

Revolutionary Dreams and Realities: The Complex Relationship Between Surrealism and Communism

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March 30, 2024

"Revolutionary Dreams and Realities: The Complex Relationship Between Surrealism and Communism" delves into the intricate dance between two transformative movements that sought to redefine the boundaries of art and politics in the 20th century. At the heart of this exploration is the tension between Surrealism's quest for the liberation of the unconscious mind and Communism's drive for social and economic revolution. This study navigates the shared aspirations, ideological clashes, and historical intersections that shaped the relationship between these movements. Through a detailed examination of their origins, methodologies, and the divergent paths they took, the paper illuminates how Surrealism and Communism each sought to challenge and reshape societal norms and artistic expressions. It invites readers to reflect on the legacy of these movements, considering their enduring influence on contemporary debates around art, politics, and the possibility of societal transformation. Join us in uncovering the complexities of their intertwined journeys, shedding light on the power and challenges of aligning revolutionary dreams with reality.

Keywords: Surrealism, Communism, revolutionary movements, ideological clashes, artistic expression, societal transformation, unconscious mind, social revolution, André Breton, Socialist Realism, Stalinism, avant-garde, political engagement, materialist analysis, collective action.

Introduction

At the dawn of the 20th century, the world witnessed the emergence of two revolutionary movements that, despite their distinct domains—art for Surrealism and politics for Communism—shared a profound desire to transform society. Surrealism, born out of the chaotic aftermath of World War I, sought to liberate the human mind by delving into the unconscious, dreams, and the irrational. Its proponents, led by André Breton, envisioned a world where the boundaries between reality and the imagination were blurred, advocating for a radical overhaul of human thought and expression. Meanwhile, Communism, grounded in the theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, emerged as a political force aiming to overthrow the capitalist system and establish a classless society. It promised to liberate the working class through collective ownership of the means of production and the elimination of social and economic inequalities.

Despite these shared aspirations for societal transformation, Surrealism and Communism diverged significantly in their visions of liberation. Surrealism's emphasis on individual psychological freedom clashed with Communism's focus on collective social and economic restructuring. Moreover, while Surrealists saw art as a realm of absolute freedom and revolutionary potential, Communists often viewed it as a tool for ideological education and propaganda, leading to fundamental disagreements over the role of art and artists in society.

This paper aims to explore the complex and often contentious relationship between Surrealism and Communism. By examining their ideological foundations, methodological differences, and the historical context of their interactions, we will uncover how two movements, starting from a common ground of revolutionary zeal, ended up charting divergent paths. Through this analysis, we will gain insight into the broader question of how revolutionary movements navigate the tension between the liberation of the individual and the transformation of society as a whole.

The Foundations of Surrealism and Communism

A. Brief History of Surrealism: Aims, Key Figures, and Methodologies

Surrealism emerged in the early 1920s in France as a cultural movement that sought to revolutionize human experience by exploring the unconscious mind. Its roots can be traced to the Dada movement, which arose as a reaction against the horrors of World War I, but Surrealism sought a more positive and constructive approach to societal change. Led by André Breton, who published the first Surrealist Manifesto in 1924, the movement attracted a diverse group of artists and writers including Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, René Magritte, and Joan Miró. Surrealists employed a variety of methodologies to bypass rational thought and access the unconscious, such as automatic writing, dream analysis, and the creation of unexpected juxtapositions in art. Their work challenged traditional boundaries between reality and imagination, aiming to create a super-reality where the two were indistinguishably merged.

B. Brief History of Communism: Marxist Theory, Its Global Spread, and Key Figures

Communism, as a political ideology, is based on the theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who envisioned a classless society where the means of production are owned collectively, eliminating the exploitation and inequality inherent to capitalism. The publication of "The Communist Manifesto" in 1848 laid the groundwork for the spread of Communist thought across the globe. The 1917 Russian Revolution marked a significant turning point, as the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, successfully established the world's first socialist state. This event galvanized Communist movements worldwide, with figures like Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union and Mao Zedong in China playing pivotal roles in adapting and implementing Marxist-Leninist principles in their respective countries.

C. Initial Sympathies: Common Revolutionary Goals and the Early Intersections Between Surrealists and Communists

In the aftermath of World War I, both Surrealists and Communists shared a profound disillusionment with Western civilization's failure, which had led to unprecedented destruction and loss of life. This common ground fostered initial sympathies between the two movements, as both sought to overthrow the existing social order—Surrealists through a liberation of the mind and an overhaul of cultural norms, and Communists through a socio-economic revolution that promised justice and equality.

Early intersections were marked by mutual admiration and collaboration. Surrealists were drawn to the radical political changes occurring in Soviet Russia and admired the Bolsheviks' initial support for avant-garde art as a symbol of revolutionary progress. Communists, on the other hand, saw potential in Surrealism's ability to disrupt bourgeois sensibilities and awaken a revolutionary consciousness among the masses.

However, this initial camaraderie was complicated by fundamental differences in approach and philosophy. Surrealists valued the autonomy of art and the exploration of the individual subconscious as ends in themselves, while Communists prioritized art as a means to political ends, emphasizing collective action and the material realities of class struggle. These divergent paths would eventually lead to a more contentious relationship as both movements further defined their identities and goals.

Diverging Paths: Ideological and Methodological Differences

A. Exploration of the Unconscious and Irrationality in Surrealism versus Materialist Analysis in Communism

The core methodologies and ideological underpinnings of Surrealism and Communism reveal a fundamental divergence in their approach to

revolution and transformation. Surrealism, deeply influenced by the psychoanalytic theories of Freud, sought to mine the unconscious, dreams, and the realm of the irrational as sources of artistic and personal liberation. Techniques like automatic writing, photomontage, and the creation of dream-like imagery aimed to undermine rational thought and bourgeois norms, proposing that true freedom lies in the unbridled expression of the subconscious mind.

In stark contrast, Communism, rooted in Marxist materialist analysis, focused on the tangible, external conditions of human existence. It posited that true liberation could only be achieved through the collective action of the working class, aimed at dismantling the capitalist system and its structures of exploitation. The emphasis was on the material conditions of life and the socio-economic relations between classes, believing that consciousness and cultural expressions were shaped by these material conditions, not by the exploration of the unconscious mind.

B. Surrealism's Emphasis on Individual Psychological Liberation versus Communism's Focus on Collective Social and Economic Transformation

This methodological divergence underscored a deeper ideological rift between the two movements. Surrealism's emphasis on individual psychological liberation championed the artist and the individual as agents of change, through personal exploration and expression. The movement's vision of liberation was intensely personal, focusing on the emancipation of the mind from the constraints of logical reasoning and societal norms.

Conversely, Communism prioritized the collective over the individual, advocating for a mass movement to achieve social and economic transformation. The liberation it envisioned was one of class emancipation, where the proletariat would rise to overthrow the bourgeoisie, leading to a classless society. The focus was squarely on collective action and solidarity among the working class, rather than on individual enlightenment or transformation.

C. Conflicts over the Role of Art: Surrealist Autonomy and Experimentation versus Communist Utilitarianism and Social Realism

The differing views of Surrealism and Communism extended into the realm of art, leading to conflicts over its role and purpose. Surrealists asserted the autonomy of art, believing in its inherent value as a means of exploring the psyche and challenging societal norms. Their approach favored experimentation, innovation, and the breaking of aesthetic conventions, seeing art as a revolutionary act in itself.

Communists, however, espoused a utilitarian view of art, seeing it as a tool for education, agitation, and the promotion of socialist ideals. The rise of Socialist Realism as the official art form of the Soviet Union exemplified this perspective, emphasizing accessible, realistic depictions of idealized workers and peasants in service of the state's ideological goals. Art was expected to inspire and mobilize the masses towards the Communist cause, sidelining abstract, experimental, and individualistic expressions that characterized Surrealist work.

These ideological and methodological differences marked the diverging paths of Surrealism and Communism, leading to a complex and often contentious relationship. While both movements started from a common revolutionary zeal, their visions of what liberation meant and how it could be achieved set them on fundamentally different trajectories.

The Break with Official Communism

A. André Breton and the Surrealists' Engagement with the Communist Party

The relationship between the Surrealists and the Communist Party began with mutual interest and cautious engagement. André Breton, the unofficial leader of the Surrealist movement, was initially sympathetic to Communist

ideals, seeing in them the potential for the radical societal overhaul that Surrealism also sought. Breton and several of his colleagues joined the French Communist Party in the late 1920s, hoping to find common ground between Surrealist aims and Communist methods. This period of collaboration was marked by attempts to reconcile the Surrealists' emphasis on the liberation of the mind with the Communists' focus on social and economic revolution.

However, tensions soon arose due to fundamental differences in ideology and the role of art in society. The Surrealists' insistence on the autonomy of art and their exploration of the unconscious through abstract and irrational expressions conflicted with the Communist Party's growing demand for art to serve political and educational purposes.

B. The Expulsion of Surrealists from the Communist Party and the Reasons Behind It

The break between the Surrealists and the Communist Party became inevitable as these ideological differences intensified. The Surrealists were critical of the Party's increasingly doctrinaire approach and its suppression of artistic freedom. For the Communists, the Surrealists' focus on the individual and the irrational was seen as bourgeois and counter-revolutionary, detracting from the class struggle and the Party's objectives.

The tension reached a climax when André Breton and other Surrealist members were formally expelled from the Communist Party in the early 1930s. The expulsion was largely due to the Surrealists' refusal to subordinate their artistic vision and ideological beliefs to the dictates of the Party. This expulsion marked a significant rupture, making clear the incompatibility of Surrealist and Communist visions of revolution and the role of art within it.

C. The Impact of Stalinist Policies on Art and Artists: Censorship, Purges, and the Official Endorsement of Socialist Realism

The consolidation of Stalin's power in the Soviet Union had a profound impact on the relationship between art and politics. Under Stalin, the Soviet government imposed strict controls over artistic expression, endorsing Socialist Realism as the official art style. This style, characterized by idealized, accessible depictions of workers and peasants, was intended to promote socialist values and inspire the working class.

The enforcement of Socialist Realism and the suppression of other art forms led to widespread censorship, purges, and the persecution of artists who did not conform to the state's ideological and aesthetic standards. Many avant-garde artists, including those with Surrealist tendencies, found themselves marginalized, silenced, or worse. This period saw the suppression of artistic innovation and the imposition of a narrow, state-sanctioned aesthetic that left little room for individual expression or experimentation.

The break with official Communism and the impact of Stalinist policies on art represented a dark period in the history of artistic freedom. It underscored the deep divisions between a movement that celebrated the irrational and subjective aspects of human experience and a political ideology that increasingly demanded conformity and utilitarianism in art. The legacy of this rupture continues to influence debates about the role of art in society and the relationship between artistic freedom and political ideology.

Critical Support and Continued Opposition

A. The Continued Left-Wing Sympathies of Surrealists Despite Opposition to Stalinism

Despite their estrangement from the Communist Party and their critique of Stalinism, many Surrealists maintained their allegiance to left-wing ideals. Their opposition was not to the concept of revolution or to the principles of equality and social justice, but specifically to the authoritarianism and dogmatism that characterized Stalin's rule in the Soviet Union. Surrealists continued to believe in the potential for art to effect societal change and maintained that a truly revolutionary art form must be free from state control and censorship.

This nuanced position allowed the Surrealists to continue advocating for political causes that aligned with their vision of liberation and justice, without endorsing the repressive policies and practices of Stalinist Russia. Their critical support for left-wing movements underscored a commitment to a broader understanding of revolution, one that included the realms of culture, psychology, and personal expression alongside political and economic transformation.

B. The Surrealists' Critique of the Soviet Union under Stalin and Their Support for Alternative Revolutionary Movements

The Surrealists were vocal in their critique of the Soviet Union under Stalin, particularly condemning the regime's suppression of artistic freedom and its persecution of dissidents. They were appalled by the show trials, purges, and the general climate of fear and repression that characterized Stalin's rule. This critique extended to the official endorsement of Socialist Realism, which they saw as antithetical to the spirit of innovation and experimentation that defined Surrealism.

In search of alternatives, the Surrealists expressed interest in and support for revolutionary movements that they felt were more aligned with their

values of freedom and individual expression. This included support for Trotskyism, with some Surrealists, including André Breton, developing a close relationship with Leon Trotsky. The Surrealists' engagement with Trotskyism was part of a broader exploration of revolutionary ideas that could encompass the radical potential of art and the unconscious mind.

C. The Legacy of the Surrealists' Political Engagement and Its Relevance to Contemporary Political and Artistic Discourses

The Surrealists' complex relationship with Communism and their continued engagement with revolutionary politics have left a significant legacy. This legacy is evident in contemporary discussions about the role of art in society, the importance of artistic freedom, and the ways in which art can engage with political and social issues. The Surrealists challenged the notion that art should serve the state or any singular ideology, advocating instead for art as a realm of absolute freedom and radical potential.

Their critiques of authoritarianism and their exploration of alternative forms of political and social organization continue to resonate in an era where questions of censorship, state control, and the autonomy of art are increasingly relevant. The Surrealists' insistence on the importance of the irrational, the subconscious, and the role of the individual in societal transformation provides a counterpoint to utilitarian views of art and politics, inviting ongoing debate about the possibilities for revolutionary change in contemporary contexts.

In this way, the Surrealists' political engagement and their opposition to Stalinism underscore a broader exploration of how art intersects with politics, offering valuable insights into the tensions and potentialities of this relationship. Their legacy challenges us to reconsider the possibilities for art to imagine and enact change, highlighting the enduring relevance of their vision in today's political and artistic discourses.

Conclusion

The journey through the complex relationship between Surrealism and Communism reveals a fascinating intersection of art and politics, marked by shared revolutionary aspirations but divergent paths toward societal transformation. This exploration has uncovered the ideological and methodological rifts that emerged between these two movements, highlighting the tensions between individual liberation and collective action, between the unconscious mind's exploration and the material conditions of existence, and between artistic autonomy and art as a tool for political ends.

Understanding the nuanced relationship between Surrealism and Communism is crucial, not only for historical completeness but also for its contemporary relevance. This relationship underscores the challenges and potentialities inherent in aligning artistic movements with political ideologies, revealing the delicate balance between the pursuit of artistic freedom and the demands of political engagement. It prompts a reflection on the role of art in societal change, questioning whether art can be both a realm of unfettered expression and a catalyst for collective action.

The legacy of Surrealism and Communism in challenging and reshaping societal norms and artistic expressions continues to resonate. Surrealism, with its radical embrace of the unconscious and the irrational, offers a vision of art as a boundless territory of exploration and defiance, challenging us to question our perceptions of reality and the status quo. Communism's emphasis on social and economic equality remains a powerful critique of capitalist structures, inspiring ongoing debates about justice, equity, and the possibilities for a more equitable society.

The dialogues between these movements, with their points of intersection and divergence, enrich our understanding of the potential for art and politics to intersect in complex and transformative ways. They remind us that the quest for liberation—whether of the mind, the individual, or society—is fraught with challenges but also brimming with possibilities. By

examining the historical interplay between Surrealism and Communism, we gain insights into the enduring power of art and political engagement to envision and work toward alternative futures, reaffirming the importance of these movements in shaping our contemporary world.

