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► **To cite this version:**

Céline Mansanti. Uncharted Modernism: Surrealist Literature and Cinema. Alternative Modernism(s), 2013, Cardiff, United Kingdom. hal-03647517

HAL Id: hal-03647517

<https://hal-u-picardie.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03647517>

Submitted on 22 Apr 2022

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Uncharted Modernism: Surrealist Literature and Cinema

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Even though American Surrealism is still mainly associated today with the visual arts and with the 1960s, American Surrealist literary experimentations did exist in the 1920s and 1930s. Many of them appeared in *transition*, the American expatriate magazine published in Paris between 1927 and 1938, which, among many other texts, famously published Joyce's *Work in Progress*, numerous pieces by Gertrude Stein, as well as the first translations into English of countless French surrealist texts. Some of these American experimentations are still remembered today (William Carlos Williams' *Novelette*, Nathanael West's *Dream Life of Balso Snell*). Together, however, these texts shape a distinctive American response to French surrealism.

It is my goal here to define the main features of this aesthetic, as well as to consider its significance within the broader framework of transatlantic modernism. In order to do so, we will examine a selection of American surrealist texts published in *transition*, as well as two film excerpts included by Bruce Posner on the "American surrealism" DVD of his collection of Early American Avant-Garde Films released in 2005. I will also make references to West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, published in France in 1931.

The first striking feature of the American surrealist texts published in *transition* is their massive use of the fantastic, sometimes verging on the grotesque. Extraordinary worlds are created. In *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, the hero climbs up the intestine of the Trojan Horse starting from its anus. The grotesque in the novel relies primarily on the festive, iconoclastic, scatological atmosphere created by West. Very often, the American surrealist texts in *transition* curiously rely on personifications of animals, plants and objects. In *Love in the West*, by William Closson Emory, "orchids and sweet peas wander about chatting together. Dandelions carry luggage here and there and do odd jobs." (t13, 34). Examples of such personifications in this short story are countless. Let's mention the "colored easter eggs carrying arm loads of luggage" while "turnips and asparagus accompany them from train" and "A bologna sausage paces up and down in front of the night club yawning (t13, 37). "Home

Edition”, published in the same issue, in 1928, is a story by Whit Burnett¹. It opens on this sentence: “Enter, bowing, Page One, followed by Mr. Calvin Coolidge in high hat, the Average Citizen with abashed look, Crime, Coal Strikers, Chicago Riots, Missing Clue, Police in Hot Pursuit, Miss America, and other Atlantic City Beauty Contestants who play leap frog gracefully over a series of headline-hurdles up to the point of arriving gracefully, with legs crossed, on the Statue of Liberty.” (t13, 199) In the following issue, another narrative by Whit Burnett stages “A pair of ear muffs bow[ing] and do[ing] a polka” while “Two pairs of black rimmed spectacles do a hesitation waltz.” (t14, 121). In “Work on Sidetrack”, by Murray Godwin, a Pford car, I quote “gave birth to a tinfant totter, motor Number I-U, who cannounced her gladvent with a sounding hoot from her tinny horn. » (t15, 45). Harry Crosby, in 1930, writes : “I do not find it strange that a blue bird should fall in love with a playing card because the playing card in question happens to be the queen of hearts” (t19-20, 34). In 1935, Wayne Andrews writes of “innumerable headless heads of hair, billowing” before “the entry, rather ‘solemn’ to be sure, of 449 golden doorknobs” (t23, 7-8). Charles Tracy, in 1936, opens his poem “Portrait of Our House” with “Egg-noggs agog jog. Laughing/ pegs jagg acrest to our nest” (t24, 32), and George Whitsett, in the same issue, offers this Joyce-inspired nursery rhyme: “Lice night/ And the nice before./ Lambs and cuttlefish came to my door,/ The lambs wore plumes,/ The cuttlefish said,/ And a spray of almond over their head” (t24, 38). This is a lot of examples, but I think it is essential to have an idea of the importance of personifications in these texts.

Of course, a question that immediately comes to mind is : why would these texts be considered as surrealist? The answer is given by their authors themselves, who in many cases describe them as such. In his preface to *The Surrealist Parade*, written the year of his death in 1987, Wayne Andrews writes: « I did not meet Breton until the summer of 1934 when he won my eternal loyalty by putting his stamp of approval on my prose poem “The Evocative Treason of 449 Golden Doorknobs” ». Some of the texts are explicitly called “scenarios” by their authors. This is the case for “Love in the West” by William Closson Emory, and “Home Edition” by Whit Burnett. The reference to this genre, half-way between literature and cinema, shows the influence of surrealism. Indeed, while the “scenario” genre was invented

¹ who was to become three years later the editor of the successful magazine *Story* devoted to the short story 1931.

by Cendrars, Romain and Albert-Birot around 1915, the surrealists were the ones who developed it in the 20s².

The American surrealist texts, heavily based on the creation of a fantastic world, are different from French surrealist experimentations, relying on the “merveilleux”. In 1962, Breton remarks that « The fantastic almost always derives from some unimportant fiction, whereas the marvelous glimmers at the extreme end of the vital movement and entirely engages affectivity ». In other terms, the marvelous emerges from reality, whereas the fantastic opposes reality. Whereas the fantastic relies on visual shock, the marvelous comes from language : « the earth is blue like an orange » is a case in point. An illustration of this difference in our American texts is that the fantasmagorias created by the authors are usually safely contained within the limits of a parallel world, whether it's a dream (*The Dream Life of Balso Snell* for example) or a scenario. Reality itself is not radically put into question.

In this respect, an importance influence on these texts is *Alice in Wonderland*. Wonderland is what Alice experiences while she's asleep. Wonderland is also a fantastic world where animals, plants, and objects are personified. Across the Channel, the surrealists were actually the first to acknowledge the importance of Carroll. Between 1929 and 1952, Carroll was claimed by the Surrealist Movement as one of their own. But that was not before 1929. And texts like “Love in the West” and “Home edition” were published in transition as early as 1928, just after the Alice Comedies series which launched Walt Disney's career in the animation business. When studying American surrealism, it's therefore important to consider Anglo-American popular culture, and not just French surrealism.

If Breton lowers down the fantastic in opposition to the marvelous, it doesn't mean that American surrealist experimentations are not interesting. Personifications tend to create a playful, essentially joyful world. Spectacular images abound, making the reader stagger with visual overdose. Sometimes the fantastic verges on the grotesque, in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* or in « Love in the West ». The grotesque in these texts tends to be Bakhtinian inasmuch as it is warm, festive, full of life, in other terms, it is more comic than it is threatening. The

² Souvent impossibles à filmer, la plupart des scénarios surréalistes sont aujourd'hui tombés dans l'oubli. Ce n'est d'ailleurs peut-être pas un hasard si « Un chien andalou » de Luis Buñuel et « La Coquille et le clergyman » d'Antonin Artaud sont restés dans les mémoires : ce sont aussi les seuls à avoir été tournés. La revue publie des scénarios surréalistes, dont, à l'automne 1928, « Midnight at Two O'Clock » de Robert Desnos et, en juin 1930, « La Coquille et le clergyman », « The Eighth Day of the Week » de Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes et « The Mill » de Philippe Soupault.

scatological body is a recurrent element of this American grotesque. We've already mentioned the situation of West's narrator, making his way up the intestine of the Trojan Horse. Godwin shares West's taste for the scatological, as in this short story published in 1927:

The coprojectile contacted with a flask of soup for nightwork in the pocket of the foreman. (...) The bozo on guard at the entrance was lashed to the north column by a whirling lower intestine. (t4, 174)

Humour, whether scatological or not, is a recurrent feature of these experimentations (« O Beer! O Meyerbeer! O Bach! O Offenbach! » exclaims the hero of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*). The worlds created and the language used are very dynamic. Personifications contribute to the dynamism of the texts, but so do accumulations, the semi-telegraphic style of the scenarios, and the frequent use of onomatopoeias such as « dynami-dr-r-r-ing-ng-ng... », « wham » and « bam » in Murray Godwin's « Work on Sidetrack ». Sequences unfold very quickly, in « Work on Sidetrack », « Home Edition », *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, as well as in Williams' Novelette. Here's an example from A Novelette.

My child has swallowed a mouse. – Tell him to swallow a cat then. Bam! This is the second paragraph of the second chapter of some writing on the influenza epidemic in the region of New York City (...).

The use of a familiar tone and of American vernacular language adds to the dynamism of the language. « What the hell do I care about art! » exclaims John Gilson in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. Likewise, Murray Godwin dismisses highbrow visions of art: « “Art demands –” says Mr Josephson. Well, art can demand what it damned pleases, or bay at the moon; it does not matter the kink of gnatsneck to me. » (t15, 119) Social criticism, and an emphasis on violence and experience also characterize these texts.

And here is where we get: these American surrealist experimentations are not only interesting in themselves. They are also interesting because of their political and aesthetic stance against French surrealism and high expatriate modernism. Williams is the one who pushed the theorization of American surrealism the furthest. His definition of American surrealism in “How to Write”, in 1936, is based on the reading of two seminal essays published in transition. The first one is Jung's “Psychology and Poetry”, published in 1930. Jung's concept of the collective unconscious allows him to dismiss Breton's automatic writing, which he uses however as a counterpoint to define what he calls “spontaneous writing”. Unlike automatic writing, “spontaneous writing” leaves space for rationality and is compatible with Williams'

conception of the poem as an object. In order to write “How to write”, Williams relies on another essay published in *Transition*. “The Structure of the Personality”, by Gottfried Benn, was published in 1932. According to Benn, the structure of the personality is not only cerebral but also corporal. Williams uses this idea to connect spontaneous writing with the most physiological, humble functions of the body. Unfortunately, I don’t have time to develop this idea, which I discuss in a chapter of my book on *Transition* magazine. Let’s just say that Williams’ surrealist writing, as exemplified in *A Novelette*, written in the winter of 1929-1930, is much less solemn, much less conceptual, much more concrete and corporal than French surrealist writing. Spontaneous writing is associated to physiological relief, whether sexual or excremental, and explicitly opposes the symbolic, allegorical patterns of many French surrealist texts. On the whole, American surrealism contributes to shaping a lower form of modernism, by contrast with the high modernism of the European avant-gardes, and mostly aims at stimulating sensation and producing signs, or objects rather than creating meaning.

This specificity of American surrealism is important to understand when considering Bruce Posner’s DVD collection released in 2005. *Unseen cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film, 1894-1941* is a collection of 7 DVDs, aiming at showing that an early American film avant-garde did exist before Maya Deren. It brings together American modernist films as diverse and essential as *Ballet mécanique*, *Manhatta*, *The Love of Zero*, *Pie in the Sky* and many others. On its release, the collection received enthusiastic critical acclaim from magazines such as *Cineaste* and *Modernism/Modernity*. However, both were disappointed with the “American Surrealism” disc, “the only one”, as the reviewer of *Modernism/modernity* rightly argues, “to name explicitly an art movement, and thus the disc most likely to court controversy.” In particular, both critics question the inclusion of “the visual fanfares” extracted from Douglas Fairbank’s *When the Clouds Roll By* (1919) and James Cruze’s *Beggar on Horseback* (1925). These selections, according to one of them, “don’t summon the hallucinatory violence of the surrealist sensibility”, “nor do they deploy the power of surrealist incongruity”. My contention is that these two film extracts fully belong, on the contrary, on this DVD, as they’re representative of the American surrealist aesthetic at work in the pages of *Transition*.

The first short extract we’ll watch is from *Beggar on Horseback*, a 1925 film by James Cruze, that has since been lost, like most films by this director. 37’10-38’37. Two elements seem

particularly relevant for our discussion. First, the fantastic and grotesque atmosphere of this extract, relying ONE on the Bakhtinian carnivalesque (all the guests are half brides and grooms, and the traditional wedding theme is jazzified) and TWO on the animalization of musicians disguised as frogs (which echoes the personifications of animals in transition's surrealist texts). And second, another interesting element is the inscription of the fantastic within the well-established structure of the dream or in this case the nightmare.

We find the same structure not only in most surrealist texts in transition, but also in the second extract we're going to watch, taken from Victor Fleming's first movie, *When the Clouds Roll By*. The film almost opens on Douglas Fairbanks dining on onion, lobster, welsh rarebit and pie. Show 29'28-30'02. This heavy meal triggers a nightmare, and here's an extract of it: 33'31-35'31. It's a pity we don't have time to screen the whole sequence, because it includes every gymnastic feat in the F's repertoire.³ There's a dynamism there, in F's acting but also in the use of slow and fast motion, that recalls the textual dynamism of many surrealist texts in transition. And of course, the fantastic, the comic, the grotesque, the personification of food, echo both the extract from *Beggar on Horseback* and transition surrealism.

So in the end, these films are very different from what we acknowledge as canonical surrealist films, like *Un Chien andalou* for example, in 1929 and *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, in 1928. I'd like to make 2 remarks to conclude. First, these American films come first, chronologically, before the French classics. They were made in the late teens and early twenties, at a time when a French surrealist like Robert Desnos dreamed of a surrealist cinema, and saw in *When the Clouds Roll By*, in a 1923 article for the *Paris-Journal*, an interesting attempt to represent a dream on the screen. Second, and I hope it's something I managed to convey throughout this presentation, there is a real, rich, interesting, self-sufficient esthetic in these American surrealist proposals, both literary and cinematographic. By linking together *Alice in Wonderland*, French surrealism, Gottfried Benn, Carl Jung, James Joyce, Walt Disney and the Hollywoodian comedies of the 20s, American surrealism speaks for the transatlantic, interdisciplinary dialogue of high modernism and popular culture.

³ This was an enormous amount of action for such a brief sequence. The most visually stunning of these events – the sequence in which F climbs up the wall and across the ceiling – was so memorable that Fred Astaire and the director Stanley Donen reused the idea over thirty years later for the celebrated “dancing on the ceiling” sequence in *Royal Wedding* (1951).