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HALLUCINATING CURLS AND A MAN-COFFIN. OCCULTIST TRACES IN CENTRAL EUROPEAN SURREALISM

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to analyse the influence of occultism on the development of the Central European avant-garde, especially the Surrealism of the '30s and '40s. On the one hand, occultists affirm a retreat from the tyranny of reason, which for many avant-garde artists embodies the pettiness of human existence, stifled by the forces of family and public duties. On the other hand, they are an inexhaustible source of props, actions and rituals. Both aspects are extremely important for both Czech Artificialists (Toyen and Štyrský) and Surrealists (Teige, Nezval); however, they gain particular importance in the theories and practice of Romanian Surrealists – Victor Brauner, Gherasim Luca and, above all, Gellu Naum. The space in which these transformed entities with a new status enter consciousness are the eponymous „dangerous territory" that André Breton wrote about, and which become a metaphor (but is it only a metaphor?) of the alliance of the proto-language and the proto-image.

KEYWORDS: Avant-garde; Surrealism; theory of the object, occultism; Surreality

First off, a reminder: in the founding *Manifesto of Surrealism* [1924], André Breton announces the concept of Surreality, a space on the border of sleep and wakefulness, expressed in the recontextualization of elements of reality, hitherto subject to the habits of logic, but now independent of the will of the rational subject. This break with predictability and automatism is defined as "[…] what the occultists call *dangerous territory*" (Breton 1972a: 40). The space is described precisely as „dangerous" because it could escape the laws of logic and everyday habits of the individual, and consequently threaten the domination of man. According to Breton, the subject, surrounded by objects, releases fear in himself, which at the level of everyday existence could be an obstacle, but in fact is priceless, because it restores hope to the "dark presence", "desired suddenness" or "lustful violence" (Breton 1972c: 285; Breton 1972a: 41) of images.

All these categories, referring together to the dark side of the personality, the powers of the unconscious and internal or external stimuli, point to the issue of miracles central to the Surrealists' reflections – taken from the writings of Sigmund Freud and from literature (Comte de Lautréamont to Edgar Allan Poe). However, the marvelous is understood here simultaneously very broadly and very narrowly. On the one hand, it refers to everything

that cannot be systematized and framed by any rules; on the other, it quite specifically examines the arcana of black magic, which consists of demonological, alchemical and esoteric threads ("Surrealism will usher you into death, which is a secret society"; see Breton 1972a: 32–35). Surrealists – some intuitively, others equipped with specialist knowledge, and even confronting it with practice – in anticipation of a revolution in the bourgeois here and now, reach for risky measures, but also offer attractive answers to the questions about the possibility of self-realization of the individual in a world ravaged by capitalism and deluded by civilizational progress.

Occultists are summoned here on purpose. They propose a retreat from the tyranny of reason, which for many avant-gardists – especially those under the sign of Dada and, above all, Surrealism – personifies the shallowness of human existence, stifled by the censoring and castrating forces of family and public obligations. They form a kind of secular faith, both highly ideological and undermining this ideology, which makes them patrons of an internal paradox of Surrealism, which could be described as the coexistence of *serio* and *buffo* elements in each segment of the Surrealist theory and practice. Hence, they are an inexhaustible source of props, actions and rituals – obviously highly symbolic, unclear to outside observers (and thus assuming a certain elite *modus operandi*), yet focused on revolutionizing the everyday life of every human being and anchored in this egalitarianism for good (for more specific analysis of the Breton's thought on the occult, see Bauduin 2014).

However, while the Parisian, or French (or more broadly: Western European) Surrealists wanted in the first place to weave occult threads into the main postulates of the movement and use this, as Hartmut Böhme would say, "unusual power of attraction" (Böhme 2014: 56), to enrich the general doctrine of the movement, the representatives of Central European Surrealism, especially Romanians and Czechs (due to the fresh memory of the astral theories initiated by the Zenithism's leader and guru Ljubomir Micić, Serbian Surrealists preferred to deal with more prosaic matter, but that is a completely different story; see Kocot, Siewior 2014: 240–249), in the 1930s and 1940s managed to develop the potential of the basic categories of Surrealism, including, in particular, the concept of the Surrealist object. The combination of occult themes and objects research produced extremely inspiring effects both in the programs of the local branches of the Surrealist International and, above all, in the works of Romanian and Czech writers, painters, photographers and filmmakers.

For the purpose of this article I would like to briefly address a few of them, making this selection emblematic for the whole phenomenon; a phenomenon that could also serve as a convenient starting point for further considerations focused around the interactions between Romanian, Czech (and, to some extent, Serbian) versions of Surrealism and French Surrealism itself (I write more about those complex but prolific relationships in two books: Kornhauser 2015: 90–175 and Kornhauser 2017a: 15–24). This special kind of interferences is observed in the explicit tension between (as I presented it, using Susan Stanford Friedman term, elsewhere; see Kornhauser, Siewior 2014: 9–15) parallax and parataxis, that is between the simultaneous need for being a part of the Western European decision-making center and a radical turn towards the originality and uniqueness of the avant-garde praxis. It's perhaps also worth noting that the Paris-based group turns much more explicitly to occult themes after the war (and indeed the Surrealists in exile in the

Americas such as Leonora Carrington are already exploring it during the war, at the same moment as the Bucharest group).

Naturally, the subsoil was prepared by "dark" traditions embedded in both – Czech and Romanian – cultures. Prague is rightly identified as the European center of occultism, from which golems and dybbuks evolved, man began to be stripped of Cartesian heritage and changed the rational foundation to irrational shakiness. We know these themes well from the works of Gustav Meyrink and Franz Kafka – after all, the interest in black magic in the avant-garde did not come out of nowhere but had decadent and modernist roots – but also such writers as Ladislav Klíma. Later, Prague's major auteurs combined elements of the grotesque and references to the magical practices of identity changed and the entry of demons into the bodies of innocent people ensued. Anyway, the entire tradition of post-war Czech Surrealism is based on this humorous-dreamlike dichotomy: visible early on in bizarre poems by Vratislav Effenberger, later, for example, in Peter Král's prose poems, and also observable in the activities of the periodical „Analogon". Likewise, we might recall the filmography of Jan Švankmajer, full of faustic and occult references, based on objects-fetishes-carriers of meanings (see Böhme 2014: 88), as in the *Conspirators of Pleasure* [1996], where it is not only about the director's predilection to recycle the conventions and technical details of stop-motion animation, but also about the conviction that objects transformed by humans into fetishes gain autonomy that is difficult to harness, with the aim of fulfilling their own desires on the unaware (or quite conscious, but helpless in the face of newly independent things) men.

Even the interwar Czech avant-garde, though nominally attached to constructivism and to the poetic faith in the harmony of life and art, at times betrayed inspirations and scopes of Karel Teige's early Poetist manifestos. Hence, in the later stage of the development of the Poetism, he was more often undermining the logic of rationality, and summing up the first stage of the Surrealist revolution in which he was vividly involved, he will talk about „flowing down and identifying with the world and humanity in a higher phase" (Teige 2014: 140), about "the true kingdom of freedom" (Teige 2014: 140) and the meanings of "below the surface of things" (Teige 2014: 151–152) as its ultimate ends. Anyway, already in Toyen's (born Marie Čermínová) paintings from the 1920s and 1930s, it is easy to see the influence of supernatural matter. It is enough to look at the canonical manifestos of Artificialism, the Czech avant-garde movement trying to drive a wedge between Constructivism and Surrealism. Its founders, Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen, emphasize that it is not actions on reality – even if transformed and re-contextualized – that determine the power of the image. When they say that "[…] artificialism comes with an inverted perspective. Leaving reality alone, it strives for *maximum imaginativeness*" (Štyrský, Toyen 2002: 589), they do not only mean departing from the patterns of Cubism (although they derive from its deconstructive foundations a tool for disassembling schematicisms in thinking about an object). They are interested in looking into the essence of the unconscious, though not in a Surrealist, more ideologically committed and collectively oriented style; it would rather be a series of private introspections leading one to believe that the inner images exude a mystical aura around them, provoking the symbol to work (Štyrský, Toyen 2002: 590).

The „abstract consciousness of reality" (Štyrský, Toyen 2002: 589) postulated here does not deny the existence of the external world, but refrains from cooperating with it

on the basis of rational control. This concept is led by self-replicating images – memories and internal models – the domain of which is "universal space that disrupts the system" (Štyrský, Toyen 2002: 590) that has grown in place of real spaces. This brings us very close to the "dangerous territory" and quasi-esoteric imagery straight from Breton's writings. This evolution can also be seen in Toyen's paintings, which readily use symbolic artifacts (inverted figures, distinguished objects "floating" in a deserted scenery, and finally collage-like entities with an unclear status, as in the famous *News from the Forest*, 1936), whose destiny is not clear, and as a result of a change in the context, see their functional features dispersed. These kinds of semiophores, to use Krzysztof Pomian's term (see Pomian 1990: 56), seem to fill the void, but at the same time are the guarantors of this void. The wild space of "dangerous territory" therefore appears as a trap with no way out. It is also possible to interpret many of Štyrsky's photographic series in a similar way, although in many of them the dark tones give way to macabre on the border of pornography and something like a Surrealist-gonzo-style reportage.

The most important discovery of Czech avant-garde artists, which forms the basis of the new world, is the conviction about the fluid – and conquered by magical powers – identity of the object. Indeterminacy is a remedy for the „beast of habit" (Breton 1972a: 22; Breton 1972b: 136–137) indicated by Breton, which is opposed by the practice of exploring the "dangerous territory", during which slumbering monsters are awaken. Vitězslav Nezval, a convert from Poetism, and his friends write about a vision of the future universe, in which "a wadding tailor's dummy will play a more violent scene in a love tragedy than an actor" (Nezval 2014: 123), and the table "sometimes takes in our eyes the properties of a bear, and sometimes the properties of billiards of cream soufflés (Nezval 2014: 124)". Meanwhile, Romanian avant-gardists saw the sources of the new nature of objects and the fall of the subject primarily in dreams, the „syphilis of the subconscious" (Bogza 2007: 714), as Geo Bogza, the major figure of the Bucharest avant-garde in the early 1930s, who made an significant effort to intercept some Surrealist threads in post-Integralist era, called them in his famous manifesto *The Rehabilitation of the Dream* [1931]. He portrays a vision of a dream as a reality that absorbs and reduces the subject in favor of transformed, animated objects, resulting from "(…) the feeling of a sudden penetration of the essence of the world when things lose their destiny" (Bogza 2007: 714). The metaphor of constant transformations and place changes competes with the passionate expression of bizarre states and phenomena: "the whole world is covered with jelly" (Bogza 2007: 714), the author concludes, using the famous metaphor from Victor Shklovsky's essays with the jelly through which the most unexpected beings try to break through, creating a scenery of the "dangerous territory".

The paradox of objects is therefore based on many contradictory elements: objects are objects, but also beings that are non-humans, and even people who are no longer subjectified – "man is embodied rain, while another is total hysteria with a hammer instead of a head" (Nezval 2014: 124); they are seemingly dead, but at the same time alive, only to be dead again in a moment; they are material beings and atmospheric phenomena, they are an inseparable component of universal dreams and plans. In the Czech Surrealists' manifestos from the late 1930s, this paradox of connecting the fate of people and objects takes apocalyptic dimensions. Jindřich Štyrský spins visions – not so much catastrophic as, in the first place, simply absurd – of new hybrid beings: "There

will be a man-letter, a bitten bone, a dot, a scrap, an altar, a ball, a staircase, a hook, a stuffing, a man-coffin, a pipe, a string, a pebble, luggage, a lump of fog and a man-sediment" (Štyrský 2014: 163). Naturally, on the one hand, Štyrský fulfills his surreal mission of connecting the reality of the outside world with the space of dreams and the recesses of the unconscious, but, on the other, he adds a pinch of poetic images to these classic avant-garde deliberations, splitting into subsequent phrases: "skins, feathered trees, shreds, creatures wilting in the side, stuck together with words, blown in the wind, full of ulcers, ice-fed, beings in outline, creatures empty, modeled from snow, raw meat and sand" (Štyrský 2014: 163).

What connects the artificialist belief in the power of quasi-magical actions on the private psyche of the subject is the radical symbolism of the object. All items have magical powers, becoming semiophores in the newly created space, for instance as in *The Surrealist* [1947], a painting by Romanian Surrealist Victor Brauner, who uses motifs taken from Kabbalah, tarot and black magic (holy grail, knife, fire, or the sign of infinity) to redefine the figure of the artist-experimenter. He is no longer a Constructivist bricoleur or a post-romantic bard but rather turns to magic. Wielding a wand, he tries to transfer the objects in front of him into the space of the supernatural, thus fulfilling his "last service" as a strong subject, and then scattering into nothingness. The demonic figure that accompanies him – merging the identity features of the subject and object – gives the impression of an emissary from the world of "dangerous territory". He guards the eternal fire under the athanor, the alchemical furnace in which the philosopher's stone is melted. The mysterious, dark-and-bright scenery in which this scene is set resembles some of René Magritte's canvases (otherwise similar to Toyen's "empty inside" figures), representing the border between reality and dream.

Faithfulness to occult themes as a dominant feature in Brauner's work will last over the years. Hieroglyphic figures of women-mothers, symbolizing the constant rush to revive the space around them, and hybrid, animal-human figures, depicted with emblems of another reality (crescents, stars and chalices), suggest the subcutaneous presence of secret powers in everyday practices. Brauner, interested in black magic already in the 1920s, will introduce Gherasim Luca and Gellu Naum into its world. Subsequently those two will become the major protagonists of Surrealism in Romania in the next decades. What is particularly important is that we are not talking about reproducing the pattern of Surrealism from Parisian cafés, but about an attempt to build a completely new theory based largely on the above-mentioned collage of references to the occult and reflection on the emancipation of the object. Of course, all this happens because of Breton's reflections from the initial *Manifesto of Surrealism* and the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* [1930], with particular emphasis on his essays from the 1930s, including, for example, *The Crisis of an Object* [1936] or *Surrealist Situation of the Object* [1935] that discusses the „latent states" (Breton 1972c: 260–261) of the object, its „abilities to transformation" (Breton 1972c: 260–261) and the vision of „the most ambiguous relationships" (Breton 1972c: 263) linking them.

The most significant development of these "objectual" categories in the works of Gellu Naum, poet, prose writer and translator, important member of the Romanian Surrealist Group (known also as "Infra-Noir"; see Yaari 2014) in the 1940s, can be seen in the theory of the "ephialtic object", developed on the pages of his essayist poetic

prose *Medium* [1945]. It is in *Medium* that Naum postulates „that the object should be stripped of its stupid uniforms" (Naum 1999: 102). The slogan of liberating the object reflects the emancipatory postulates enshrined in the Breton's *Crisis of the Object*. Such a manifestation of the hitherto latent life is to take place "on the reverse of reality" (Breton 1972a: 24), to recall the words of Breton, which Naum replaces with the phrase "the theory of the other side" (Naum 1999: 99). Supernatural space is, like the collection in Pomian's (see Pomian 1990) or Belknap's (see Belknap 2004: 1–35) theories, a place where various objects coming from different contexts meet. Heterogeneous objects gathered in one place acquire unexpected meanings. Naum uses the catalog formula to unify the statuses of all the elements of the Surreality: "Oh, wonderful automatons, wonderful robots, amazing mechanical toys, monkeys that jump, birds that move, terrifyingly huge bees, all with a single turn of a key" (Naum 1999: 105).

At the same time, *Medium* focuses on the process of complete elimination of the subject. The pattern of the domination of autonomous objects that take the place of humans according to the assumptions of "precise deformation" is repeated. „People have disappeared (…). Man does not live here, shadow lives here" (Naum 1999: 105). The Naumian Surreality is filled with phantoms, dreams, mannequins and "hallucinatory figures" (Naum 1999: 106) who "are more real, more alive" (Naum 1999: 106) than people. They resemble, in a way, the immobilized figures in the paintings of Paul Delvaux or Giorgio de Chirico, who conceal an „inner life" (see Breton 1972a: 23) within them. Another emancipated entity wandering among „dangerous territory" is the vampire, whose character is a common link in the theory of Naum and Gherasim Luca. Luca is, among others, the author of *The Passive Vampire* [1945], the work that is arguably essential for Romanian Surrealism (and much more frequently discussed work in exactly the same area), and deals centrally with occult themes within the framework of the object (I deliberately do not focus on Luca's oeuvre, because I have devoted some other texts to it, see in.e. Kornhauser 2017b). Certainly, however, he cannot be ignored, if we aim to present an entire perspective of the phenomenon. In *Medium*, the vampire character symbolizes the demonic aspect of objects and their desire to enter into mutual "bloodthirsty" interactions. Described as a „ready-made object" (Naum 1999: 106) it evokes associations with one of the types of surreal objects present in André Breton's writings, but in the first place it points to the occult sources of Naum's theory, connecting with the belief that animated objects are of demonic nature.

The "demonic" or "vampiric" nature of objects can be expressed in different ways. Naum gives the example of a knife, "(…) which, apart from cutting bread or steak as usual, tactlessly cuts off a piece of our finger" (Naum 1999: 106). And further, he lists other phenomena on the border of sleep and waking, such as even "(…) the hallucinatory durability of the object's aggression, the lustful nature of gloves, hats, chairs, glasses, vampirism of heels, stoves, cameras that suck images, vampiric lycanthropy of an animal-shaped piggy bank or simply a candlestick-owl-snake, lanterns that they suck the shadows from us quietly vampirically, (…) the brilliant play of houses that close their doors in front of us" (Naum 1999: 106). The animated and metamorphic dimension of objects that "enter into other objects" (Pop 1990: 154) is emphasized by the "demonicity" of the disturbing "ephialtic object". Naum describes "ephialtism" as "the interchangeable hermaphroditic demonicity of an object" (Naum 1999: 103), fusing together the esoteric

forms of incubus and succubus, "the malicious demons of nightmares" (Naum 1999: 106). Alistair Blyth reminds us of the alchemical and demonological aspects of Naum's writings in this context: what is significant, here we find a comparison of space to the full work of an athanor, there is also a metaphor of "dangerous territory to describe deserted and constantly transformed spaces" (Blyth 2007: 31).

We should emphasize that the operation based on the principle of "precise deformation", claimed by Naum as the clou of the process of transforming the objects' statuses and understood here in demonological terms, ends rapidly: human-animal, human-abstract or human-object hybrids appear, together with "vampires", „werewolves" and all kinds of other "ephialtic" objects. They function here as rudiments, the remains of a human figure taken over, "used" by other objects, but also as collages made of many heterogeneous objects (here we would place that "candlestick-owl-serpent"). Moreover, Naum presents its own typology of "ephialtic objects", coming up with a division according to the "level of aggressiveness" (Naum 1999: 102) of objects. "Restrained ephialtism" would include such "simple" objects as "a book that bites our fingers or stings our eyes, a window that looks at another window, a coffin, a closed button, etc." (Naum 1999: 102). Meanwhile, the "exuberant ephialtism" would characterize the above-mentioned lycanthropic entities, „resembling animals to a greater or lesser extent" (Naum 1999: 102) and losing none of their "demonic, vampiric and sexual" (Naum 1999: 102) powers. It can be easily seen that all "ephialtic" entities are animated or anthropomorphized and have a significant "metamorphic potential" (Blyth 2007: 32), understood as striving to interact with other objects and transforming Surreality. Naum describes ephialtism as "the hermaphroditic demonism of an object" (Naum 1999: 104) coalescing in one being the form of malicious demons.

The devouring process in Naum's work becomes the poetic carrier of the epistemic object theory. It takes the form of an endless orgy of transformations, the catalyst of which is lust. The covetous nature of the ephialtic objects has resulted in the appearance of new, "baffling, disturbing, mysterious images that transform the face of the universe" (Naum 1999: 105) in place of ordinary images. Ion Pop draws attention to the fact that unconscious desires are already revealed in the process of constructing an object that is subject to the action of an objective chance: "Gellu Naum observes with great interest the process of changing an object in an accidental collision with the power of desire. On the one hand, lust is constantly looking for matter to put on, and on the other hand, it is an object caught in a coincidence that searches for human desires" (Pop 1990: 165). Referring to Breton's typology of surreal objects, Alistair Blyth aptly compares man to a "found object" in a supernatural space: "In place of a static object governed by the consciousness of the perceiving subject, there appears a liberated, active object that devours the observer. In this way, man becomes a surreal object found in the dark, inorganic world of demonically animated objects that set out to feed" (Blyth 2007: 33). Consequently, in Naum's poems objects cease to be intermediaries or carriers of human desires; they become disposers of their own desires.

Finally, let's go back to the Breton's "dangerous territory" and black magic in everyday life. In the famous essay *The World We Live In*, initiating the activity of Skupina 42 [Group '42], Jindřich Chalupecký suggests a very intriguing procedure to equate the total ordinariness of human existence with the mysterious sphere of

the unconscious. Only in such a symbiosis, argues Chalupecký, can proper creative work take place. To live means to "restore a man to mystery, to chaos" (Chalupecký 2014: 173) and to surrender himself to things that are "wayward, hard and evil" (Chalupecký 2014: 173), but by functioning in a magical and mythical context they can revive the human imagination. Once again, a revolution leading to irrationality takes place here, in which the leading role is played by objects that change their materiality into the potentiality of demonic beings – unpredictable and contradicting the Bretonian "beast of habit". Geo Bogza also wrote in a similar style, announcing the "boiling of unforeseen things" (Bogza 2007: 715) in a chaotic cosmos, as did Romanian Surrealists in many manifestos – for example in the collective *Night Sand* [1945] where we can find a description of the ritual of "understanding through not understanding". Thanks to it, a group of "superautomatic objects", including "completely unknown, hallucinating curls" (Luca, Naum, Păun, Teodorescu, Trost 2014: 568), is brought to life, but also has its own body as a portal to another, analogous to ours, but existing in the unconscious, space.

All these examples clearly relate to the foundations of the surreal doctrine, reduced in the essay by Gherasim Luca and Trost to the table "accept / reject". The leading positions among accepted terms include "discoveries resulting from insanity" (Luca, Trost 2014: 521), somnambulism, the real functioning of thoughts, black magic and mania. No wonder, since mediumism – in both Czech and Romanian versions – is to be the main form of contact with the Surreality. Central European Surrealists have developed such a technique of dealing with the deposits of rationalism, which in the act of rejecting everything related to bourgeois boredom and predictability gives priority to chaotic matter and tries to penetrate the proto-language and proto-image, until the discovery of a completely cleansed space and time. And, as Štyrsky writes: "[…] it will be an era of slow mixing of air, water, earth and fire, an era of that dream synthesis of plastic and lyrical beauty. Animals will freely interbreed with each other, without the supervision of biologists, new unicorns, beetles-mammals, mythical rams and creatures composed of swords, needles and daggers will be created" (Štyrsky 2014: 163).

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