discernible part in its composition.

In other words, the truth of Surrealism was to be located not within a given ideological standpoint, or programme of instruction, but the contrary: a radical ambivalence. *Not an ambivalence towards any ethics whatsoever*, for example, but rather the *ambivalence of thought itself, in its formation,* which would be a mark of its autonomy from ethical preconceptions, or of any system of intellectual coercion; an *emancipated thought*—on the basis of which *an ethics could be founded*. This in itself was a radical position that was quickly mischaracterised as one of gratuitous irresponsibility—much in the manner of Dada, but more dangerous for its appeal to subjective as well as collective experience and, through the Bureau for Surrealist Research, for its quasi-systematic grounding in a kind of scientism. Like the spectre of Marxism, Surrealism aspired not to a merely nihilistic "critique," but to become the means of real social transformation.

The 1924 Manifesto came ready-packed with practical applications of the idea of "pure psychic automatism." These in themselves were important for indicating an aesthetic path, but more important was the construction of method—and this method in turn drew its force from an insight into the logic of poetic construction: an insight that would have universal applicability and which, in addition to the prestige and narcissistic appeal of the dream lives of others, would account for the movement's rapid international spread, particularly among those for whom psychic *repression* and political *oppression* were synonymous, and for whom social realism presented a visible incommensurability with lived experience. And it's here that we might speak of a certain *antipodeanism* brought into view by the Surrealist project: the world *underfoot*, the *inverse*, *upsidedown* dimension of the real that isn't a *mirror* of representation but representation's *underworld*. Its *envers*. Its *enfer*. A radical antipodeanism of language, of mind, and indeed of all ideological systems of collective and individual control, exploitation and colonialisation. An antipodeanism which, aroused to consciousness, might become—like Marx's downtrodden—a critical, emancipative force. Realism's proletariat.

This revolutionary aspect of Surrealism stems precisely from the question of representation. Surrealism, with its particular purview on the world and upon the ideology of realism, was concerned with the status of representation as such: both of this antipodean *surreality* and of Surrealist praxis itself. Confronted at the outset with the quandary of the *unpresentable*, but persuaded in the belief that not only did the unpresentable *exist* but that it constituted *the very basis of reality*, Breton reversed Freud's analysis of the *semiotic* character of dreams into a poetic methodology, for which he discovered antecedents in the writings of Pierre Reverdy firstly and later (and more persuasively) in those of Lautréamont.

Midway through the 1924 manifesto, Breton quotes from a text by Reverdy published at the end of WWI: "The image," Reverdy wrote, "is a pure creation of the mind. / It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. / The more distant and true, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality…" (qtd. in Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism" 20). In 1925 a special issue of the Surrealist magazine *Le Disque Vert* was dedicated to Lautréamont, who was born in Uruguay and died in 1870 at the age of 24, and whose description of a young boy in *Les Chants de Maldoror* as beautiful "as the

chance encounter on a dissection table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella,"[3] became a sort of operating-manual in miniature for the technique of Surrealist collage[4]—exemplified early on by the *exquisite corpse*, and later reprised in what Dalí would characterize as a *critical paranoiac method*, and Guy Debord (anchored in the critical praxis of John Heartfield) would refine into *détournement*, as a putting to work of radical incommensurabilities to produce an unforeseen re-ordering of sense and of the constitution of the "real." A technique, in other words, of accessing the unpresentable through the violent (if temporary) overthrow of the ideologically of representation itself.

One of the most fluent practitioners of the technique of Surrealist collage, however, was Max Ernst. Co-founder with Hans Arp and Johannes Baargeld of the Cologne-based Zentrale W/3, Ernst had made a name for himself as the instigator of the 1919 *Dada-Vorfrüling* ("Dada Spring") exhibition, entered via a men's urinal in which a woman in a communion dress recited obscene poetry. Viewers were invited to destroy the works on show (including Baargeld's *Anthropophiliac Tapeworm* and Ernst's *Original Running Frieze from the Lung of a Seventeen-Year-Old Smoker*), with hammers provided for that purpose. Despite this propensity to auto-critique, the exhibition was closed down by police due to public outrage ("fraud," "obscenity," "creating a public scandal" (Waldman 21)). Its immediate effect was to gain Ernst an invitation from Breton to stage an exhibition in Paris.

Ernst described his work of this period as *sculpto-peinture*—like Schwitter's "Merz," an assemblage of found material arranged more or less at random. He defined his technique, echoing Lautréamont, as "the systematic exploitation of the fortuitous or engineered encounter of two or more intrinsically incompatible realities on a surface which is manifestly inappropriate for the purpose—and the spark of poetry which leaps across the gap as these two realities are brought together" (qtd. in Russel 29). It was at this time that Ernst began producing collages drawn from 19th-century book illustrations (woodcuts, line blocks, steel engravings), an activity that would form the basis of two of his best-known later serial compositions, *La Femme 100 têtes* (1929) and *Une semaine de bonté* (1934)—described as "pictorial novels."

La Femme 100 têtes, consisting of 147 prints, appeared with a forward by Breton, while Ernst himself offered that the particular intensity of the collages "derives as much from the emotional commonplaces which serve as their point of departure as from the uses—no less sacrilegious, one could say, than purely absurd—to which they are put" (qtd. in Schneede 112). *Une semaine de bonté*, published in five volumes, drew among others on the illustrational work of Gustave Doré (the principle source of Ernst's bird-headed figures), détourning what has been described as Victorian visual platitudes into bizarrely unsettling manifestations of unconscious sociopathic intent—thereby transforming banal advertisements for a bourgeois world-view into melodramas of prohibited desire. Uwe Schneede describes Ernst as handling his material "with great mastery, like a scientific observer … and setting out, like Freud, to demonstrate the effects of sexual repression in human life" (139) and, further: "It is for this very reason that these collages have

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[3] "…comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie!" Comte de Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1868-9), Canto VI, Verse 3.
[4] Encompassing Dadaist photomontage, as well as Soviet film-montage and *litmontaz*.

such extreme suggestive power: they derive their impact not from the formal interplay of pictorial elements, but from the analysis of social realities" (Schneede 139).

Bella Li's *Argosy*, published in Sydney in 2017, explicitly reversions Ernst's collage novels in a work of Surrealist antipodeanism *après la letter* that poses questions about the contemporary critical impetus of a poetics of collage. Li's book, comprised of pictorial collage sequences and sequences of dreamlike "poetic prose" or "prose poems," divides equally into two sections: "Pérouse, ou, Une semaine de disparitions" (alluding to the scientific expedition of the Compte de La Pérouse, which vanished in 1788 in the South Pacific) and "The Hundred Headless Woman." By way of these advertisements, *Argosy* invites reading as a *détournement* of a *détournement*. In the collage sequences of "Pérouse," Ernst's bird-headed and bat-winged Victorians are transmuted into bird-headed colonial officers, giant "South Sea Islanders," animal-vegetable-insect hybrids, ships rigged with nautilus shells, bizarre Lepidoptera, and other suchlike cropped from tinted 18th and 19th-century etchings. Freudian perversion among the European bourgeoisie gives way to an ethno-anthropology of the fantastically "other."

"Pérouse, ou, Une semaine de disparitions" is a pictorial voyage that draws from a mix of exotica and scientific record (the distinctions between which are frequently ambivalent in any case), evoking—among other things—ideas of the Enlightenment "noble savage" whose criticised doppelgangers came to haunt the Nazi evangelists of *Entartete "Kunst."* The disappearance of the expedition of La Pérouse after it had set sail from Botany Bay and its brief encounter with Arthur Philip's "first fleet" (sent by the British admiralty to colonise New South Wales), hovers in the background like an unsettling premonition of the European "civilising project" of which Li's source material was the pictorial embellishment. It eventually came to be believed that La Pérouse's shipwrecked crew had been "massacred" by "natives" on the island of Vanikoro.

But we may suspect that, beyond this implication of "irrational menace" (one which serves to obscure, of course, the *disappearance* of indigenous cultures in the Pacific and elsewhere in the wake of such voyages of European Enlightenment—just as in Perec's *La Disparition*, for example, it's the internal *disappearance* of Europe's Jews in the wake of Nazi "Enlightenment"), there is another, immeasurably more frivolous "disappearance" being alluded to in Li's book: that of the Surrealist poet Paul Éluard. Éluard, whose writings ghost the textual sequences of *Argosy*, notoriously staged a mysterious vanishing act from Paris in 1925, which turned out (to Breton's intense disgust) to be a rich man's "round-the-world" holiday cruise, whose itinerary—Marseilles, Gaudeloupe, Martinique, Panama, Tahiti, Cook Islands, Wellington, Sydney, Brisbane, the Dutch East Indies, Singapore (where he rendezvoused with Max Ernst), Saigon, Colombo, Djibouti, Suez, Marseilles—was the stuff of postcards and literary travelogue. La Pérouse of the interwar art-tourist class, with a picturesque nod to Gauguin, pared of any threat from local "savages" (though syphilis, the pre-eminent European disease, yes). Breton's disgust, it ought to be remembered, stemmed not from Éluard's snobbism but from the sheer *banality* of his "voyage": its betrayal of Surrealist mythos.

By contrast, the sequences in Li's *Argosy* that comprise "Hundred Headless Woman" are concerned with a different genre of disappearance: that, within the main body of (predominantly male) Surrealist art, of "woman" into fetish ("the true, captivating stereotypy" (Breton, *Point du*

jour 233))—of which attitude Breton's *Nadja* represented the very apotheoses. Despite its referencing of Ernst, "Hundred Headless Woman" is predominantly textual (e.g. "Isidora: A Western," "The Novelist Elena Ferrante," "The Memory Machine Elena Obieta"), the sole collage sequence ("Eve and Co.") being made up of hand-drawn figures cut from 1950s dressmaking magazines and pasted into contemporary North American streetscapes. The terrain is one of a more *implicit détournement* of the representation of gender. In conjunction with the examination of ethno-exoticism in "Pérouse," "Hundred Headless Woman" thereby touches upon a larger recurring element in Surrealist antipodeanism, which is that of the conflation of the "feminine" and the "primitive" as tropes of a seductive/emancipative *irrationalism* to be ranged against the morbidity of European "civilisation" *à la mode*.

And here lies another problem. For while the techniques of Surrealist collage avail themselves of what, at a given moment, represent a revolt against stereotype, moral hypocrisy, and so on— exposing latent contradictions while suggesting whole worlds of "unpresentable" experience— they equally avail themselves of the contrary. It was precisely the *fluency* of Ernst's collage-novels in the first place—like that of Dalí and Picasso—which bred imitators on a quasi-industrial scale, and through this work of "imitation" (and in the case of Dalí and Picasso, self-parody) produced a "tendency to evoke superficially" (Breton, *Point du jour* 234) resulting in the domestication of Surrealism as *style*. We move, in a manner indistinguishable from commodification, from Surrealism's bounty to its poverty. And just as Surrealist "method" is reducible to style, so is its critique—but here's the rub: insofar as Breton founded a *method* upon a clear analysis of a poetics—indeed of a mechanism of construction, one which (by its very *ambivalence* to its terms) is universalisable—so too the logic of "Surrealist" critique is founded upon the generalisation of "critical logic" as such. Its subversion thus requires the surrender of all essentialisms: beyond Surrealism there is only naked commodities.

In one of the sections of *La société du spectacle* concerned with "spectacular consumption," Debord notes that, "The two currents that marked the end of modern art were Dadaism and surrealism" (*The Society of the Spectacle* 191). "Historically," he adds, "Dadaism and surrealism are at once bound up with one another and at odds with one another. … For Dadaism sought to *abolish art without realising it* and surrealism sought to *realise art without abolishing it*" (191). In his long 1957 "Report on the Construction of Situations," Debord had already identified the "return of Surrealism" as specifically a "return to art:" that is to say, to the *institution of art*. Co-opted "into ordinary aesthetic commerce," what was once transgressive in Surrealism isn't merely domesticated and neutralised, but cultivated "as a sort of nostalgia" (i.e. for the radicalism *of the past* preserved "in a congealed form") which henceforth "discredits any new venture" ("Report in Construction" 19). It is only, in other words, in the normalisation of Surrealism *as art* (which it embraced in any case), that its radicalism is permitted to be acknowledged, and acknowledged moreover as *definitive* (the "most disturbing movement possible"), thus neutralising not only what was most radical about Surrealist critique, but disarming in its name any future critique (which can only be regarded as a pale imitation, etc.) (Debord, "Report in Construction" 19). "The most extreme destruction," Debord argues, "can be officially welcomed as a positive development because it amounts to yet one more way of flaunting one's acceptance of a status quo where all communication has been smugly declared absent" (*The Society of the Spectacle* 192).

In his 1935 Prague lecture on "The Surrealist Situation of the Object (Situation of the Surrealist Object)," Breton himself stated that "the greatest danger threatening Surrealism today is the fact that because of its spread throughout the world, which was very sudden and rapid, the word found favour much faster than the idea and all sorts of more or less questionable creations tend to pin the Surrealist label on themselves." To avoid misunderstandings of this kind, which stem from a certain fetishisation and a certain cultishness, Breton proposed the following:

> The best way to seek agreement on this question seems to me to seek to determine the exact situation of the Surrealist object today. This situation is of course the correlative of another, the Surrealist situation of the object. It is only when we have reached perfect agreement on the way in which Surrealism represents the object in general—this table, the photograph that that man over there has in his pocket, a tree at the very instant that it is struck by lightning, an aurora borealis, or, to enter the domain of the impossible, a flying lion—that there can arise the question of defining the place that the Surrealist object must take to justify the adjective Surrealist. ("The Surrealist Situation" 258)

It is unavoidable, however, to recognise that the Surrealist "situation"—as with the situation of Surrealist collage (and of montage in general)—is precariously relative: its underlying ambivalence *cuts both ways*. The very possibility of a *sur*-realism demands it: its critical impetus can never be conflated with an essential "Surrealism" of any kind, because its very contingency, its very *force*, leaves it open to precisely the same movement by which it initiates itself. In other words, what "justifies" the adjective Surrealist isn't any kind of *object*, and least of all an aesthetic artefact, but its *displacement*—or, as Li puts it, its "disappearance." If Ernst's *La Femme 100 têtes* and *Une semaine de bonté* imply a certain "disappearance" of one European idea, Li's channelling of Ernst in "Pérouse, ou, Une semaine de disparitions" and "The Hundred Headless Woman" implies another: an idea bound to the situation *of the "Surrealist" subject*.

Take for example Tzara's 1918 "Note sur la poésie nègre," in which he notes: "we are God only for the country of our knowledge, in the laws according to which we live our experience on this Earth, on both sides of our equator, inside our borders" (29-30). Tzara's anthropoetics—one of the unacknowledged impetuses of early Surrealism—poses the question of critical—*frames of reference* in terms of the problem of universality: can a universal situation of "poetry" be brought into view, unless through a projection or displacement into otherness? This problem is almost immediately confused with that of the "origins" of the poetic impulse, as an anthropological condition, and the consequent appeal of an aesthetic "primitivism." The risk here is that Tzara's implied question, once inverted, would appear to cause an entire epistemological rationale to disappear: just as Li's work implies (through a repositioning of the Surrealist frames of reference around an antipodal and feminist subjectivity) a spectrology of Surrealism that also marks its definitive "disappearance."

Tzara's "translation" of so-called negro poetry—which begins with "The Kangaroo," sourced from "Luritcha (North Australia)"—is really a method of *détournement*: situating what we might call the quasi-Surrealist object within a field of collage called European culture. And while it is necessary to speak of the hegemonic character of such ethnological "translations," it is also

necessary to acknowledge the very contingent, indeed ambivalent character of their orientation. For just as translation plays upon a representation of the unpresentable (or *representation as disappearance*), it also poses a threat: the instant the "object" translates into a "subject," the direction of disappearance is reversed. There is, within Surrealism, an element of hysteria, to possess its object so as not to be obliterated by it—such that the only thing guarding it becomes, like Ernst's prolific output, an inflationary manufacture of *situations*.

The force of collage's *radical ambivalence* (what Breton called "the triumph of the equivocal" (*Point du jour* 236)) consequently returns, like Marx's tragedy sublimated into farce, in the *necessary ramification* of precisely the formulaic, in the manufacture of new stereotypes, new pictorial conventions, in a whole *stylistics* (the "poverty," in Breton's words, of a "poetry" that, brought to an impasse, dies of itself, of inertia, of boredom). Necessary, because on the one hand the assumption of *any* critical POV implies a *reductio ad absurdum* (the open-ended critique-of-critique), and because on the other—in revealing the arbitrary construction of supposed essentialisms—it presents itself as a method for aesthetically reconciling precisely the contradictions it exposes. As Bataille puts it, "All claims from below have been surreptitiously disguised as claims from above" (39). This is the terrain—mediated by the intervening discourse of postmodernism—which Li's *Argosy* traverses, so to speak, in its evocation of a "return of the spectre of Surrealism" as a "return of Surrealism's repressed" (Debord, "Report in Constructivism" 19)—concluding with what can only be described as a simulacrum of a Sam Taylor-Wood art-fashion shoot, featuring a faceless (female) model posed in a series of locations *à la mode*, entitled "La ténébreuse" (French, because it's about as "exotic" as a perfume label).

It's in this respect, also, that Debord speaks of Surrealism as leading "back to traditional occultism" (Debord, "Report in Construction" 19), a summoning of *dark powers* (the force of the unpresentable) no longer in the service of revelation but as a bulwark *against disappearance*. In China Miéville's 2016 novel, *The Last Days of New Paris*, the spectre of Surrealism is rendered in vastly threatening and paradoxical terms of *resistance*. Miéville's novel goes some way to re-translating the Surrealist antipodeanism that frames Li's *détournement*s back onto the figure of the Surrealist "capital": Paris. The novel is topologically situated in a zone of psychic quarantine, between the 1941 Surrealist exodus in the face of Nazi occupation and the fictional endgame of a WWII situated in an alternative "Surrealist" history: in "1950."[5] Miéville's war is one in which the French Surrealist *résistance* group—"La main à plume"—are caught in a battle between occultist Nazis and rampaging "manifestations" let loose from the collective unconscious by a reality-altering "S-blast" (a massive Surrealist neuron bomb).

The historical Main-à-Plume were a Surrealist derivation active under the Occupation from 1941-1944 (during which time Breton and company were absent from Paris, in exile in New York), led by Robert Ruis, Jean Simonpoli and Marco Ménégoz. Their group-name referred to a line from

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[5] A first-person postscript brings us up to the recent present, in which Miéville mimes himself (in a set-piece of the genre) as the unexpected recipient of the foregoing "account" from the mouth of an aged, unidentified "witness." He's merely the conduit, in the public interest, of a story he can neither verify nor disprove (were he inclined to do either): the "writer," we are led to understand, is *historically impotent* in the face of contested realisms.

Rimbaud, "La main à plume vaut la main à charrue," in *Une Saison en enfer*. In June 1944 they formed a *maquis*, which operated in the Fontainbleu forest, until the group was betrayed a month later and its members were imprisoned, tortured and shot (but only after refusing to talk). The theme of betrayal in *The Last Days of New Paris* is closely linked here to an allegory of art at the service of ideology and the recurring theme of failed revolution, not least of which is *la révolution surréaliste* (where the silence of the historical Main-à-Plume stands in notable contrast to Miéville's "confessional" fictionalisation).

Miéville's novel centres upon a 3-way drama around his fictional Main-à-Plume's last surviving member, "Thibault"—who possesses an uncanny affinity with Surrealist objects ("manifs")—Jack Parsons, a real-life occultist and rocket scientist (acolyte of the "Great Beast," Aleister Crowley), and "Sam," a kind of one-woman analogue of Operation Paperclip and the Manhattan Project. Miéville's Paris is accordingly a kind of Paris upsidedown, an antipodean Paris, *à l'envers* or rather *à l'enfer*: a portal of hell, of that Terra Australis Incognita of the European imaginary, situated somewhere between Moruroa Atoll (the site of French Pacific nuclear weapons testing between 1966 and 1996) and Les Deux Magots. At the heart of this novel is a proposition, which harks back to the premises of *Entartete "Kunst"* and bears out, in a deeply ambivalent form, the prospect of Surrealist social transformation as a chaos of unreason. Where Li's project evokes a decorous mannerism as the camouflage of counter-critique, Miéville's evokes a gamespace of rampaging "exquisite corpses" and demons as allegory of the ideological capture of "no future." Here, the reifications of perpetual Surrealism stand as counterparts to a Fukuyamaesque neoliberal "end of history," in which revolt and resistance are reduced to videogame parlour décor of commodified dissent.

Two dates, then: 1941, 1950. These are the historical co-ordinates of Miéville's dialectic of the "Last Man": resistance fighter, fantasist, writer. His account begins, non-chronologically, in 1950: something arrives out of a hostile and improbable distance, assuming a form at once concrete and phantasmagoric: it is Leonora Carrington's 1941 pen-and-ink work, *I am an Amateur of Velocipedes*—a female oracle of sorts, tasked with delivering three messages, one spoken, one written, one in the form of a Surrealist playing card. The mysterium of plot: messages from the past convoking a future for a quasi-fictive world in which otherwise there is none. Close the book, 12 February 1950, real world (so-called): Albert Einstein raises the spectre of Mutually Assured Destruction resulting from any nuclear war. Assuredly, M.A.D. saturates Miéville's novel, like some overwhelming background radiation bleeding through the protective fictional membrane in which New Paris is quarantined from "reality." Rewind to January 24, the elided subplot of a distended war against Nazi Germany and the occupation of Paris: in a prelude to the Rosenberg trial, nuclear physicist Klaus Fuchs confesses under interrogation by MI5 to being a Soviet spy—for seven years he's passed secret data on British and US atomic weapons research to Moscow. In Miéville's novel, the Soviet Union and the Cold War arms race will remain the elephant in the room.

Rewind to 1949, 29 August, Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan: the Soviets conduct their first successful weapons test, codenamed First Lightning—in response, Truman orders the rapid development of a hydrogen bomb, initiating a race that will culminate in the Soviet Union's detonation of the "Tsar Bomba"—producing the largest yield ever recorded, an estimated 50-58 megatons—on

Severny Island in the Arctic Ocean, 30 October 1961. To illustrate the bomb's destructive potential on a major urban centre, and to galvanise the European public, a diagram is disseminated of the bomb's 60 mile blast radius superimposed on a map of the Île de France region, with Paris at its epicentre. The message is clear: in one fell stroke, the "Tsar Bomba" would be capable *in fact* of doing to Old Paris what Le Corbusier's 1925 "Plan Voisin" for the construction of a "New Paris" had, in an act of grandiose *symbolical* provocation, merely dreamt of. (Announcing his project to demolish the 3rd and 4th arrondisements upon which to erect a new modernist city, Le Corbusier proclaimed, "At the present moment a congress on 'The New Paris' is about to assemble. ... Paris of tomorrow could be magnificently equal to the march of events that is day by day bringing us ever nearer to the dawn of a new social contract" (Le Corbusier). It would represent, in fact, a type of ideal disappearance—*of the very idea of Paris*. In its presentation of the unpresentable, the *rationality* of the bomb would effectively bring the "European" project of "civilisation" full circle, from auto-critique to suicide.

Here, as elsewhere, historical detail provides an alibi for Reason's imminent betrayal: such betrayal will provide the appreciable subtext of Miéville's novel, yet its agency will not be that of the Axis Powers or those of the Cold War, but Surrealism itself. In unleashing the forces of radical ambivalence, Miéville appears to argue that the Surrealists confected not only their own disappearance, but that of the very revolutionary possibility they advanced upon the world. As if to say, in fact, that the germ of neoliberalism—of global commodification and its discontents— lay not in the cynical expropriation of Surrealist technique, etc., but in the very *logic* of Surrealism. In this way, both Miéville's *The Last Days of New Paris* and Li's *Argosy* can be construed as a "return" insofar as they are focused upon an examination of the Surrealist source-code: Li from the position of the "Surrealist object," Miéville in approaching the occult mechanics, or mythos, of the S-blast, in which the "dark powers" of the global order—from *Tausendjähriges Reich* to the *New American Century*—manifest as pure phantasmagoria.

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