

BRITISH ACADEMY LECTURE

Surrealism and its Legacies in Latin America

DAWN ADÈS

Fellow of the Academy

SURREALISM IN LATIN AMERICA has a history peppered with lacunae, misunderstandings and bad faith, not least in the ways this history has been told; it has also had strong adherents and defenders and some of the movement's greatest poets and artists, such as Roberto Matta from Chile, who made his career exclusively outside the continent, and César Moro, who has been described as 'the only person who fully deserves the epithet surrealist in Latin America'.¹

Surrealism has played an important but contentious role in the development of modern Latin American art. The history of the reception of surrealist ideas and practices in Latin America has often been distorted by cultural nationalism and also needs to be disentangled from Magic Realism. Surrealism was nonetheless a potent influence or chosen affiliation for many artists and its legacies can still be detected in the work of the contemporary artists from Latin America who now dominate the international scene.

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¹ Camilo Fernandez Cozman, 'La concepción del surrealismo en los ensayos de Westphalen', in *César Moro y el surrealismo en América Latina*, ed. Yolanda Westphalen (Lima, 2005), p. 44. See also Jason Wilson, 'The sole surrealist poet: César Moro (1903–1956)', in S. M. Hart and D. Wood (eds), *Essays on Alfredo Bryce Echenique, Peruvian Literature and Culture* (London: 2010), pp. 77–90. César Moro, the pseudonym for Alfredo Quispez Asin, was born in Peru, lived in Paris for eight years from 1925 to 1933, encountered the surrealists in 1928, chose to write in French and published his encantatory celebration of love, 'Renommée d'amour', in *SASDLR* in 1933. See also Dawn Adès, 'César Moro and surrealism in Latin America' (Getty Research Papers, forthcoming).

Some of the key issues and questions that arise in trying to give an account of Surrealism in Latin America would be pertinent to its reception anywhere outside its home base, Paris, but others have a special relevance to Latin America. Often adherents to surrealism were or felt themselves to be outsiders in their own communities, marginalised for social, political or sexual reasons. Surrealism's strong stance against *père, patron, patrie* and absolute refusal of religion attracted like-minded people in many countries, but questions of faith and of nationalism loom especially large in Latin America. How could the cultural nationalism rife in many of the relatively newly independent countries in Latin America co-exist with the anti-nationalism and internationalism of the surrealists? Another important question is the relationship between surrealism and the local avant-gardes. How were the latter manifested and how far were they already linked to the new developments in Europe? The strength of local art and cultural groups varied a great deal, as did the response to surrealism. There was extensive two-way traffic and this took very interesting forms in the encounters between surrealism and Latin America, especially following the dispersal of many of the surrealists to the Americas following the Fall of France to the Germans in 1940.

During the Second World War the surrealist headquarters moved to New York, with Breton, Tanguy, Matta, Ernst and Duchamp; another group settled in Mexico: Péret, Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, Wolfgang Paalen, Alice Rahon, and César Moro, who had already taken refuge there from Peru. While Europe was being torn apart by the rise of Fascism and then the war, surrealist networks strengthened in the New World. In recognition of the importance to the surrealist movement of artists and poets from Latin America, Breton, contrasting the 'warm south' with the cold ruins of Europe, wrote, with regard to the Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins: 'L'esprit, durant ces dernières années, n'a cessé de souffler des terres chaudes.'² On Marcel Duchamp's cover of the New York surrealist review, *VVV*, in 1943, the rider on the globe points south.

'Latin America', a designation based on geography and race, was long thought to date from the French intervention in Mexico in the 1860s, invented by pan-Latinist intellectuals around the parvenu emperor Napoleon III to disguise his hunger for *la gloire* (military glory) with appeals to a shared Latin heritage between France and Mexico. However, recent research has shown that the term was widely in use by Spanish-speaking intellectuals in the Americas in the previous decade, the 1850s; it

² André Breton, 'Maria' ex. cat., *Maria* (Julien Levy Gallery, New York, 1945).

appears in an 1856 poem by Tomas Calcedo of New Granada (now Colombia) 'Las dos Américas' and elsewhere.³ The Latin American source of the term originated in the context of racial, political and commercial tensions with the United States, with its expansionist aims and the incursions of the filibusterer William Walker who sought to reintroduce slavery in Central America.

The rivalry between the two Americas has continued, not just in the political but also the cultural arena; in seeking to establish an identity over and above the national and to fight cultural colonialism, critics and artists in Latin America have pursued various essentialist notions—from the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier's '*lo real maravilloso*', 'marvellous reality', to Cesar Paternosto's *Abstraction: the AmerIndian Paradigm*,⁴ fuelled by a sense of being marginalised in relation to the USA. In the context of Latin America, surrealism has been accused of neocolonialism, of being too fantastic or not fantastic enough, too irrational or not irrational enough. For the one-time surrealist, Carpentier, its 'mysteries' were manufactured, and for the curators of the controversial exhibition of 1987, *Art of the Fantastic*, the 'fantastic' in Latin America 'is more spontaneous and direct than programmatically surrealist'.⁵ The surrealists have been described as the latest in a long line of European visitors who, 'since Columbus, have invented an America at the service of their own desires and interests'.⁶

Surrealism has been the victim of its own success, the word passing into common currency with its meanings and histories debased and trivialised. So the first part of my lecture is a job of historical retrieval, to counter some of these assumptions and explore the reception of surrealism in Latin America, from the foundation of the movement in Paris in 1924 to c.1944. The second part of the lecture will focus on two artists working in Mexico with surrealist connections of different kinds: Frida Kahlo and Gunther Gerzso.

³See Aims McGuiness, 'Searching for "Latin America": race and sovereignty in the Americas in the 1850s', in N. Appelbaum, A. S. Macpherson and K. Rosenblatt (eds.), *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003). 'Latin America', which includes Central America, parts of the Caribbean and Mexico, which is part of the North American continent, should never be confused with 'South America'.

⁴César Paternosto, *Abstraction: the AmerIndian Paradigm* (Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels and IVAM, Valencia, 2001).

⁵Holliday T. Day and Hollister Sturges, *Art of the Fantastic: Latin America 1920–1987* (Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1987).

⁶Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, 'El surrealismo y la Fantasía Mexicana', *Los Surrealistas en México* (Mexico City, 1986), p. 17.

Rather than offering a definition of surrealism and then applying it to the diverse manifestations of the movement and to creative individuals in Latin America, I shall follow another methodology, which aims to chart the self-defined surrealist groups and individuals active in Latin America, taking firstly reviews and then exhibitions as key markers of surrealist activity, and through them assess the attitudes to and responses to surrealism within Latin America. I have chosen this approach rather than one based on country ('Surrealism in Argentina', or 'in Chile', etc.), as a matter of principle, because surrealism itself and its major protagonists, like César Moro, shared the sentiment expressed so succinctly in the 1920s by Salarrué: 'Yo no tengo patria' ('I have no fatherland').⁷ In some respects this goes against the grain from a practical point of view, as many of the surrealist initiatives were perforce circumscribed by their location at the time, and subsequent critical histories all too often define themselves nationally. The only 'country' Breton acknowledged as such was Mexico, and the relationship between surrealism and Mexico will inevitably dominate my lecture, though it will be threaded through it thematically and treated critically.⁸

There are several areas where surrealism's encounters with Latin America were articulated in particularly interesting ways: the tensions with cultural nationalism, the clash with the Roman Catholic church, the question of the 'fantastic' vs. the 'marvellous', the problem of modernity vs. indigenous cultures and the enduring surrealist fascination with Pre-Columbian art, architecture and literature. These topics emerge during the investigation of reviews, and will then be explored in relation to the works of artists related to surrealism.

Surrealist journals in Latin America

Reviews have been the life-blood of the movement, since its inception in 1924 and the founding of its first journal, *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924–9). This and its successor *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution* (1930–3) were its prime means of communication, expressed the collective nature

⁷ Salarrué 'Yo no tengo patria', *Repertorio Americano* (Costa Rica, 1929).

⁸ André Breton, 'Souvenir du Mexique', *Minotaure* nos. 11/12 (Paris, 1939). A strong case could be put for 'Argentina' as also of special interest. Julio Cortázar was a major heir of surrealism, while Borges thoroughly disliked its irrationality and interest in the unconscious; but both drew on Duchamp, who happened to go there in 1918, see Graciela Speranza, *Fuera de Campo: Literature y arte argentinos despues de Duchamp* (Barcelona, 2006).

of the movement, and were the principal forum for its multidimensional ideas and activities. Through the 1920s and 1930s there was vigorous debate about poetry, art and politics, a fractious relationship with the communist party, which Breton and others joined in 1926, a flow of writings of extraordinary originality and experiments in the visual field that carried across the globe. As Walter Benjamin, writing from Weimar Germany, acknowledged in his 1929 essay, 'Surrealism: latest snapshot of the European intelligentsia', surrealism was the most powerful cultural force in Europe: 'The sphere of poetry was here explored from within by a closely knit circle of people pushing the "poetic life" to the utmost limits of possibility.'⁹ It was a small group, held together by daily meetings in the café, loving Paris but otherwise resistant to nationalist sentiments. As the movement expanded from its Paris centre, it was often through international and local avant-garde reviews that surrealist ideas and their expression in writing, painting, photography and film had spread. The surrealists themselves could not, however, necessarily control their presentation in these foreign contexts and while eager for surrealism to become international there was always a question of how fully the movement had been understood. This was to remain a cause of tension, exacerbated by the nature of surrealism, which was neither monolithic nor static, nor reducible to a style. On the one hand, surrealism was centred on Breton and his circle in Paris; on the other hand, it offered a message of liberation, the freedom of desire, a nonconformist model of the relationship between politics and art of increasing value as the totalitarian regimes closed in, all of which drew adherents from round the world. The reviews that were associated with, identified with, or just included surrealism in Latin America highlight some of the key issues in the movement's internationalism as well as the question of individual or group involvement.

There was an explosion of reviews in Latin American countries through the 1920s and 1930s. Some have a specific affiliation with surrealism, some respond to its radical ideas in so far as they relate to their own cultural and political positions and others drop in on surrealism—artists in particular—as part of an eclectic survey of contemporary art and poetry. It is beyond the scope of this lecture to cover them all; I have selected some of the most important, as representative of these different aspects and bearing in mind the broader history of surrealism's impact in the continent.

⁹Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The last [*sic*] snapshot of the European intelligentsia' (1929), *Reflections* (New York, 1986), p. 178.

The first review explicitly announcing its adherence to surrealism was the aptly named *Qué* (What). The circumstances in which the first surrealist group, responsible for this review, was formed in Argentina are curious; in October 1924 the Buenos Aires newspaper *Critica* dedicated an entire issue to the death of Anatole France. Slipped into the issue was the announcement of a pamphlet attacking the great old man of French culture: *Un cadavre*. Aldo Pellegrini, a student in Buenos Aires, was fascinated by the outspoken attack on this representative of the pure French genius, and immediately sent for all the publications of this disrespectful group. So he acquired Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* of 1924, and the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, started a small 'surrealist fraternity' with like-minded fellow students seeking a new language for poetry, experimented with automatic writing and eventually published two numbers of the review *Qué*, in 1928 and 1930.¹⁰ As well as poems and texts declaring firstly limitless freedom, followed by the use of psychoanalysis for self-knowledge, the review had articles on Charlie Chaplin and Harry Langdon—a taste shared by other avant-garde reviews such as the catalan *L'Amic de les arts*, which may well have been an important conduit between Spain and South America. *Qué* was austere in appearance, with no illustrations and a hard, clean typeface with the name on its cover; the next issue, it announced, would deal with 'El problema de la muerte', the problem of death. This was in tune with if not directly influenced by recent issues of *La Révolution surréaliste*, such as no. 7, June 1926, which had a succession of articles on death: Benjamin Péret's 'La dernière nuit du condamné à mort', and René Crevel's 'Le pont de la mort'.

But after the second issue of *Qué* there was no further evidence of group activity and Pellegrini fell silent until 1947. There seems to have been no connection between the *Qué* group and the painter Antonio Berni, who fraternised with the surrealists while in Paris in the 1920s, and in 1932 exhibited works from his surrealist period at the Amigos del Arte in Buenos Aires, before inventing his own collage-form of social realism. Pellegrini contacted César Moro and the Peruvian poet Emilio Westphalen after the war to try to establish a broad surrealist front in Latin America but received little encouragement. He translated one of the surrealists' chosen books, *Les chants de Maldoror* by Lautréamont (originally from Uruguay), and then, in 1952, he joined forces with the poet Enrique Molina to publish in Buenos Aires what was undoubtedly one of the high

¹⁰See Ruben Daniel Méndez Catiglionni, 'Aldo Pellegrini y el surrealismo en Argentina', *César Moro y el surrealismo en América Latina*, pp. 47–59.

points of surrealism in Latin America: *A partir de cero*. The front cover of the final issue in 1956 has a disturbingly effective photo-collage by Juan E. Fassio, playing on a Baudelaire quotation, 'Le bonheur vomitif'. Nonetheless, *A partir de cero* was, as Molina says, important but at the same time quite 'intimate', 'porque si bien en America hubo influencias surrealistas, no hubo verdaderos grupos de acción. Excepto en Chile: Mandragora si era mas coherente y trataba de hacer intervenciones, como la famosa anecdotia de Braulio Arenas, que rompió el discurso de Neruda en un teatro ...'¹¹ It was not linked to wider public and political action. The very title, 'starting from zero', expresses an often voiced concern within Latin America about the avant-gardes—that there was little continuity, little sense of an internal tradition of modernism, even of the 'art and anti-art' tensions, but rather repeated 'ruptures' and a tendency to respond to external initiatives in art and culture. Molina recognised that surrealism was 'not a literary school but a total conception of man and the universe'. Like César Moro, he believed that 'ningún poeta puede dejar de querer al surrealismo. De algun modo es la encarnación de un mito de la poesía, que perdura y le da un sentido muy especial a la tarea del poeta.'¹² But also like César Moro, by the 1950s he had ceased to believe that the initial commitment of surrealism to automatism, which had been reasserted during the surrealist exile in America, could be the sole key to poetry.

Automatism had been the basic principle in the definition of surrealism in Breton's *Manifesto* of 1924: 'Pure psychic automatism, by which we intend to express, whether verbally, in writing, or in any other way, the true functioning of thought. The dictation of thought in the absence of any control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic or moral considerations.'¹³ Surrealism had grown and flowered beyond this definition, whose strict application had been interpreted freely by artists like Max Ernst and André Masson, but had been relatively disappointing so far as texts were concerned. The greatest writings by the surrealists were not strictly automatic—Breton's *Nadja* (1928) and Louis Aragon's *Paris*

¹¹ '... because if it is true that there were surrealist influences in America, there were not really active groups. Except in Chile: Mandragora was more coherent and tried to make interventions, like the famous anecdote when Braulio Arenas interrupted Neruda's lecture in a theatre ...', Enrique Molina, *A Partir de Cero* (Entrevista, 1997), *Surrealismo: Poesia & liberdade* <www.triplov.com>.

¹² 'no poet can fail to love surrealism. It is, in any case, the incarnation of a myth of poetry, which endures and gives the poet a very special sense of his task.' Ibid.

¹³ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme* (Paris, 1924), p. 42 (author's translation).

Peasant (1926) were the works that had convinced Benjamin that surrealism was the source of the most powerful creative current of the time. Writing in 1929, he described them as a completely new genre of expression. The reassertion of automatism by Breton in the 1940s, with the admission that it might run ‘underground’, had partly been a defence against the wildfire success of Salvador Dalí’s ‘dream paintings’ which had given the public a simplistic view of surrealism. Despite the fact that Molina had a sophisticated understanding of surrealism and its wider significance, it is the specific failure of automatism that he focuses on: ‘Yo sigo creyendo en el surrealismo, pero no creo en la cosa formal . . . Se imita la escritura automática, la forma y las imágenes surreales, pero yo creo que el poema es un campo cerrado, neto, de tensiones y de lucidez. No es una cosa interminable, como sería la pretensión del automatismo . . . Como hipótesis es interesante, pero el inconsciente no es todo el hombre.’¹⁴ Molina is quite right in saying that automatism had not produced the literary crop it had promised, but in a sense to focus his critique on this point is a relatively mild form of rejection. It is in line with that of Moro, who became disillusioned with surrealism in the early 1940s, and earlier of the Mexican poet Villarutia,¹⁵ as well as poets of the first surrealist hour such as Robert Desnos, who came to believe that poetry could not come of unrestrained verbiage but needed shape, tension and clarity. Moro was associated in Mexico with the artist Wolfgang Paalen and contributed to his review, *Dyn*, which announced itself as moving on beyond surrealism. Moro wrote to Westphalen in 1944: ‘je garde une admiration définitive pour le surréalisme en ce qu’il a fait du positif dans le domaine poétique, mais il y a tout un côté dogmatique qui réellement m’emmerde . . . Je ne crois pas non plus que “Dyn” puisse remplacer le surréalisme . . . le temps est trop au cataclysme pour qu’on puisse voir clair.’¹⁶

The problem Molina faces here, speaking many years later, after surrealism had been pronounced dead many times, reflects a paradox at the heart of surrealism: on the one hand the movement was, constituted itself as, a collective; on the other, it promulgated a practice—automatism—

¹⁴‘I continue to believe in surrealism, but not in its formal side . . . Automatic writing, surrealist forms and images are imitated, but I believe that poetry is a closed arena . . . It is not an interminable thing, as automatism would like to believe . . . It is interesting as an hypothesis, but the unconscious is not the total of the human being.’ Molina, *A Partir de Cero*.

¹⁵See Kent Dickson, ‘César Moro and Xavier Villarutia: the politics of Eros’, Ph.D. thesis, University of California at Los Angeles, 2005.

¹⁶Moro, letter to Westphalen, 26 Nov. 1944, Westphalen Archive, W Box 1, f 8, Getty Research Institute.

which was in-turned on the individual psyche. What was automatism for? Was it the seedbed for wonderful poetic images? Or was it a means of exploring the hidden depths of the unconscious, the mystery of the individual 'I'. Both are suggested in the first *Manifesto*. Among the diverse and distinctive responses of surrealist groups in North and South America to the idea of automatism in the post-war years was an interest in the potential of music, especially improvisation in jazz.¹⁷

By the late 1920s, at the same time that *Qué* had its short-lived and largely unnoticed moment in Argentina, surrealism had already come to the notice of established journals which provided an important conduit within the continent for new ideas without having a specific affiliation. Some, like the Mexican *Los Contemporaneos*, adopted a broad cultural modernism (itself quite confrontational in a Mexican context); poems by the 'super-realista' group were published in 1929 (vol. 4) together with Rayographs from Man Ray's *Champs délicieux*, which had been published in Paris in 1922, and a still from his film *Etoile de mer*. The following year recent paintings by Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró were reproduced, demonstrating the close contacts with contemporary art in Spain and Catalunya as well as Paris, but there was no special recognition of the movement, as the stance of the journal was to present a broad anthology of 'modern movements'.

The Peruvian review *Amauta*, founded in 1926 by José Carlos Mariátegui, had a very different relationship with surrealism, with which it was in contact as part of a broad network of leftist intellectuals and artists. Mariátegui also founded the Peruvian Socialist Party, for which he took as model not the USSR but the Andean commune, or *ayllu*, based on pre-Conquest social and economic structures. Poems and articles by surrealists were published: a poem by César Moro, in Paris and about to join the movement (no. 14, April 1928), and Xavier Abril's 'Poema surrealista' (no. 18, 1928). The texts and interviews translated for *Amauta*, including Aragon's 'El proletariado del espíritu' and a questionnaire 'Existe una literatura proletaria?' in which Breton was a respondent, reflect the recent adherence of leading surrealists to the communist party. *Amauta* welcomed the connection between *La Révolution surréaliste* and the communist

¹⁷ Westphalen in Lima as well as the Chicago group were keen on the link between surrealism and jazz. The Chilean poet Jorge Cáceres founded the Club de Jazz de Chile. See Franklin Rosemont, 'Black Music and the surrealist revolution', *Arsenal*, 3 (Chicago, Spring 1976), p. 17. This is a topic that needs further investigation; there might for instance be an interesting connection with the close friendships between the Latin American and the Belgian surrealists. The latter, unlike the Paris group, liked music.

review *Clarté*, hoping for a merger in a new review to be called *La Guerre civile*, as announced in *La Révolution surréaliste* (no. 6, March 1926). Like the surrealists, Mariátegui encouraged debate about the ways Marxism should be understood and interpreted in the cultural and literary spheres. Surrealism was a controversial subject in *Amauta*, with doubts expressed about Breton's homage to Jacques Vaché (who was described as a criminal and drug-addict), but Mariátegui saw surrealism not just as a symptom of the decadence of capitalist civilisation, evident in the atomisation and dissolution of its art, but as active rejection of bourgeois culture, constituting a necessary break with it. Mariátegui wrote in *Variedades* in 1930 of Breton's *Nadja* that it had 'superado al realismo mediante el descubrimiento del mundo de la locura y lo irracional, con lo que "*Nadja* prelude, tal vez, bajo este aspecto de procedimiento, una revolución de la novella"¹⁸. *Nadja* was, apparently, one of the very few avant-garde books in Mariátegui's private library, and Breton was one of the few contemporary figures to be honoured with a full-page portrait in *Amauta*. The publication of the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* in *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1929 seemed to Mariátegui to affirm the movement's commitment to Marxism, though difficulties with the PCF were already threatening the partnership as the surrealists refused to sacrifice their own poetic and visual experiments in the interests of political action. Mariátegui's articles on surrealism always expressed 'sympathy and hope', but his early death in 1930 brought to an end the relationship with the leading Latin American intellectual of his time.

It is possible that he would have retained greater sympathy for the movement during its intransigent refusal in the 1930s to give in to the Parti communiste français's (PCF) demands that it decide once and for all whether it put itself or the party first, and back the programme of socialist realism, as opposed to its own experiments with language and object, than César Vallejo. Vallejo, who visited the Soviet Union in 1928 and 1929, responded to the *Second Manifesto* and to the notorious attack on Breton, *Un cadavre*, by announcing the death of the movement. Their adherence to Marxism had been promising, he wrote in 'Autopsy on Surrealism', but in the end they remained wedded to anarchism, 'the most abstract, mystical, cerebral form of politics', and in 'perpetual breach with

¹⁸(... added the discovery of the worlds of madness and the irrational to realism, so that "*Nadja* is a prelude to a revolution in the novel") José Carlos Mariátegui quoted in Milagros Carazas, 'El discreto (des)encanto del surrealismo francés. Reacciones y posturas críticas del intelectual peruano (1924–1930)', in Westphalen, *César Moro y el surrealismo en América Latina*, p. 84.

the great Marxist directives'.¹⁹ 'Adherence to communism', he continued, 'had no reflection whatever in the sense or essential forms of their works.' (Indeed, this classic example of Marxist aesthetics, reflection theory, reveals the fundamental gap with surrealism.) Vallejo pinpoints Breton's claim in the *Second Manifesto* that surrealism's success lay in 'the crisis of consciousness' it had stirred up. This, Vallejo argues, following the party line, does not conform to Marxist doctrine. Moral and intellectual crises are chimaerae, promising revolution 'from above', whereas true revolution can only be made from below: 'there is only one revolution, the proletarian, and the workers will make this revolution with action. Not the intellectuals with their "crisis of consciousness".'

The three final reviews I shall introduce all have a clear, if not exclusive, affiliation with surrealism. The first is the only review in which Moro had an editorial role: *El Uso de la Palabra*, a single issue published in Lima, late in 1939. It was long-planned by its editors, the Peruvian poet Emilio Westphalen and Moro, the latter at long-distance, from Mexico, where he was resident from 1938 to 1948. It finally reached Moro in Mexico City just too late to coincide with the opening of the International Exhibition of Surrealism in Mexico City. Moro was passionately committed to surrealism and made strenuous efforts, following his return from Paris in 1933, to animate it in Latin America, but *El Uso de la Palabra* was a disappointment. For one thing, by mischance the title was identical with that of a review that appeared at almost the same time, in Paris—*L'usage de la parole*. Moro wrote to Westphalen that they would have to change the title for any future issues: although they thought of it first—the title was advertised in the Paris journal *Minotaure* in 1936—they would be accused of plagiarism again.²⁰ Moreover, Moro did not wish to be associated with contributors to *L'usage de la parole*, surrealist dissidents who were 'en froid avec Breton'. More seriously, the review itself did not match Moro's expectations. Being in Mexico, he had been unable to oversee the layout, which he found awkward and inelegant, the typography boring and the photographs that he had chosen and sent with great care and some satisfaction at their subversive character badly reproduced. He had commissioned his friend Eva Sulzer to photograph a nude sculpture: 'a very lovely and obscene statue in the main gardens of the Avenida Juárez'.²¹

¹⁹ César Vallejo, 'Autopsy on surrealism', in Jack Hirschman (ed.), *Art on the Line* (New Haven, CT, 2002). Originally published as 'Autopsia del surrealismo', *Varietades*, 1151 (26 March 1930).

²⁰ César Moro letter to Westphalen, 1 March 1940, Westphalen archive, W Box 1 GRI.

²¹ Moro letter to Westphalen, 16 Oct. 1939, W Box 1 f 4, Getty Research Institute.

This and two photographs of Indian women by Lola and Manuel Alvarez Bravo were clearly intended to signify in their own right, rather than mere illustrations; despite Moro's disappointment they retain something of the punch of the illustrations in *La Révolution surréaliste*.

The main thrust of *El Uso de la Palabra* was an attack on contemporary Peruvian art, poetry and culture. The two photographs of Indian women, by Lola Alvarez Bravo and her then husband Manuel Alvarez Bravo, are ripostes against the indigenist painting that Moro describes in his text 'About painting in Peru' as odious and spreading like a virulent plague. He attacks the fashion for images of the 'Indian' (the term then common) 'which the ruling class accepts in its houses of appallingly bad taste, as long as they come framed and without the peculiar smell of wool which, according to this class, characterises the Indians. They really prefer the smell of the little crucifixes . . . These paintings serve Aryan fat cats as proof of the supposed inferiority of the races of colour.' Anyone who 'dares to look at the world with eyes that are not those of a brave indigenist painter or of a folkloric writer is immediately treated as foreign-loving, frenchified and bitter enemy of the Indian, of this fabulous cardboard myth that gives them a living'.²² Such picturesque images are examples of the real cruelty with which the great misery of the indigenous peoples, their complete ostracism and exploitation, is traduced on canvas or on the pottery knickknacks sold to tourists. Like Mariátegui in *Amauta*, though with less faith in social and political reform, Moro contrasts the picturesque with the actuality of the Indian 'who works tirelessly in implacable climates with a pathetic handful of maize for food, [or] drowns in the refuge of cocaine and alcohol'. The fashion for indigenism is, moreover, paired with ignorance of history; the indigenist painters and their collectors are conscious only of the Inca period and know nothing of the ancient and highly refined coastal civilisations, preferring if anything 'coastal primitivism' such as processions of 'Our Lord of the Miracles'.

The promised second issue of *El Uso de la Palabra* never materialised, but after the war Westphalen edited a new journal, *Las Moradas*, to which Moro frequently sent contributions from Mexico, including a translation of Leonora Carrington's *Abajo* (En Bas, Down Below), an account of her escape from France in 1940 and incarceration in a lunatic asylum (no. 5, July 1948).

²² César Moro, 'A propósito de la pintura en el Peru', *El Uso de la Palabra* (Lima, Dec. 1939), 3, 7.

There was a surprising lack of coordination and collaboration between Moro and the group that launched the review *Mandragora* in Santiago de Chile in December 1938. The review, edited by the poets Braulio Arenas, Teofilo Cid and Enrique Gomez-Correa, initially affiliated itself with surrealism because this was still where ‘the most vital developments in poetry, philosophy and art’ were originating; its rubric was ‘Poetry, Philosophy, Painting, Science, Documents’. The first issue published reviews of Eluard’s latest book of poems, *Cours naturel*, and of Breton’s *L’amour fou* which ‘does no more than ratify us in our old, known positions. It unites us to the cosmic rhythm, revealing the precious land where the words poetry, revolution and love acquire a more captivating and true meaning.’ Gradually a split developed among the editors. By 1943 Gomez-Correa, in his article for the seventh and final issue of *Mandragora*, ‘Testimony of a black poet’, is more ambivalent towards surrealism: it was, he wrote, engaged in a process of recapitulation and, although it remained the best strategy, could no longer be the sole and sufficient goal for our thinking. Like Wolfgang Paalen in *Dyn*, the editors of *Mandragora* felt the need to go beyond surrealism while taking it as the necessary starting point. Braulio Arenas, however, in a letter to the New York surrealists published in *VVV* in 1943, affirmed his allegiance to international surrealism, complained bitterly of the hostility and incomprehension they met in Chile, announced the end of *Mandragora* and the forthcoming appearance of a new review.²³ Particular venom was reserved for the Chilean writer Vicente Huidobro, ‘el sembrador de escarcha’—sower of frost, who was interested only in solving purely aesthetic problems in a simplistic manner, who attacked surrealist automatism without understanding it and confused in the grossest fashion poetic activity, pure poetry and poetic concretion or crystallisation (the poem itself).

Mandragora contained some interesting visual material, notably the collages and photomontages from Jorge Cáceres’ book of poems *Monument to the Birds*. Cáceres sent copies to Benjamin Péret in Mexico, who responded with friendly critique, and a warning:

Everyone at some time has been more or less influenced by the works of his predecessors . . . In *Monument to the Birds*, I think the influence of Max Ernst is so invasive that it hides entirely Jorge Cáceres. This is serious. At any price, you must forget Max Ernst and the other surrealists in order to find yourself; otherwise you risk paraphrasing someone or other without the personality of Jorge Cáceres managing to detach itself. I think, too, that collage has become

²³ Braulio Arenas, ‘Letter from Chile’, *VVV*, nos. 2/3 (March 1943), 124.

very difficult to use as a means of expression unless its elements can be completely renewed. Those used by Max Ernst have become, obviously, unusable by anyone else. The best thing would be, in my opinion, to look for new automatic procedures. Surely there are some that no-one has thought of yet ...²⁴

The final review in this selective survey, *Tropiques*, is one of the most remarkable to be associated with surrealism, and one of the most important in the history of surrealism's international contacts. *Tropiques* first appeared in April 1941 in Vichy-controlled Martinique. In the same month Breton, Lam, Lévi-Strauss and Masson arrived as refugees on the Caribbean island. Breton, temporarily released from what was effectively a prisoner-of-war camp to visit Fort-de-France, picked up the first issue of a new review that to his astonishment referenced surrealism. Its voice 'said exactly what needed to be said ... Aimé Césaire was the name of the one speaking.'²⁵ This was the French language review *Tropiques*, edited by Aimé and Suzanne Césaire and René Menil. In this home-grown review the refugee surrealists, who quickly made contact with the editors, found not only independent references to their own poetic universe—Rimbaud and Lautréamont—but also a political voice that believed in poetry. Césaire's opening text was a passionate protest against a colonial power subservient to fascism and expressed horror at the cultural void of his country: 'A silent and sterile land. I am speaking about ours. And my hearing measures by the Caribbean sea the terrifying silence of man ... [but] we are the kind who refuse the shadow.' The surrealists in Paris had long campaigned against European colonialism, as in the 1931 exhibition 'The Truth about the Colonies', organised by Louis Aragon and André Thirion in association with the PCF. With *Tropiques* the surrealists encountered a movement of a new kind which championed the black population and cultures from within and which reciprocated the surrealists' admiration. 'Breton', Césaire said in a 1978 interview, 'brought us boldness; he cut short our uncertainties ... I would say that the meeting with Breton was a confirmation of the truth of what I had discovered by my own reflections.'²⁶ He had coined the term *négritude* in the review *L'étudiant noir* in 1934, while at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, and

²⁴ Benjamin Péret, letter to Cáceres, 15 Dec. 1942, Gomez-Correa Archive, Box 1, Getty Research Institute.

²⁵ André Breton, 'Martinique charmeuse de serpents: Un grand poète noir', *Tropiques*, no. 11 (May 1944), 119. See also Dawn Adès, 'Wifredo Lam and surrealism', in *Wifredo Lam in North America: the Making of an Exhibition* (Milwaukee, WI, 2008), pp. 37–47.

²⁶ 'Entretiens avec Aimé Césaire par Jacqueline Leiner', Introduction to the facsimile edition of *Tropiques* (Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 1978), p. V1.

remained its greatest exponent. Menil, however, became, 'one of its more trenchant critics'.²⁷ For Menil, it became a reductive political ideology based on an essentialist notion of identity that merely inverted black/white values. Wifredo Lam, whose famous painting *The Jungle* (1943) depicts personages from the Afro-Cuban religion *santería* as well as satirising the sentimental and sexualised depictions of blacks came to agree with Menil: 'The personages in my paintings are neither white nor black, they lack race ...'²⁸

Surrealist exhibitions in Latin America

Exhibitions, like reviews, played a major role in the internationalisation of surrealism. Reviews were the best site for the movement's dynamic and multidimensional activities, but the surrealists expected exhibitions, too, to be more than a collection of pictures hung on the wall. In Paris, the 1938 *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* was a complete, other-worldly environment, with pools and foliage in an underground cavern, confounding the visitor's sense of divisions between art and life, inside and outside, night and day. Few surrealist exhibitions outside Paris achieved this degree of inventive disorientation, but most nonetheless tried to go beyond the regular 'art exhibition'. Aside from one-person exhibitions by surrealist artists relatively few surrealist group exhibitions were organised within Latin America. Factors to take into account include the comparative paucity of exhibition spaces and of commercial art galleries through the 1930s and 1940s, and the conservative character of the national fine art academies. César Moro, again, sought to animate surrealism through exhibitions. He organised the first surrealist exhibition in Latin America, in Lima in May 1935, as well as the International Exhibition of Surrealism in Mexico City in 1940. The cover of the 1935 catalogue was included in the double page spread 'Surrealism around the World' in the Paris journal *Minotaure*, to demonstrate the global sweep of the movement.

The 1935 exhibition was restricted in scope, as Moro lacked the resources to put on a truly international show; it was titled 'Exposición de las obras de Jaime Dvor, César Moro, Waldo Parraguez, Gabriela

²⁷ Michael Richardson, 'Introduction', *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London, 1996), p. 8.

²⁸ Wifredo Lam, 'Mi pintura es un acto de descolonización', interview with Gerardo Mosquera, *Exploraciones en la plástica cubana* (Havana, 1983), p. 189.

Rivadeneira, Carlos Sotomayor and Maria Valencia'. The show announced as *Exposición surrealista* in Chile, 1941, similarly showed only the work of the Mandragora group immediately to hand: Jorge Cáceres and Braulio Arenas. Most of the works in the 1935 Lima exhibition were by Moro himself—paintings, drawings, and collages, some of whose titles read like automatic texts: 'L'oeil anthropophage au dessus de ciel cherche un oeil nu nez de platre un ciel nu né du platre . . .'²⁹ The pun on 'nu nez' and 'nu né' is characteristic of Moro's writing and relates to the curious system of generating images adopted by Raymond Roussel. Four of the other artists had exhibited a couple of years earlier in Santiago de Chile (Dvor, Parraguez, Rivadeneira and Valencia) and showed some of the same work in Lima. Interestingly, this work had been presented in a very different way in the 1933 exhibition. The Chilean poet and critic Vicente Huidobro supplied a celebratory preface, 'Una nueva constelación en el cielo de America'. Normally, he writes, he returns to America from Europe with a sinking heart and finds nothing but fields and mountains;³⁰ this time, in the four artists, he recognised true originality and works worthy of international success. Various as they are, he goes on, they share the use of poor materials, simple, overlooked things from which they conjure poetry. But there is no attempt to link this practice of collage/constructions and objects to surrealism. Moro, by contrast, in his 1935 catalogue surrounds his own and some of the same works as those celebrated by Huidobro with inflammatory dada and surrealist quotations, with a strong anti-art flavour, such as Picabia's 'Art is a pharmaceutical product for fools'. The preface, unsigned but almost certainly by Moro, is in the most violent surrealist vein of announcing the supercession of art. Far from nourishing the human spirit with their lyrical effects, as Huidobro claimed, these works were to sow disillusionment and bring an end to painting altogether: 'En el Peru, donde todo se cierra, donde todo adquiere, mas y mas, un color de iglesia al crepúsculo, color particularmente horripilante, tenemos nosotros la simple temeridad de querer cerrar definitivamente las posibilidades de éxito a todo joven que desee pintar; esperamos desacreditar en tal forma la pintura en América . . .'³¹ Not only do they intend to

²⁹Since his stay in Paris (1926–33) Moro wrote almost exclusively in French, perhaps to distance himself from Hispanic culture as well as to affirm his solidarity with the surrealists. French was, of course, the international language of the time.

³⁰*Exposición de Diciembre*, Huerfanos 920 (Santiago de Chile, 1933).

³¹'In Peru, where everything is closed in, where everything acquires, more or less, the colour of a church at dusk, a particularly horrific colour, we have the simple temerity to wish to close off definitively the possibilities of success for any young person who wishes to paint; we intend to

undermine painting, which Breton had once called a ‘lamentable expedient’, but they also express their disdain for good taste and for bourgeois art lovers, and their refusal to please: ‘Esta exposición muestra ... por la primera vez en el Peru, una colección sin elección de obras destinadas a provocar el desprecio y la colera de las gentes que despreciamos y que detestamos ...’³² The final text in the catalogue is an outspoken attack by Moro on Huidobro himself, a personal diatribe calling him an arriviste and plagiarist, which led to a high profile polemical exchange between the two.³³ Moro’s attack on Huidobro—who also came under fire from the Mandragora group—is a striking example of the desire both in dada and surrealism to distance themselves from what Aragon described as the ‘accredited avant-garde’. It was this, quite as much as the academic and conservative art world, that these more radical and subversive movements rejected. They wanted to bring an end to the idea of art as a spiritual alibi, remote from reality, at the same time as asserting the distinct character of their ideas, and wanted to avoid at all costs getting absorbed into a general notion of ‘modernism’. Huidobro, who had extensive contacts with the European avant-garde, collaborating, for example, with Hans Arp, represented exactly the kind of flaccid acceptance of all and every modern trend that they rejected.

The most important international surrealist exhibition in Latin America was also organised by Moro. Following his involvement in political protests against an increasingly fascist government in Peru, which was allied to Franco’s nationalist rebellion in Spain, Moro was obliged to leave the country and in 1938 settled in Mexico City.³⁴ Here he saw André Breton again on the latter’s five month visit, and became friends with local artists and poets, such as Villarutia, as well as the surrealist exiles—Wolfgang Paalen, Alice Rahon, Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and

discredit in this way painting in America ...’ After his return to Lima in 1933, Moro wrote *Los anteojos de azufre*, Sulphur Goggles, which was not published until 1958, after his death. Here Moro attacks the stultified, provincial art and poetry of Peru; the only poetry he finds worthy of the name is by the inmates of the mental asylum, the Hospital Larco Herrera, where he worked as librarian.

³² ‘This exhibition shows for the first time in Peru a collection, unselected, of works destined to provoke the scorn and anger of the people we scorn and hate ...’

³³ Huidobro responded in his little magazine *Vital* (June 1935) with a vicious article calling Moro among other things a ‘piojo homosexual’; in February 1936 Moro hit back with ‘Vicente Huidobro o el Obispo embotellado’ (the bottled bishop), calling him a cretin whose work was a brothel. See also Wilson, ‘The sole surrealist poet: César Moro (1903–1956)’.

³⁴ See Dickson, ‘César Moro and Xavier Villaruria’, for an account of Moro’s activities in Lima with CADRE, the Comité de Amigos de los Defensores de la Republica Española (1936).

Benjamin Péret. Despite the misery of his personal circumstances his commitment to promoting surrealism was undimmed. In 1940 he and Paalen, with the collaboration of Breton from a distance, organised the International Exhibition of Surrealism at the Galeria de Arte Mexicano—at the time the only commercial gallery in Mexico City. The exhibition was intended as the latest in the series of international surrealist exhibitions that had taken place previously in Prague, London, Tenerife and Japan, as well as Paris. Moro had to contend, however, with a very powerful local art world, as well as with the practical transport problems following the outbreak of the Second World War. These, as Paalen noted in the catalogue, prevented them from showing adequately the work of surrealist sculptors Arp, Giacometti and Moore, and deprived them of the sculptures of Picasso and Ernst altogether, as well as of surrealist and found objects. But the exhibition nonetheless continued the surrealist tradition by including non-Western objects—ancient Mexican art, dance masks from Guerrero and Guadalajara, ‘Arte Salvaje’ (masks from New Guinea)—and drawings by the insane. It also included a section of ‘Pintores de México’; the most famous Mexican artist, however, Diego Rivera, together with Frida Kahlo and the photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo, was included in the ‘surrealist artists’ section. Rivera had hosted Breton and Lamba during their visit to Mexico, and Kahlo had stayed with Breton in Paris in 1939. Moro was sceptical of Rivera’s affiliation to surrealism, as he wrote to Westphalen: ‘Nobody believes in his surrealism; it’s his thousandth attempt to re-make his reputation, which he really has no need to do, as in the United States he earns fabulous sums and is regarded as a matchless genius.’³⁵ There is a suggestion in Moro’s letter that Rivera had hoped through Breton to establish his reputation in France—several canvases had been reproduced in the special section on Mexico in *Minotaure*—but without success: ‘A Paris, cela n’a pas marché, malgré Minotaure; tu comprends les gens ont un instinct assez fin et connaissent la peinture. Il fallait mille circonstances pour que Breton soit tombé dans le piège qui lui tendait Rivera, lui si lucide a été roulé comme un enfant.’³⁶ Rivera and Kahlo, Moro confided, insisted on their paintings hanging in the most prominent places, as is confirmed from installation shots.

³⁵ Moro, letter to Westphalen, 28 Jan. 1940, Westphalen Archive, Box 1, GRI.

³⁶ Ibid. ‘In Paris, it didn’t work, in spite of *Minotaure*; you know, people there have a refined instinct and understand painting. There were a thousand reasons why Breton fell into the trap prepared for him by Rivera, though so lucid he was tumbled like a child.’

An incident over the catalogue is revealing of sensitivities in Mexico over political and religious issues. Moro was asked by the gallery to suppress ‘a paragraph on the Christian era, another on Aragon, another on intellectuals, and they don’t want me to call the Spanish Conquerors “Barbarians”’. He was convinced the request came from the grand old man of Mexican letters, Alfonso Reyes, although this proved incorrect and he never did discover who was behind it. The attack on Aragon, who had chosen to stay in the Communist Party rather than surrealism and remained a Stalinist, stayed in (he was a traitor who had fallen ‘to the lowest moral level of a provoker at the service of the darkness and confusion required to start docile masses on a new slaughter’), as did the reference to the ‘invasion of the Spanish barbarians and their followers of today’. But the paragraph on the Christian era was censored. Moro wrote it out in the catalogue he sent to Westphalen:

At this precise moment the Christian era ends. A great wind has been unleashed, at whose origin we see the moral, poignant support of Sigmund Freud, which has just dispersed for ever the props of Golgotha and death-loving ivy devours the crosses where birds would never live. Surrealist clairvoyance situated the end of the Christian Era in 1925; in 1939 we need to remember this.³⁷

Moro’s reference to ‘1925’ relates to the photograph on the cover of *La révolution surréaliste*, no. 3 (15 April 1925) which showed Christian statuary—a Pieta, angels, a pope, a saint—grouped haphazardly in a double exposure against an ordinary house, as if discarded and desacralised, with the title ‘1925: Fin de l’Ère Chrétienne’.

Surrealism’s unflagging battle against Christianity, and especially the Roman Catholic church, manifested for instance in the famous photograph in *La révolution surréaliste* of Benjamin Péret insulting a priest, in the display of ‘European fetishes’, including a statue of the Madonna and child, in the Anti-colonial exhibition in Paris of 1931, on the cover of the surrealist journal *Bief*, showing a nun with a gun (no. 1, November 1958), as well as in Moro’s censored text, touched a nerve in many places in Latin America. In Brazil, for example, ‘The polemic between Surrealism and Catholicism has been frequent in our culture.’³⁸

³⁷The copy of the catalogue with handwritten paragraph is in the Westphalen Archive, GRI.

³⁸Florianio Martins ‘Surrealismo & Brasil’ <www.triplov.com>.

Surrealism and *lo real maravilloso*

Of the many initiatives aiming to stamp a distinctive, unique cultural identity on Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century, the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier's '*lo real maravilloso*' has probably been the most influential. It has also had a disastrous effect on the understanding of surrealism in this context, as Carpentier's purpose was to distance surrealism from Latin America. The opposition he sets up between 'surrealist fantasy' and 'magic reality' is fictitious and misleading. Carpentier, who had been on the fringes of the surrealist movement in Paris in the late 1920s and contributed an article on Cuban music to Bataille's review *Documents*, announced his thesis in the 1949 prologue to his novel *Kingdom of this World*, one of the first of the so-called Magic Realist novels of Latin America. Carpentier draws a sharp distinction between what he presents as the surrealist marvellous, and the Latin American marvellous real. In surrealism, he claimed, '... the dream technicians became bureaucrats ... Poverty of the imagination, Unamuno said, is learning codes by heart. Today there are codes for the fantastic ...' Surrealism was no more than 'that old deceitful story of the fortuitous encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine on the dissecting table that led to ermine spoons, the snail in a rainy taxi, the lion's head on the pelvis of a widow, the surrealist exhibitions'.³⁹ In Latin America, by contrast, Carpentier argues, reality itself is marvellous: 'What is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvellous real?'⁴⁰ He claims to have had the revelation in Henri-Christoph's kingdom—Haiti, where a former cook became king. A 'marvellous reality' arises from 'an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality ... [a nature that is untamed, living myths and ancient superstitions] ... an amplification of the scale and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state'.⁴¹ Carpentier's invective against surrealism and apparent exaltation of an alternative 'marvellous' have had far-reaching, but quite paradoxical, consequences.

Firstly, it consolidated, especially in Latin America, the identification of surrealism with 'fantasy' and a fantastic divorced from the real world.

³⁹ Alejo Carpentier, 'On the Marvelous Real in America', in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (eds.), *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham, NC, 1995), p. 85.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

The construction put on the terms ‘fantastic’ and ‘marvellous’ needs to be examined. If one looks at Breton’s discussion of the marvellous and at the works he chooses to illustrate his ideas, they are in no sense the ‘manufactured’, ‘fake’ marvellous of Carpentier’s caricature. Nothing, in fact, as Maria Bernal has said, ‘goes against Breton’s definition of the marvellous’,⁴² except the idea that it is an exclusively Latin American phenomenon and only Americans can express it and also, crucially, the notion that the marvellous presupposes faith.

The term Magical Realism, which has supplanted Carpentier’s ‘lo real maravilloso’ in relation to the fiction that is the best-known twentieth-century cultural export of Latin America, was coined by Franz Roh in his 1925 book *Nach-Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus: Probleme des Neuesten Europäischen Malerei (Post Expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Most Recent European Painting)*, to define a quality common in post-war figurative paintings by such as de Chirico and Carra, as well as in Henri Rousseau. Carpentier was certainly aware of Roh’s book, which had been translated into Spanish, but denied its influence on him for a long time, saying that ‘What he called magical realism was simply painting where real forms are combined in a way that does not conform to daily reality . . .’⁴³ That is not how Roh saw this kind of painting. For him, they had clarity, simplicity and objectivity, but with an underlying intention of approaching the ultimate enigmas of existence. Apparently familiar objects were imbued with a quality of strangeness: nearer to Freud’s Uncanny than anything else.

Carpentier’s ideas have had a profound effect on the post-war reception and historiography of surrealism, not least in Mexico. The exhibition *Los surrealistas en México* brought to a head, in the context of the visual arts, the controversy that had been rumbling for a while. Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, in her essay ‘El Surrealismo y la fantasía mexicana’, for the exhibition catalogue *Los surrealistas en México* (1986), wrote ‘There is no doubt [Breton] was hypnotised by our country, but he did not understand that what he was postulating as surreality, among us functions in a different way, as real reality fertilised by a peculiar fantasy but not like unreal reality which is what he was after.’⁴⁴ Here again, the deliberate

⁴² Maria Clara Bernal, *Mas allá de lo real maravilloso: El surrealismo y el Caribe* (Bogotá, 2006); see also *Realismo Mágico: Fantástico e iperrealismo nell’arte e nella letteratura Latinoamericana, a cura di Mario Sartor* (Forum, Udine, 2005).

⁴³ Carpentier, ‘The Baroque and the Marvelous real’, in Zamora and Faris (eds.), *Magical Realism*, p. 102.

⁴⁴ Prampolini, ‘El surrealismo y la Fantasía Mexicana’, p. 19.

misconception that surrealism intended completely to override reality is drawn into a specious argument primarily intended to distance Frida Kahlo from surrealism: 'In México, Breton extended surrealism to pre-Hispanic production, to the popular, and dubbed "surrealist" probably the most realist of our painters, Frida Kahlo.'⁴⁵ This is now repeated in most accounts of Kahlo, underpinned by her own late statement: 'They thought I was a surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality.'⁴⁶ I question this, not from the desire to pigeonhole Kahlo again but to contrast it with the way she and others saw her painting in the period after Breton's visit and also restore to surrealism its fuller meaning. *Las Dos Fridas* was exhibited at the International Surrealist Exhibition in Mexico City and at the MoMA New York *20 Centuries of Mexican Art* in the same year, 1940. For the catalogue of the New York show, Kahlo's friend Covarrubias dubbed her 'suprarrealista' and wrote: 'Almost all Frida Kahlo's paintings are autobiographical, expressed in a dream language that is truly surrealist and motivated by the psychological states of the artist's mind.'⁴⁷ Covarrubias certainly wrote this with Kahlo's approval. Her own comment is entirely in line with surrealism: 'I never knew I was a surrealist until André Breton came to Mexico and told me I was. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint always whatever passes through my head, without any other consideration.'⁴⁸ The reference here to the definition of surrealism in the first manifesto is oblique but knowing. That she was unaware of surrealism before is neither here nor there. Surrealism was built on the recognition of like spirits from the past and present regardless of their awareness of the movement itself, and Kahlo was one of many artists—like the photographers Manuel and Lola Alvarez Bravo, whose work was recognised as cognate with surrealism: 'At this present point in the development of Mexican painting, which since the beginning of the 19th century has remained largely free from foreign influence and profoundly attached to its own resources, I was witnessing here, at the other end of the earth, a spontaneous outpouring of our own questioning spirit ...'⁴⁹ It was not for their 'unreal reality' that Kahlo's

⁴⁵ Prampolini, 'El surrealismo y la Fantasia Mexicana', p. 19.

⁴⁶ Frida Kahlo, Undated quotation in Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York, 1983), p. 266.

⁴⁷ Miguel Covarrubias, in *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* (New York, 1940), p. 160.

⁴⁸ Kahlo, undated quotation, Herrera, *Frida: a Biography of Frida Kahlo*, p. 254.

⁴⁹ André Breton 'Frida Kahlo de Rivera', in exhibition catalogue, *Méxique* (Paris 1939), repr. in Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* (Paris, 1965), English trans. by Simon Watson-Taylor, *Surrealism and Painting* (London, 1972), p. 144.

paintings and Bravo's photographs were so highly valued by the surrealists, but for a thoroughly grounded real resistant to pure fantasy, a real that included the psychic realities of dream, memory and the unconscious, the impulses of desire revealed in the imagination. The fact that Kahlo subsequently, in her diary, continued to experiment with automatic writing and drawing suggests that she found more resources in surrealism than she subsequently admitted openly.

Although Kahlo's paintings after 1938 betray an awareness of surrealism (*Las Dos Fridas* is a brilliant expression of uncanny doubling and a split self, and *What the Water told me*, reproduced by Breton in *Minotaure* in 1939, multiplies reveries and memories) her earlier works, such as the extraordinary *My Birth*, are no less convincingly surrealist. *My Birth* of 1932, like several of her works of this period, uses, as Diego Rivera wrote in his 1943 article which was intended to reclaim Kahlo for Mexican art, the *retablo*: 'In her *retablos*, Frida always paints her own life.'⁵⁰ The *retablo* is a traditional catholic offering, a tiny painted representation of a miracle owed to the intervention of a saint, Virgin or Christ. Kahlo's versions of the *retablos* nail precisely that ambiguous point where modernity and superstition clash, where the popular is harnessed to its opposite and survives. *My Birth* was painted just after Kahlo had a miscarriage, and her own mother had died. The Virgin of the Sorrows, at the head of the bed, was a precise memory of an object her devout mother cherished. It is not the magically hovering saint or virgin of the *retablos*. The empty scroll at the bottom of the painting is the most telling detail of all—in the traditional *retablo*, a text explains the circumstances of the miracle. Here there is no miracle—there are the deaths of the unborn baby and of her mother, embodied in her own birth. The directness of the image simply underlines a conundrum that cannot quite be put into words.

No doubt the surrealists, who had a horror of the catholic church, responded to the anticlerical sentiments of Kahlo's painting, while sharing an ambiguous appreciation of the visual treasures of the imagination that faith produced. This differs radically from Carpentier's incorporation of superstitious belief in his description of the Latin American marvellous real: 'The phenomenon of the marvellous presupposes faith', he wrote.⁵¹ In Magic Realist novels, faith is often the instrument for the shift

⁵⁰ Diego Rivera, 'Frida Kahlo y el arte mexicano', *Boletín del Seminario de Cultura Mexicana*, 1/2 (Oct. 1943), repr. in *Rivera Arte y Política* (Mexico, 1978), p. 246.

⁵¹ Carpentier, 'On the marvellous real in America', in Zamora and Faris (eds.), *Magical Realism*, p. 86.

into the fantastic, which is articulated as a longing for an imaginary unity. The ways that novels like Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) or Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1987) slide between dreams, daily realities and miracles, however, do have something in common with surrealism. There was 'a deep vein in Latin American culture, more apparent in literature than in the visual arts, that the surrealists recognised and claimed as kindred'.⁵²

Prampolini, to underline the distinction she is trying to draw between 'surreality' (secret fantasies, dreams of a purely personal world) and Mexican artists (whose 'fantasy' is rooted in their real and irrational world), contrasts the work of Kahlo with that of Remedios Varo, who escaped to Mexico in 1941 with her partner the poet Benjamin Péret and stayed there until her death in 1963: 'Al ver su mundo, donde se extiende la belleza maravillosa de que hablaba Breton, uno se pregunta? como es posible que una realidad enormemente poderosa y estrujante como la mexicana, no haya podido tocar una sola cuerda sensible del alma de esta artista? El programa surrealista que conformó su talento le impidió ver la realidad?'⁵³ This is 'the tone of the Moscow Trials', the surrealist writer José Pierre suggests in his critique of Prampolini and her insistence on the 'Mexican School' and on 'Mexican reality'.⁵⁴ He wonders at the odd situation in which someone who evidently hates surrealism is invited to write the introductory essay in the catalogue of the exhibition, *Los surrealistas en México* at the National Museum of Art. Vigorously defending surrealism from Prampolini's misunderstanding, based on Carpentier, he identifies two powerful forces within official Mexican culture that inevitably clash with surrealism: the overriding 'mexicanidad', and the linked emphasis on representing the 'reality that surrounds us'. Pierre sniffs here a sulphurous hint of 'Stalin's and Jdanov's so-called "socialist realism"', rather than Carpentier's 'marvellous real', suggesting that the Stalinist mural painter Siqueiros would have approved her argument. Siqueiros, unlike Rivera, was an unwavering member of the Party and opponent of surrealism. He

⁵² Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), p. 255.

⁵³ 'Looking at her world, where we see the marvellous beauty Breton spoke of, one asks oneself? How is it possible, that a reality as enormously powerful and striking as the Mexican, has not touched a single cord in the soul of this artist? The surrealist programme that formed her talent prevented her from seeing reality.' Prampolini, 'El surrealismo y la Fantasía Mexicana', p. 20.

⁵⁴ José Pierre, 'A few disjointed reflections on the encounter between México and Surrealism', *El Surrealismo entre Viejo y Nuevo Mundo* (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1989), p. 333.

accused Alvarez Bravo, whose photographs compose the cover of the 1940 International surrealist exhibition catalogue, of ‘the aesthetic crime of Bretonism’.

Prampolini’s comment betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of surrealism, which never tried to impose a programme on the artists, other than questioning a crude definition of reality. Surrealism could not be equated with any style, and the degree of ‘reality’ in the work of an artist was very variable. The surrealist belief in the interpenetration of dream and waking, the imagination and reality, exterior and interior, is expressed in Kahlo’s work as convincingly as in any surrealist artist’s work. Metaphors like that of the palette/heart, veins exposed and brushes dripping blood, capture the mental as much as the physical reality of her condition. What then should we make of the contrast Prampolini draws with Varo? Here the former surrealist Roger Caillois offers an interesting interpretation of Varo’s ‘fantasy’ in ‘Cases d’un echiquier’. Her world, Caillois writes, ‘est entièrement insolite, en tout point incompatible avec le monde familier, cependant il tient du monde réel les divers éléments qui le composent ... Ils n’obéissent plus aux mêmes lois ... Les corps les plus durs, la pierre ou les métaux, sont devenus solubles et perméables ou froissables ... cet univers est identifiable et impossible à la fois. On n’y trouve pas de monstres, de larves ou d’engins venus de lointaines planètes, Tout y est terrestre et connu, mais répondant à une autre économie et pourvu d’autres propriétés. En outre, ce monde déconcertant possède, et c’est sa force, une incontestable unité: il ne consiste pas en mille démentis hétéroclites, infligés au monde réel.’⁵⁵ Caillois makes an analogy with Bosch, whose world was based on a complete if strange theology and iconography, to be in turn eclipsed by others, equally recondite and esoteric. The point is that Varo, like Bosch, creates a complete if uncertain and unpredictable world, informed not just by alchemical ideas but also by Varo’s serious and precise understanding of physics, and delight in the appearance of new scientific models of the universe and its physical properties.⁵⁶ The fact that these change and will continue to change reveals not just the results of scientific experiment but the role of the human imagination in the construction of models of ‘reality’.

⁵⁵ Roger Caillois, ‘Cases d’un echiquier’, *Obliques* (Paris, 1977), p. 219.

⁵⁶ Alan Friedman, ‘The serenity of science’, *Remedios Varo: Catalogue raisonné* (Mexico, 2002), pp. 75–87.

Surrealism and Pre-Columbian America

When the surrealists redrew the map of the world in 1929 to express their own geosocial values, nations suffered a sea change; in America, only Mexico and Peru survive, together with Alaska, as the homes respectively of the Pre-Columbian civilisations of Mesoamerica—Maya, Aztec, etc, the Andean civilisations and those of the North West Coast. This view of America was reinforced when many of the surrealists were refugees in the United States during the war: a land ‘that denies myth’,⁵⁷ and turned to the indigenous present and the Pre-Columbian past. Their interest began in the 1920s; one of the earliest of the Paris surrealist exhibitions, in 1927, had paired the painter Yves Tanguy with ‘Objets d’Amérique’, and displayed a version of the great Aztec statue of Coatlicue. The collections of Breton and Eluard already included Mexican and North West Coast figures and objects by the late 1920s, and, once in America, Breton, Ernst and others amassed quantities of ‘First Nations’ art: Kachina dolls, Haida masks, Tlatilco figurines, even gigantic totem poles. But their interest extended well beyond art and artefacts, to myth, poetry and literature, which they helped to bring to wider appreciation. In Mexico, the surrealists were in contact with the major Americanist scholars like Alfonso Caso, the first person in the modern period to decipher the Mixtec-Toltec codices and whose article on the newly discovered ‘Codices of Azoyu’ was published by Wolfgang Paalen in his review *Dyn*.⁵⁸ The point I wish to make is that the surrealist interest was not limited to, say, the fantastic Aztec sculpture or animal masks, to the visibly marvellous but extended to the civilisations as a whole. The association with Claude Lévi-Strauss, who had travelled on the same boat as Breton to Martinique, and whose essays were published in *VVV*, is often discussed in connection with the surrealists’ growing interest in myth, but in his research as an anthropologist he avoided the peoples who had scripts and a literature.

Benjamin Péret played a significant role in extending the West’s knowledge of indigenous literatures. He was the first to publish a French translation of the Maya book *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, in 1955, and spent years gathering material for his *Anthologie des Mythes, Légendes et contes*

⁵⁷ Anais Nin quoted in Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*, p. 150. See also Fabrice Flahutez, *Nouveau monde et nouveau mythe: Mutations du surréalisme de l’exil américain à l’“Ecart absolu” (1941–1965)* (Paris, 2007)

⁵⁸ *Dyn*, 4–5, Amerindian Number (Mexico, Dec. 1943).

populaires d'Amérique.⁵⁹ He had started this in Brazil, and in Mexico set up an extensive network of contacts throughout the Americas to help him. Through Moro, he wrote to Westphalen explaining his project and asking for contacts in Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia and Paraguay: 'je voudrais de véritables legends incaïques, des légendes des indiens actuels de l'Amazonie et des myths precolombiens ... un recueil de légendes d'Amérique bien choisis pourrait être fort intéressant et montre comment la poésie et le sens du merveilleux sont innés chez l'homme. Je suis persuadé que si actuellement il (le sens du merveilleux) est réfugié chez quelques artistes et étouffé par la vie moderne chez la plus grande partie du peuple civilisés, il n'est néanmoins pas disparu, les constructions délirants des fous en témoignent. Il est simplement réprimé et il réapparaîtra un jour dans toute sa splendeur.'⁶⁰

Gunther Gerzso shared the surrealists' passion for the art and architecture of Pre-Columbian America. His work has been almost exclusively exhibited and commented upon in the context of Mexican twentieth-century art and within that as a pioneer of abstraction; *Risking the abstract: Mexican Modernism and the art of Gunther Gerzso* is the title of the largest exhibition so far dedicated to his work. Gerzso was born in Mexico in 1915, spent much of his youth in Switzerland, was a stage designer in Cleveland, Ohio, returning to Mexico frequently, and in 1941 finally settled there, working as set designer during the golden age of Mexican cinema, for the surrealist Luis Buñuel among others, and painting in his spare time. He finally dedicated himself to painting in 1962.

The polemics that split the Mexican art world, between the socialist realists like Siqueiros ('Abstraction? What trash!') and artists following modernist trends hardly touched him and he always denied his paintings were purely abstract: 'Today still, I am a surrealist ... what I do is a species of abstract surrealism.'⁶¹ Abstract surrealism was not the oxymoron it might seem: painters like the Chilean Roberto Matta had been forging from the spontaneous gestures of automatism and biomorphism canvases of breathtaking originality, cellular caves on a cosmic scale, with titles like *Psychological morphology*. Gerzso, though, had little interest in automatism. The grid-like structures of his paintings, as he acknowledged, relate

⁵⁹ Benjamin Péret, *Anthologie des myths, legends et contes populaires d'Amérique* (Paris, 1959). See also Fabienne Bradu, *Benjamin Péret y México* (Mexico, 1995).

⁶⁰ Benjamin Péret, letter to Westphalen, 18 April 1942, Westphalen archive, Box 3, GRI.

⁶¹ Gerzso, quoted in Diana C. Du Pont, 'Gerzso: pioneering the abstract in México', *Risking the Abstract: Mexican Modernism and the Art of Gunther Gerzso* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2003), p. 98.

to cubism: 'my work is a confluence of three things: Cubism, Surrealism and Pre-Columbian art and architecture'.⁶²

Gerzso was close to the group of surrealist exiles in Mexico City, Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Benjamin Péret, as well as to Wolfgang Paalen and the Mexican poet, critic and diplomat Octavio Paz. Early paintings, such as *El Descuartizado* (The Quartered) of 1944, were inspired by the French surrealist André Masson, and one notable canvas commemorates his friends transformed: Varo masked and surrounded by cats, Leonora a naked icon. From the mid-1950s, Gerzso's paintings develop an original pictorial language of overlapping planes, beautifully modulated surface that construct shallow spaces, behind which an unfathomable black is glimpsed. As Paz put it, Gerzso 'gave up figuration to explore non-figurative space. In this change Cardoza y Aragon saw a break with surrealism. I do not agree: Gerzso's work was no longer surrealistic, but surrealism was still his inspiration.'⁶³ Although without any obvious figuration, the paintings allude to architecture, to archaeological sites and their landscapes. It was the buildings of pre-conquest America that had the most profound impact on Gerzso's painting. He visited the old cities, like Labna and Chichen Itza, naming paintings after them, but also used/appreciated photographs like those of Martin Chambi. The special issue of Wolfgang Paalen's review *Dyn*, dedicated to Amer-Indian art, contained fine photographs of Inca architecture, including that of the famous twelve-sided stone in a wall at the Inca capital, Cuzco, whose extraordinary form and modulated surface echo in Gerzso's painting. It was not just the structures of these walls and buildings that fascinated Gerzso, but the tragic past and hidden present of indigenous America of which they are dumb witnesses. The first line of Péret's poem 'The Swirl of Dust', written in Mexico, captures this effect:

When stones slam their doors as a sign of despair ...

Cuauhtémoc Medina, in 'Gerzso and the Indo-American Gothic: from eccentric surrealism to parallel modernism', points to the violence and hauntings that 'stalk the fragments of Latin American art that deal with the indigenous and the modern at the same time', and identifies the

⁶²Gerzso, quoted in Diana C. Du Pont, 'Gerzso: pioneering the abstract in México', *Risking the Abstract: Mexican Modernism and the Art of Gunther Gerzso* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2003), p. 98.

⁶³Octavio Paz, 'Gerzso: the icy spark', in John Golding and Octavio Paz, *Gerzso* (Neuchâtel, 1983), quoted in Diana C. Du Pont, 'Gerzso: pioneering the abstract in México'.

role of surrealism in perceiving the continent in terms of layers of history and the uncanny return of an undead past.⁶⁴ Gerzso once said: ‘When you try to look into one of my paintings, you’ll always run into a wall that keeps you from going any further. It will stop you with the brilliance of its light, but at the back there’s a black plane: it’s fear.’⁶⁵ Fear of what? Fear of the dark, of ghosts, of the past, of the dead, or of a repressed, supposedly ‘archaic’ present that confronts modern Latin America at every turn. As Medina argues, the book that most brilliantly captures this fear, which Mexican intellectuals represented as a metaphysical threat, is *The Labyrinth of Solitude* by Gerzso’s close friend, Octavio Paz. The ambiguity at the heart of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* is between ‘we’, the modern Mexican seeking to forge a fully modern society, and ‘they’, peasants, ‘Indians’: ‘We . . . struggle with imaginary entities, with vestiges of the past or self-engendered phantasms. These vestiges and phantasms are real, at least to us . . . those ghosts are the vestiges of past realities. Their origins are in the Conquest, the Colonial period . . .’⁶⁶ The peasant—‘remote, somewhat archaic in his ways of dressing and speaking’ embodies for everyone but himself ‘the occult, the hidden . . . an ancient wisdom hiding among the folds of the land’.⁶⁷ Paz romanticises the bitter reality of an indigenous present incommensurable, he believes, with the former civilisations, those who built Uxmal, Sacsahuayman, etc. In his ‘Circulatory Poem (for general disorientation)’ Paz suggested parallels between surrealism and the overlaying of eras, the co-existence of pasts and presents, alien to the normal, given periodisations of history:

surrealism
 passed will pass through México
 magnetic mirror . . .
 far away in México
 not this one
 the other, ever buried ever living . . .⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Cuauhtemoc Medina, ‘Gerzso and the Indo-American Gothic: from eccentric surrealism to parallel modernism’, in *Risking the Abstract: Mexican Modernism and the Art of Gunther Gerzso*, p. 212.

⁶⁵ Gerzso to Rita Eder, in Eder *Gunther Gerzso: El Esplendor de la muralla* (México 1994), quoted in Medina, ‘Gerzso and the Indo-American Gothic’, p. 195. Gerzso was close to the German art historian and critic Paul Westheim, who emigrated to Mexico in 1941. Westheim had worked with Carl Einstein, whose book *Negerplastik* had analysed the aesthetic qualities of African art. Westheim characterised Aztec sculpture as ‘surrealist’.

⁶⁶ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950; New York, 1961 edn.), p. 72–3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶⁸ Octavio Paz, *The Collected Poems 1957–1987* (trans. and rev.) (Manchester, 1988), p. 399.

In his memoir of André Breton, Paz recalled a conversation in which he said to Breton that, to him, surrealism was the ‘sacred malady of our world . . .’; since it was a necessary negation in the West, it would remain alive as long as modern civilisation remained alive, whatever political systems and ideologies might prevail in the future. Breton answered that he doubted whether the world now dawning can be defined in terms of affirmation or negation: ‘we are entering a neutral zone, and the surrealist rebellion will be obliged to express itself in forms that are neither negation nor affirmation’.⁶⁹ The contemporary Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles echoes this, in the context of a comment on the dangers of political and cultural nationalism: ‘There is no possibility of collective survival if we stay with the notion of region or nation . . . this is a question of national identity, the most perverse of cultural projects. The contribution [of Brazil] would be to demonstrate the impossibility of surviving if we do not understand the earth as something unique. There is no way of creating a perfect project that is marked out by its opposite. There is no way of avoiding social, economic and political entropy.’⁷⁰

In the final part of my original lecture I looked at the work of Cildo Meireles, hoping to reignite debate about surrealism’s legacies in contemporary art which I believe have been seriously underplayed and are especially interesting in a Latin American context. Recently the legacies of Dada, Duchamp and surrealism have shown up in the most refreshing trends in the both literature and the visual arts in Latin America: art that is suspicious of political boundaries and the limits of specific mediums, that explores alternative cartographies (Guillermo Kuitca and Jorge Macchi, for instance); that engages in unclassifiable urban interventions that nod to surrealist wanderings in the city, such as Francis Alÿs; renewing the readymade, montage, chance encounters, found objects, revisiting the old surrealist strategies of black humour and disorientation to express contemporary states of unrootedness, displacement and alienation; an art which alternately seduces and estranges. This art without fixed frontiers is flourishing everywhere, but nowhere with greater variety and conviction than in Latin America.

⁶⁹Paz, ‘André Breton or the Quest of the Beginning’, *Alternating Current* (London, 1974), p. 54.

⁷⁰Cildo Meireles (1994), in Nuria Enguita, ‘Places for Digressions, an interview with Cildo Meireles’, *Cildo Meireles*, ed. Nuria Enguita and Vicente Todoli (IVAM, 1995), p. 166.