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“An Amusing Lack of Logic”

Surrealism and Popular Entertainment

Keith L. Eggener

During the latter half of the 1930s, Surrealism spilled out onto the American scene like fluid from a Meret Oppenheim’s fur-lined cup. In 1936, more than fifty thousand people attended the Museum of Modern Art’s “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” exhibition in New York (fig. 1). The show then moved on to Philadelphia, Boston, Milwaukee, San Francisco, and other cities. Soon socialites were dancing lobster quadrilles at Surrealist costume balls and shopping through the pages of *Vogue* and at Bonwit Teller’s for Schiaparelli shoe-shaped hats. A broader audience, meanwhile, encountered reams of print in popular magazines like *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, and the *American Weekly* detailing the movement’s players and plots. In 1939, thousands of visitors to the New York World’s Fair paraded through Salvador Dali’s “Dream of Venus” pavilion to watch scantily clad mermaids—“liquid ladies,” the artist called them—frolic and gasp for air in a vast aquarium, replete with cow, piano, and typewriters, all made of rubber. Advertisers, too, deeply moved by Surrealism’s lure, were soon invoking its themes—dreams, desire, domination—to pitch such mundane items as cars and cardboard boxes (fig. 2). Even as the “Dada, Surrealism” show was still on MoMA’s walls, M. F. Agha, art director

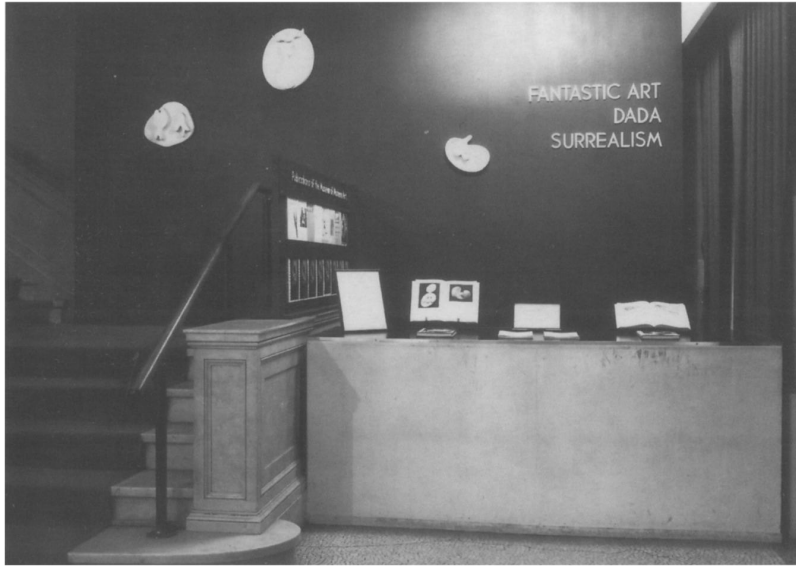
for Conde Nast Publications, spoke to a luncheon gathering of the Advertising and Marketing Forum of New York about the practical uses to be made with the new art form:

It can be easily understood if we remember that surrealism deals primarily in the basic appeals so dear to the advertiser’s heart. It capitalizes fear, disgust, wonder, and uses the eye-catching, bewildering devices which we all know were the basis for many a sound advertising campaign.¹

While previous analyses of America’s initial encounters with Surrealism have considered the movement’s links to leftist politics and its fertilizing of the field for Abstract Expressionism,² little attention has been paid to the ways in which Surrealism was first presented to and received by American mass audiences or to how Surrealism came to be adopted by trendsetters in fashion and entertainment.³ Surrealism undeniably met its share of hostile critics. According to Jeffrey Wechsler, it “had terrible timing. In the early 1930s, as a foreign movement dealing with apparently irrelevant or slightly mad subjects, Surrealism was an irritation to those with growing perceptions of a national art with meaning and dignity.” Attacks were generally

Photographer unknown, Salvador Dali sketching Harpo Marx in Hollywood, ca. 1939





1 Installation view of the “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” exhibition, The Museum of Modern Art, 7 December 1936–7 January 1937

xenophobic and defensive, expressing alarm over the importation of foreign decadence into an innocent America, or they were blasé, casting Surrealism as a historical artifact that every modish person had already abandoned years before.⁴ Yet many embraced it eagerly. Whether designed to praise or bury Surrealism, America’s initial critical conceptualization of the movement bears further analysis.

One particular and recurring mode of American discourse in the 1930s played a critical role in Surrealism’s reception: drained of its political content and reconstituted as entertainment, Surrealism was frequently cast as the close cousin of cartoons and popular cinema. Indeed, the rhetorical commingling of Surrealism and mass market entertainment touched upon the careers of two of the period’s most noted artists: a “mouse man” and a “madman”—Walt Disney and Salvador Dali.

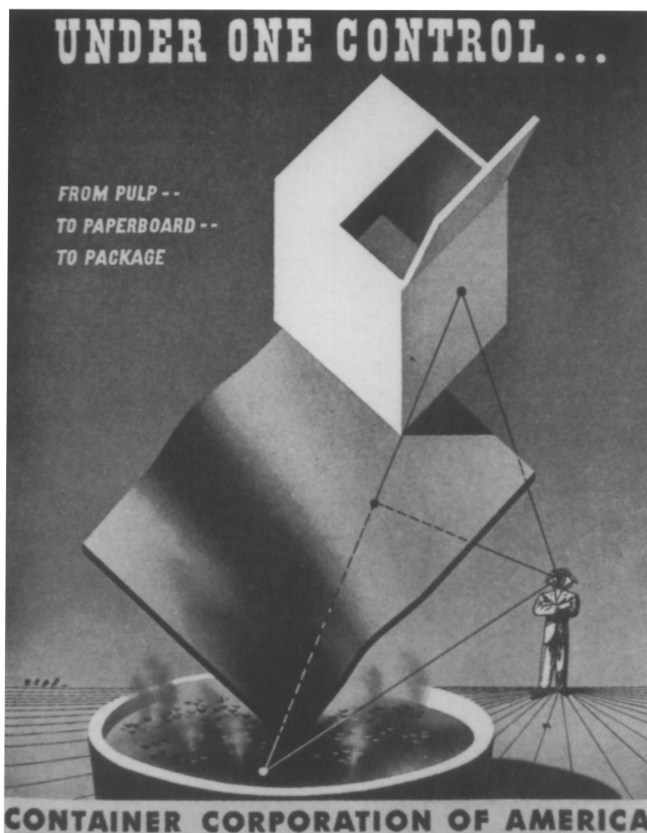
Surrealism’s Arrival

The earliest examples of genuine Surrealist art to be seen in America were prob-

ably those included in Katherine Dreier’s Société Anonyme exhibition of modern European and American art, which opened at the Brooklyn Museum on 18 November 1926. Soon Surrealist art could be seen in group and solo shows at galleries and museums across the United States; by 1936, Dali, Joan Miró, Yves Tanguy, André Masson, Pierre Roy, Giorgio De Chirico, Jean Arp, Max Ernst, Paul Klee, René Magritte, Man Ray, and Joseph Cornell had all had one-person shows. Group exhibitions of Surrealist art prior to MoMA’s included those at Hartford’s Wadsworth Atheneum (1931), the Julien Levy Gallery in New York (1932), the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art in Cambridge (1932), the Springfield Museum of Art in Connecticut (1936), and the Baltimore Museum of Art (1936).⁵

Most Americans who knew something about Surrealism, however, got their information from printed accounts. American newspapers and magazines began discussing Surrealism with increasing regularity as early as 1925, just one year after the publication of André Breton’s first *Manifesto of Surrealism*.⁶ By the mid-1930s articles on Surrealist art and artists could be found in a broad range of illustrated high-circulation periodicals, including *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek*.

American authors writing in these publications associated Surrealism almost exclusively with the illusionist branch of the movement, the branch represented by Dali. They noted little aesthetic or ideological difference between the Surrealism of the 1920s and that of the 1930s, and few mentioned the movement’s automatist or abstract painters apart from Miró, who, even so, was best known for figurative works like *The Farm* (1921–22, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) and *Dog Barking at the Moon* (1926, Philadelphia Museum of Art). The most widely discussed and highly praised



- 2 Surrealist-inspired advertisements for the American Container Corporation and Gunthers Furs. Published in Frank Caspers, "Surrealism in Overalls," *Scribner's* 104 (August 1938)

The Gunther Furs ad, designed by Paul Smith of Kenyon and Eckhardt, was the first Surrealist ad in America.

"Surrealist" artists in America before 1934 were Giorgio De Chirico and Pierre Roy—neither of them official members of the group, a fact scarcely acknowledged by the American press. After 1934, the movement's brightest star on America's shores was unquestionably Dali.

This literature is also striking for its neglect or ignorance of Surrealism's sources, aims, and thematic content. For most American authors, Surrealism did not mean revolution, either psychic or social. Little mention was made of the movement's agenda or political sympathies as described in Breton's manifestos of 1924 and 1929 and in his more overtly political statements of the mid-1930s.⁷ When Americans at this time spoke of Surrealism's attachment to Marx, they were usually talking about Groucho or Harpo. Museum directors and gallery

owners, people with an investment in the art, were producing much of the earliest American copy on Surrealism, and during the politically fractious 1930s they may have thought it economically prudent to cast the movement in relatively non-threatening terms. As New York gallery owner and art promoter Julien Levy later explained, Surrealism needed to be altered if it was to be welcomed and bought by American audiences. Recalling his 1932 exhibition, he wrote:

*If Breton had been there at that time there would no doubt have been a more orthodox representation. Manifesto heavy, it would have collapsed of its own rigidity. I wished to present a paraphrase which would offer Surrealism in the language of the new world rather than a translation in the rhetoric of the old.*⁸

At the time of the show, Levy provided the press with a typically sanitized characterization, calling Surrealism an art “belonging to the 27th dimension. The artists are trying to objectify the unconscious. It all seems to have started years ago with Dr. Freud.” Such vagaries may have contributed to the confusion of professional critics with fewer vested

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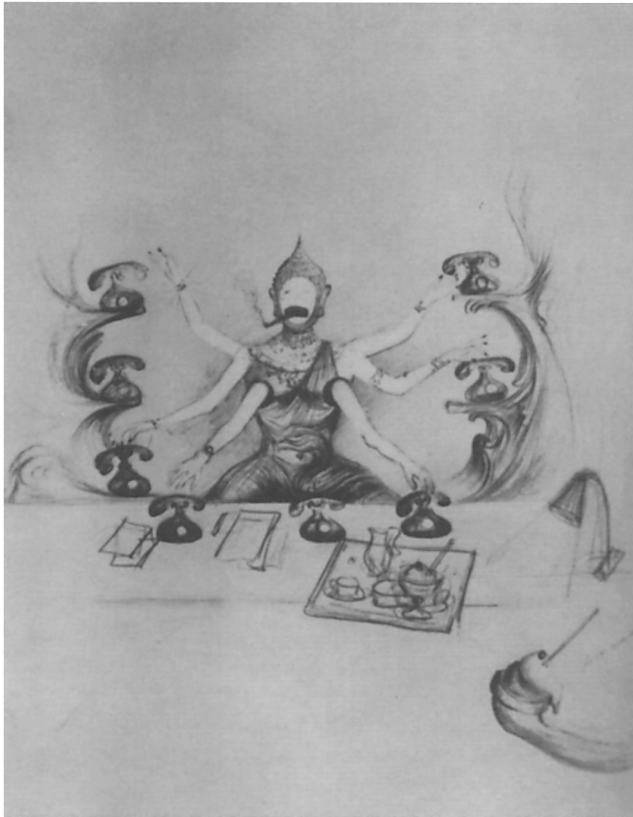
interests. Edward Alden Jewell of the *New York Times* lamented in 1933, “Those who understand surrealism are probably fewer than those who feel competent to explain Einstein.” Moreover, perhaps because few Surrealist writings were translated into English before 1936, few English-speaking critics knew or cared that this odd little band of francophone malcontents had set their sights on liberating human consciousness from reason and, as Breton put it in his 1924 manifesto, from “aesthetic or moral concern.”⁹

One intriguing exception to this general journalistic incomprehension lends insight into how it may have come about. On 2 July 1937, the *Commonweal* published a negative review of the MoMA exhibition. The author, Barry Byrne, began by noting Surrealism’s then-current modishness in the United States, astutely surmising that this was “in no way indicative of understanding or appreciation.” In Byrne’s estimation Surrealism was pessimistic and decadent, already passé in Europe and likely to be nothing more than “an amusing, if a misunderstood guest” here. As he saw it,

that misunderstanding is in no way an indictment of American life and taste; on the contrary I am persuaded that it is in the nature of a vindication. What this art has of laughter in it is the laughter of an old and cynical world; American laughter is neither old nor cynical. . . . The European preoccupation with material things and possessions has about it the clutching miserliness of age; this preoccupation in America is the child’s delight in a vast accumulation of toys. The revolutionary content of Surrealism, a content that is essentially bolshevik and seeks to cleanse by destroying, will not reach Americans because the gulf between the teacher and pupil prevents anything but a type of academic understanding. The propaganda, quite possibly indifferent in effectiveness in Europe, becomes amusingly inappropriate and unrelated in America.

Byrne concluded by suggesting that MoMA’s exhibition would elicit three types of reaction from the communities it visited: “a small measure of esthetic interest, such as that children possess when they are unhampered by accumulated prejudices”; the “thrill of sophistication” for an “anxious, cultured fringe” who delight in being “in the know”; and “that most hopeful group, fortunately a large one, who will find the whole matter a sort of art circus, and who curiously enough will have in their amusement a common ground with the artists themselves. These will laugh it on its way, in good American fashion . . . toward oblivion.”¹⁰

Byrne’s description of the third reaction is of particular interest. For Byrne and numerous other American analysts, Surrealism’s entertainment value far outweighed its political aims. While Surrealism represented the mental anguish of an old and dissolute Europe, Byrne’s America, pure and innocent as a child, had no part in Surrealism’s battles and was unlikely to understand or sympathize with them. His portrayal of Surrealism—its



- 3 Salvador Dalí, "Groucho Marx as the Shiva of Big Business" and "Harpo Marx, His Harp and Some Less Familiar Accessories." Portrait drawings, published in *Theatre Arts Monthly* 23 (October 1939)

art, politics, and anguish—as somehow laughable, something to watch but not to participate in, seems to associate it with the concurrent vogue for slapstick comedy, circus freak shows, and other popular entertainments that presented the pathetic or the unusual as amusement. It is not without significance that Dalí's "Dream of Venus" pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair was located on the midway beside such attractions as Morris Gest's "Little Miracle Town," home of the "World's Greatest Midget Artists."

A Game Anyone Could Play

While Surrealist politics were variously ignored, misunderstood, dismissed, or derided in the United States, Surrealism's aesthetic results were often received

favorably. The movement's arrival during the mid-1920s coincided with a growing critical aversion to Cubism and abstract art. Surrealism, at least that branch of it that interested American critics, appeared to revive subject matter that was more or less identifiable, and for this it was praised. As a writer for *Art News* proclaimed in 1936, "Whatever the faults of Surrealism, its quasi-romantic interest in subject matter and in new plastic forms have marked a cathartic turn away from the sterile formalism of Cubism." Discussing Julien Levy's 1934 Dalí exhibition, Henry McBride, art critic for the *New York Sun*, predicted that soon people would be "dashing . . . to the gallery, in order to feast their eyes upon, at last, the destruction of this cursed Cubism, which has occupied the public attention too long." Even



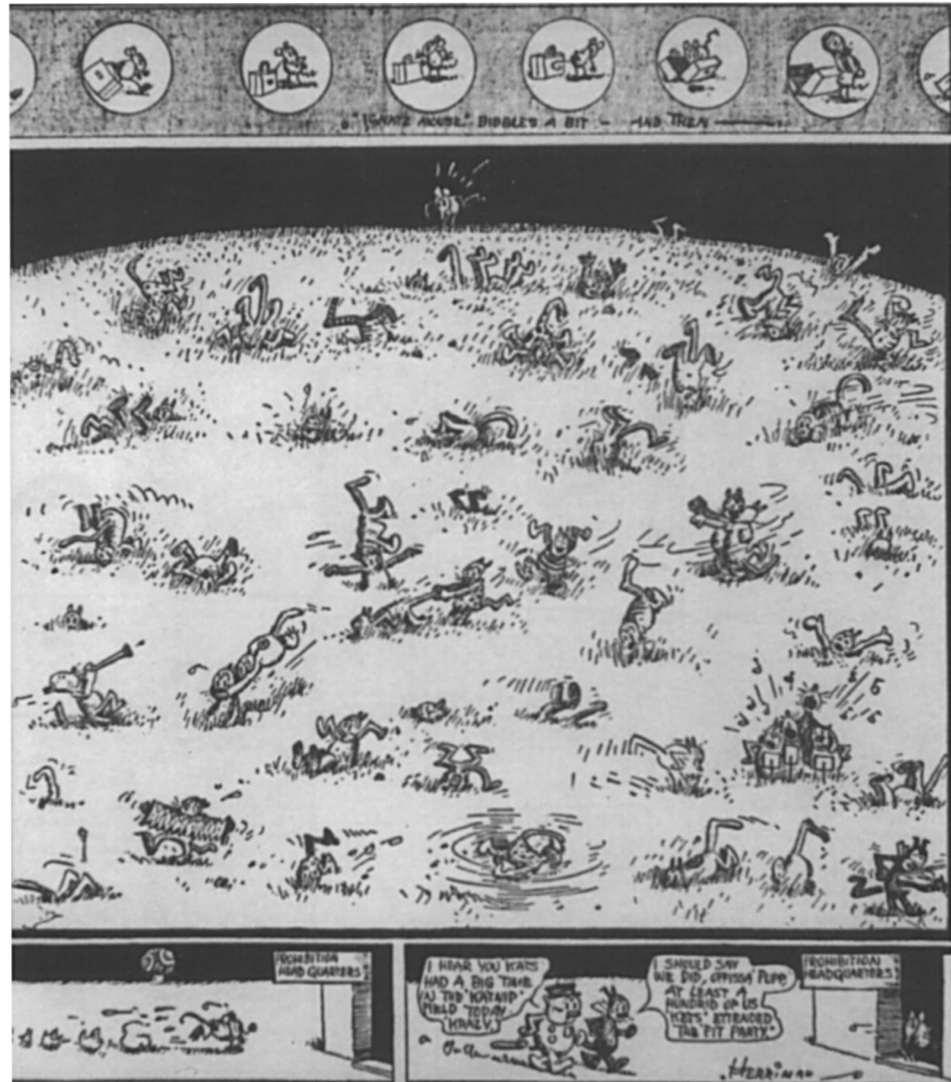
4 Joan Miró, *Carnival of Harlequin*, 1924–25. Oil on canvas, 66 x 926.2 cm (26 x 35 7/8 in.). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, Room of Contemporary Art Fund

Newsweek, whose reviewer took a dim view of the proceedings at MoMA, had to admit that no one came away from the 1936 show unaffected: “There was too much symbolism hitting below the belt for even the most out-and-out extrovert not to feel some quiver of the unconscious.”¹¹

Talk of the subconscious and of Freudian psychoanalysis was fashionable during the 1930s, and attempts to explain

Surrealism often began by linking it—rather superficially in most cases—to these ideas. In 1932 *Art Digest* described Surrealism as “the newest [*sic*] ‘ism’ in art, which, apparently is a project into aesthetics of Freudian psychology.” Writing for the *New Yorker*, Margaret Case Harriman explained that “a Surrealist is governed by the Freudian principle of licking the tar out of his subconscious by putting down loudly in writing,

5 George Herriman, *Krazy Kat* comic strip, *New York Journal*, 18 May 1919



painting, or ordinary speech all the things his subconscious mind tries to frighten him with in whispers.”¹²

Freudian-based explanations were sometimes used to make Surrealism seem less ominous, even familiar—a part of common, everyday experience. While Surrealism might be perplexing to critics like Jewell, it was just as often noted for the accessibility of its imagery and techniques. In 1936, Henry Luce’s conservative and decidedly nonthreatening new *Life* magazine assured its readers

that “Surrealism is no stranger than a normal person’s dream. . . . When you scribble idly on a telephone pad you are setting down your irrational subconscious.” In similar terms Levy declared, “Everyone shares the subconscious. Everyone can enjoy poetry and everyone can make it.” Such populist analyses tended to efface whatever menace or mystery Surrealism might have held for American audiences. Its making came to be represented as a game that anyone could play. In 1939, for example, *Life*

published several Daliesque poems and drawings submitted by its bemused readers. And for those who blushed as they doodled, McBride offered the following absolution: "Everything goes in psychoanalysis. It's all a dream. Do you see? It's not something you have done or will do, but, as far as I can make out, it's something you have repressed. Therefore it's altogether to your credit."¹³

Writers and museum officials in the 1930s repeatedly alluded to Surrealism's "amusing" and "escapist" elements. In 1931, at the opening of the country's first group show of Surrealist art, Wadsworth Atheneum director A. Everett Austin offered an astonishingly offhanded interpretive strategy:

We can take pleasure in what we have today and pride in knowing that we are in fashion. . . . These pictures are chic. They are entertaining. They are of the moment. We do not have to take them seriously to enjoy them. We need not . . . demand that they be important. Many of them are humorous and we can laugh at them. Some of them are sinister and terrifying, but so are the tabloids. It is much more satisfying aesthetically to be amused, to be frightened even, than to be bored by a pompous and empty art. . . . After all, the paintings of our present day must compete with the movie thriller and the scandal sheet.¹⁴

Coming at such an early date, Austin's collocation of Surrealism and cinema is clear and provocative. Paintings, like movies and tabloids, were now being directed at audiences seeking diversion from the distressing realities of economic depression. If Surrealism pushed the envelope, presenting imagery that was somehow more bizarre, disturbing, shocking, or amusing than earlier artwork, so did Hollywood. Film historian Robert Sklar notes that during the 1930s not even Hollywood was "depression-proof." In their fierce competition for a

share of the country's tight money, producers continually outdid one another, contriving ever more titillating and amazing concoctions. As Sklar puts it, "Movies called into question sexual propriety, social decorum and the institutions of law and order. . . . Like the politicians, they [film producers] recognized how much their audience longed to be released from its tension, fear and insecurity."¹⁵

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For many observers, Surrealist art suggested similar avenues of diversion. Jerome Klein, of the *New York Post*, categorized Surrealism as a "deliberate cult of nonsense and confusion . . . an effort not to understand objective reality but to escape it." James Thrall Soby, art critic and later director of MoMA's Department of Painting and Sculpture, discussed the paintings of Yves Tanguy in terms of their "humorous fantasy" and "amusing lack of logic." In a *New York Times* review of 1932, Jewell called Levy's Surrealist group show "one of the most entertaining exhibitions of the season . . . an hour of the most captivating diversion." Four years later he termed the MoMA "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" exhibition an "opulent circus . . . the most incredibly mad divertissement the town has ever seen." "The doors will probably

have to be closed at frequent intervals to prevent trampling,” he wrote. “The show is that marvelous. . . . Both Dada and Surrealism belong to a charming interlude of irrationality before our world went altogether mad.” Perhaps the most vivid statement along these lines comes from an article entitled “Weird Worlds,” which appeared in the *Commonweal* in April 1938. The author, Alex McGavick, wrote:

People who feel that modern art is ugly and unintelligible ought to regard it for the fantasy it contains. Strange viewpoints, weird forms, exotic subject-matter seem to be the order of the day in art, and these elements are fascinating to discover, and enjoy, for their own sake, apart from aesthetic considerations. . . . Looking at their pictures [those of modern artists] is like taking a trip to Mars, or visiting the zoo to look at the strange beasts, or reading Ripley. You don't know what queer thing is going to turn up next.¹⁶

America's Dream Factory

In light of such comments it seems inevitable that the “fantastic” products of Surrealism would be equated with the output of America's own dream factory. Links between Hollywood and Surrealism did run fast and loose. Surrealists were described as the Marx Brothers of the art world, while comedians like the Marx Brothers were hailed as “native” Surrealists, owing to their own “amusing lack of logic” (fig. 3). Paintings such as Miró's *Carnival of Harlequin* (fig. 4) were praised for their “perky, goofy” imagery, their fantastic humor and jaunty wit. Miró's figures were compared to Krazy Kat comic strips (fig. 5) and Mickey Mouse cartoons. Glenn Wessels, of the San Francisco *Argonaut*, described Max Ernst as one “who speaks from . . . the Mickey Mouse world . . . where almost anything is more than liable to happen,” while

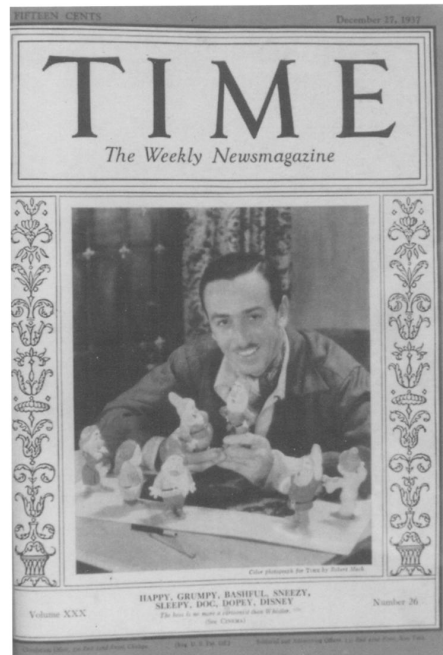
Matthew Josephson, of the *New Republic*, characterized Ernst as “at heart a great magician out of the variety theatre.” In the nationalistic rhetoric typical of the era, Josephson went on to say that Americans “have long been producing super-realist [i.e., Surrealist] art in the raw state. The European artists of the French capital have inspired themselves with our movies, our jazz comedians, our folk customs, have refined all this material and sent it back to us.”¹⁷ The 1936 MoMA exhibition furthered this sort of thinking by lumping together European Dada and Surrealism with work by such American “independents” as Rube Goldberg, James Thurber, and Walt Disney.¹⁸

In 1942, Robert D. Feild, a professor of art history trained and for a time employed at Harvard University, couched his analysis of the work of one prominent contemporary artist in the following terms:

Our ideas of good and evil are only relative. In that other world where all values are transformed beyond recognition, why should not the relationship between good and evil be changed out of all proportion? Deep in the subconscious there must be a stream of continuity, some mysterious power linking us with that source whence all ideas originate. . . . For a moment, then, let us surrender to the ultimately absurd. Pull down the barriers of sanity and let us indulge to the fullest in the realm of unreason. . . . The escape from reason allows one to create a world that at last has meaning. The intelligence is put to rout.¹⁹

Had this passage, with its suggestions of moral ambiguity, Freudian subconscious, and the subversion of reason, been a description of Surrealism, it would have been, at this date, among the more accurate reflections available in English of Breton's and Dali's own early public pronouncements on the subject.²⁰ In fact, it is taken from the book *The Art of Walt*

6 Robert Mack, portrait photograph of Walt Disney. Cover of *Time*, 27 December 1937



Disney, written with the assistance and approval of Disney Studios. It is an odd text. While Feild makes no direct mention of Surrealism, his terms are highly suggestive. It was one thing for writers independent of Disney to further the notion that his art was riddled with ambiguities, that it was like Surrealism in its “strange-making” of the world.²¹ It was quite another for Disney to endorse this view. Yet Disney himself described this aspect of his work in terms that were closely related to, if less ominous than, those used by Feild: “I do not make films primarily for children. Call the child innocence. The worst of us is not without innocence, although deeply buried it may be. In my work, I try to reach and speak to that innocence.”²²

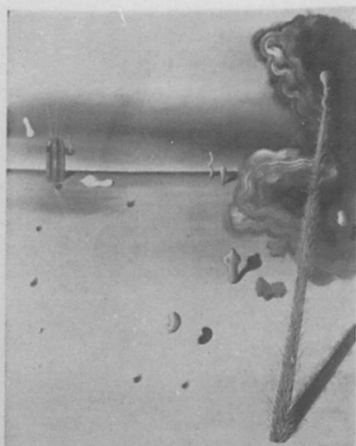
Disney’s status as a “high artist” was much discussed during the mid-1930s. On 27 December 1937, *Time*’s cover featured a photo of a smiling Disney, accompanied by the caption “The boss is no more a cartoonist than Whistler” (fig. 6). The previous year, Walt and Roy Disney sent four cartoon stills from their

new film *The Three Little Wolves* for inclusion in MoMA’s “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” exhibition (fig. 7). That Walt Disney, who even then was noted for his political conservatism, would allow his pigs and wolves to cavort with Magrittes and Massons suggests his own innocence regarding the Surrealists’ revolutionary aims and Communist alliances, his acceptance of their work as little more than “perky and goofy.” Strangely enough, none of his biographers makes mention of his participation in the show. Also noteworthy is the fact that, shortly after the MoMA show opened, the exhibition catalogue was amended with an erratum sheet giving credit for the Disney drawings to “Walt Disney Productions, Ltd.,” adding, “Mr. Disney wishes to take no personal credit for films which are the collective work of over 400 people.” This statement is peculiar because Disney, even under repeated protests from his employees, rarely gave on-screen credit to the artists who worked on his animated films.²³ The addendum suggests that he perhaps had second thoughts, prompting him to distance himself from his cartoon contributions to the exhibition once they had been submitted.

Dali the Entertainer

While a picture of the American reception of Surrealist art thus emerges as variously ill-informed and deliberately reconstructive, the most famous Surrealist in America proclaimed it was neither. In his 1942 autobiography, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali*, the artist actually praised the accuracy of American assessments of his work. He wrote that during the mid-1930s he had received translations of American reviews of his exhibitions and that these demonstrated

a comprehension a hundred times more objective and better informed of my

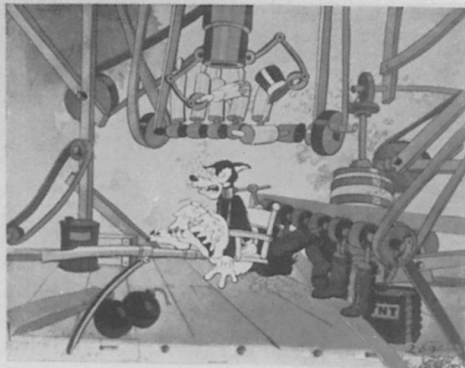


Mama, Papa Is Wounded: YVES TANGUY (1927)

exercise of reason and every aesthetic or moral pre-occupation being absent." The development of the movement was almost entirely in Paris, with the usual public demonstrations attendant to Gallie "isms." New York, after its first flair under the Sieglitz banner, has since contributed nothing to either movement.

"During the course of Surrealist development," writes Georges Hugnet, "outside all forms of idealism, outside all opiates of religion, the marvelous comes to light within reality. It comes to light in dreams, obsessions, pre-occupations, in sleep, fear, love, chance; in hallucinations, pretended disorders, follies, ghostly apparitions, escape mechanisms and evasions; . . . in the supernatural, the unusual; in empiricism, in super-reality." That

Wolf Packer: From the animated cartoon, Three Little Wolves, by WALT DISNEY



6



Nightmare: JOHANN HEINRICH FÜSSLI (1782)

is the source material for Surrealism, "relegated for so long to legends and children's fairy tales."

Most interesting art objects included in the display are the slick-surfaced surrealist paintings of the more recent periods, of O'Keeffe, Miro, Dalí, Tanguy, Fini, and Magritte, with each of the artists extremely well represented. Disney's *Big Bad Wolf* suffers from being stopped in his tracks, but withal he does well. Some unsung Vermonter is represented with a Sears-Roebuck catalogue dog-cared into considerable plastic significance. Rube Goldberg's gentle satire of the mechanistic and Thurber's warm sympathy for the psychopathic will do a great deal to stabilize the semi-circular canals after the rest of the show.

From the considerable body of Surrealist literature presented to the museum just prior to the opening of the exhibition by Walter Chrysler, Jr., there are a number of examples. Also listed in the catalogue are several motion pictures in the museum's film library, including René Clair's famous *Entr'acte*, Marcel Duchamp is represented, among other things, with an engaging box of sugar lumps entitled *Why not Sneeze?* Finally there is a series of drawings and collages done by persons imprisoned in hospital psychopathic wards.

It's the archology of disorder—the "screwy" museuminized—on view for a whole month. If you've misplaced anything around the house, trot into the Modern; chances are you'll find it there. The thread trick proves it.

Collage (Pasted Paper) from MAX ERNST'S book *Kindness Week, or the Seven Capital Elements*



The Art Digest

7 *Art Digest*, 15 December 1936, review of MoMA's "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" exhibition, showing works by Yves Tanguy, Henry Fuseli, Walt Disney, and Max Ernst

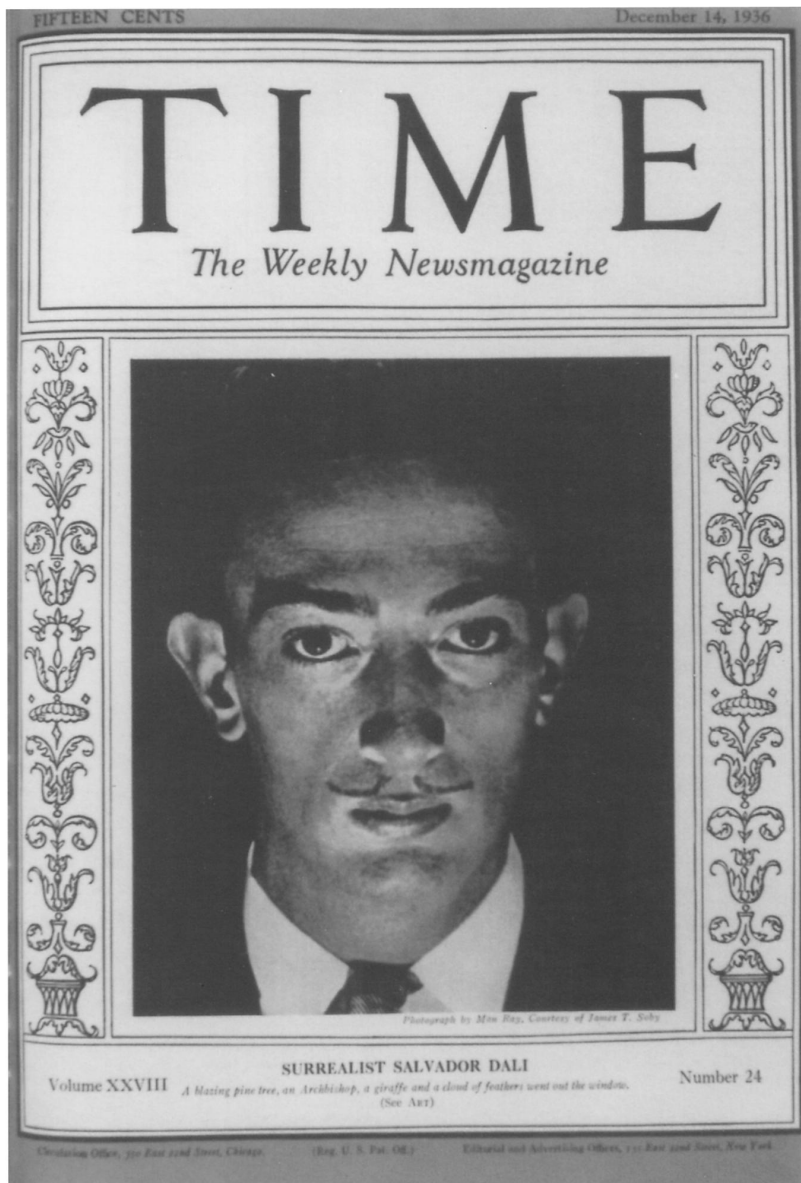
*intentions, and of the case which I constituted, than most of the commentaries on my work that had appeared in Europe. . . . America was different. . . . What with us had tragic undertones assumed at most an aspect of entertainment in America.*²⁴

While some saw fit to cast Disney the moviemaker as a native-born Surrealist, Dalí seems to have decided that the best

way to achieve fame and fortune in America was to cast himself as a sort of paranoiac-critical matinee idol, complete with "clipped cinemactor's moustache" (fig. 8). Ever mindful of the correlation between publicity and sales, Dalí appears to have understood the mechanics of movie stardom, and he adopted star qualities for his own self-promotional purposes. He later told of his growing obsession with American popular culture during the early 1930s—how he had listened endlessly to Cole Porter records and paged through back issues of the *New Yorker*, which he could not read, to soak in the images and advertisements and ready himself for his conquest of the American market. Like other Surrealists, Dalí loved American movies, and as soon as he and his wife Gala arrived in the United States, he began courting and painting Hollywood royalty. Indeed, he saw himself as one of them. "I salute you," he wrote, "all you forerunners of the irrational—Mack Sennett, Harry Langdon, and you too, unforgettable Buster Keaton, tragic and delirious like my rotten and mystic donkeys, desert roses of Spain!"²⁵

In 1934, the year of Dalí's first visit to the United States, *Art Digest* noted, "An artist whose life does not make good copy is hard to sell. The first requisite to artistic success today would seem to be a good press agent." Dalí—or "Avida Dollars," as Breton christened him upon ejecting him from the movement in 1941—had little need for assistance. In the words of a 1936 *Time* profile, Dalí possessed a skill for self-promotion that "should turn any circus press agent green with envy." "I love getting publicity," Dalí himself wrote, "and if I am lucky enough to have the reporters know who I am, I will give them some of my own bread to eat, just as Saint Francis did with his birds."²⁶

By 1937 *Art News* could report, "To most Americans Dalí represents surrealism in all its horror and fascination." The



8 Man Ray, portrait photograph of Salvador Dali. Cover of *Time*, 14 December 1936

press adored him, and writers often commented on his showmanship and dark, romantic good looks. His outrageous eccentricity made headlines, as when he was arrested for smashing a plate-glass window at Bonwit Teller's upon discovering that a display he had designed had been altered.²⁷ Dali seems to have realized, in a way that few other artists of the time did, that to maintain

public interest in America—and market share—the artist, like the actor, must appear larger than life, expansive in gesture. Like the film stars—Mae West or Errol Flynn, for example—Dali blurred the distinction between on-screen and off-screen existence. “The difference between a madman and me,” he explained in a much-quoted phrase, “is that I am not a madman.” Part of the trick, as Robert Hughes has pointed out, was to capitalize on the reigning public stereotypes of the artist—the courtier Diego Velázquez, the mad genius Vincent van Gogh—and convince the public that he was their heir.²⁸

Wildly inventive between 1928 and 1932, Dali's work became increasingly repetitious in the years that followed. Obsessive little crystalline visions of putrefaction, flaccidity, and coprophilia oozed from his brush like overripe, overheated Camembert cheese. His intriguingly prurient motifs, painted in a precise and much-admired illusionistic technique, were repeated, in fact, until they were unmistakably identifiable as his own, like trademarks. Dali's work after 1932 is often said to evince a loss of creative drive. Another way of explaining it, however, is to see his repetitions as part of a strategy—borrowing from American mass market advertising, just as advertisers had borrowed from Surrealism—aimed at promoting familiarity, even a sort of brand loyalty. “New” and “improved” were not yet the advertising buzzwords that they would later become. By the late 1930s, Dali's burning giraffes and soft watches were safe, proven, reliable Surrealism, the standard by which competitors were measured.²⁹

Eventually, through constant repetition, Dali's art and public persona lost much of their capacity to shock. In Paris in the early 1930s, after the minor riots that followed *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'or* (the two films that Dali made with Luis Buñuel), even his fellow

Surrealists began avoiding him. Though it was sometimes said “With Dali one never knows,” by the end of the decade and certainly by the 1940s, one knew very well: chances were that whatever it was, it would involve ants and telephones, lobsters, and an outrageous nonsequitur or two, delivered in mangled Franglais from beneath a familiar, though increasingly impressive, mustache. He had said in 1935 that he wanted to systematize confusion and contribute to the total discrediting of the world of reality.³⁰ If he had said this just once or even a few times, it might have either gone unnoticed or been taken as a serious threat. But he kept on saying it, in multitudinous ways, until few took him any more seriously than they did Groucho Marx or Mickey Mouse. Systematic confusion became Dali’s line.

Fashioning himself for American consumption, Dali diminished the more threatening aspects of his personality while maintaining his fascination, much as some American critics had lessened Surrealism’s threat by aligning it with cartoons and comedy. Dali was strange, but in an old familiar way, like a lewd uncle or a talking mouse. Observing those like Disney and the Marx Brothers, whom American writers and curators had turned into Surrealists, Dali, the Surrealist extraordinaire, remade himself into Dali the entertainer, the celebrity, the man famous for being famous. Soon his face became more recognizable than any of his paintings. Offers from publishers,

filmmakers, department stores, and advertising executives poured in. Few figures represented in H. W. Janson’s *History of Art* have appeared on television game shows, but Dali is among them.³¹

That Walt Disney, who even then was noted for his political conservatism, would allow his pigs and wolves to cavort with Magrittes and Massons suggests his own innocence regarding the Surrealists’ revolutionary aims and Communist alliances.

Re-enter Walt Disney. Disney’s direct involvement with Surrealism didn’t stop with his 1936 contribution to the Museum of Modern Art. In 1946 he and Dali collaborated on an animated short entitled *Destino*. Only fifteen seconds’ worth of film was completed, and this was canned by mutual consent. During the late 1950s, Disney visited Dali at his home in Port Lligat, Spain, where they discussed the possibility of a second collaboration—an animated version of *The Adventures of Don Quixote*. This venture also came to naught. But the two men got on famously. According to Disney, Dali was “a very swell guy.”³²

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was read at the M. H. DeYoung Memorial Museum's Young Scholars' Colloquium in the History of Art, San Francisco, 1992. My thanks to Whitney Chadwick, Wanda Corn, and Elizabeth Hutchinson for their many helpful suggestions.

- 1 M. F. Agha, quoted in "Links Surrealism and Ads," *New York Times*, 23 January 1937, p. 32. MoMA's attendance figures are taken from the *New York Times*, 19 January 1937, p. 10; see also Dwight MacDonald, "Action on West 53rd Street, Part II," *New Yorker*, 19 December 1953, p. 40. For references to fashion and Schiaparelli, see Richard Martin, *Surrealism and Fashion* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), pp. 154–55; and Carolyn Hall, *The Thirties in Vogue* (New York: Harmony Books, 1985), pp. 108–11. For Salvador Dalí's pavilion at the New York World's Fair, see Margaret Case Harriman, "Profiles: A Dream Walking," *New Yorker*, 1 July 1939, p. 22; and "Life Goes to the World's Fair: An Amusement Area Offers Freaks, Peeks and Rides," *Life*, 3 July 1939, pp. 66–67. For a contemporary discussion of Surrealism's impact on American advertisers, see Frank Caspers, "Surrealism in Overalls," *Scribner's Magazine* 104 (August 1938): 17–21.
- 2 See, for example, Ilene Susan Fort, "American Social Surrealism," *Archives of American Art Journal*, 22, no. 3 (1982): 8–20; Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Robert C. Hobbs, "Early Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism," *Art Journal* 45 (Winter 1985): 299–302.
- 3 To my knowledge, the only previous treatments on the reception of Surrealism are found in Jeffrey Wechsler, *Surrealism and American Art, 1931–1947* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1977), pp. 28–30; and Deborah Zlotzky, "'Pleasant Madness' in Hartford: The First Surrealist Exhibition in America," *Arts Magazine* 60 (February 1986): 55–61. For discussion of early American Surrealist exhibitions, see Julien Levy, *Memoir of an Art Gallery* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977).
- 4 Wechsler, p. 63. See also Sibella Skidelsky, "The Sham of It," *Art Digest* 11 (1 February 1937): 13; and Barry Byrne, "Surrealism Passes," *Commonweal* 26 (2 July 1937): 262–63.
- 5 See Ruth L. Bohan, *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982); and Julien Levy, *Surrealism* (New York: Black Sun Press, 1936), p. 31. Levy's book—including illustrations of works by all the major Surrealist artists and their predecessors as well as translations of writings by André Breton, Dalí, the marquis de Sade, the comte de Lautréamont, Frederick Engles, and others—provided the most complete English-language representation of Surrealist aesthetics, politics, and psychology available in the United States at the time. Limited to an edition of fifteen hundred and distributed primarily through Levy's gallery, it could not have reached an especially wide audience.
- 6 In what is perhaps the first direct reference to Surrealism in an American publication, the Boston-based weekly *Living Age* reprinted an article from the *Irish Statesman* of 12 September criticizing Breton's *Manifesto* and the first issue of *La révolution surréaliste*. See James P. O'Reilly, "Joyce and Beyond Joyce," *Living Age*, 31 October 1925, pp. 250–53.
- 7 See André Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), pp. 240–41.
- 8 Levy, *Memoir*, pp. 79–80.
- 9 Levy, paraphrased by Edward Alden Jewell, "A Bewildering Exhibition," *New York Times*, 13 January 1932, p. 27; Edward Alden Jewell, "Salvador Dalí, Arch-Surrealiste, Has One-Man Show at the Julien Levy Gallery," *New York Times*, 27 November 1933, p. 17; Breton, p. 26. By 1936, a handful of books and "little magazine" special issues, published in London and Paris, featured English-language discussions of Surrealism or translations of its principal texts. Apart from Levy's *Surrealism*, the only other book-length American study by this time was James Thrall Soby, *After Picasso* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1935). Soby praised Surrealist painting as an "authentic romantic revival" and for being "refreshing" and "free of the burden of revolutionary ideas," exhibiting a "reduced tension," and resting on "common experience" (pp. xii, 8). Surrealism's ambiguous and inconsistent politics are discussed in Jerrold Lanes, "Surrealism in Theory and Practice in France and America," *Art Forum* 35 (September 1966): 86–87.
- 10 Byrne, pp. 262–63.
- 11 Martha Davidson, "Surrealism from 1450 to Dada and Dalí at the Museum of Modern Art," *Art News* 35 (12 December 1936): 22; Henry McBride, quoted in *The Flow of Art*, ed. Daniel Catten Rich (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1975), pp. 319–20; and "Giddy Museum Exhibit Dizzies the Public with Dada," *Newsweek*, 19 December 1936, p. 26. For a provocative discussion of the 1913 Armory Show's critical reception, especially aversion to Cubism and abstraction, see J. Meredith Neal, "The Impact of the Armory Show," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 79 (Autumn 1980): 375–85.
- 12 "Freudian Psychology Appears in First American Surrealist Show," *Art Digest* 6 (15 January 1932): 32; and Harriman, p. 23.
- 13 "Surrealism on Parade," *Life*, 14 December 1936, p. 24; Levy, *Surrealism*, p. 5; and McBride, p. 319. See "Letters to the Editors," *Life*, 8 May 1939, pp. 6–7.
- 14 A. Everett Austin, quoted in Zlotzky, p. 59.
- 15 Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 175.
- 16 Jerome Klein, quoted in "Surrealist Show Sets Town Agog," *Architectural Record* 81 (January 1937): 5; Soby, p. 104; Jewell, "Bewildering Exhibition," p. 27; Jewell, "In the Realm of Art: Baying at the Purple Moon; The Museum of Modern Art Opens Show of Dada and Surrealism, Old and New," *New York Times*, 13 December 1936, sec. XI, p. 11; Jewell, "Exhibition Opens of 'Fantastic Art,'" *New York Times*, 9 December 1936, p. 25; and Alex McGavick, "Weird Worlds," *Commonweal* 27 (1 April 1938): 630.
- 17 Glenn Wessels, quoted in "Surrealism," *Art Digest* 9 (15 October 1934): 17;

- Matthew Josephson, "The Surrealists," *New Republic*, 3 February 1932, pp. 321–22. See Lloyd Goodrich, "November Exhibitions: Miró," *The Arts* 17 (November 1930): 119; and McGavick, p. 630.
- This comparison of Miró paintings with Krazy Kat comics is also noted in Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990), pp. 168–79.
- 18 With more than seven hundred objects on display, including not only Surrealist and Dada work, but five hundred years' worth of "fantastic" precedents, popular and political cartoons, and the art of children and the insane, MoMA's exhibition was criticized for its dubious pedagogy and its nebulous and confusing arrangement. This impression was exacerbated by the catalogue's lack of an explanatory text (although two essays on Dada and Surrealism, by Georges Hugnet, were published that year in the *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, vol. 4, no. 2–3 [1936]; copies of this bulletin were sold at the exhibition, along with Alfred Barr's pamphlet "A Brief Guide to the Exhibition of Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism"). For critiques of the exhibition, see A. P. McMahon, "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism," *Parnassus* 9 (April 1937): 47; and Gertrude R. Benson, "The High Fantastical," *Magazine of Art* 30 (January 1937): 48–50.
- 19 Robert D. Feild, *The Art of Walt Disney* (New York: MacMillan, 1942), pp. 57–60.
- 20 Compare Feild's statement to one made by Dali in a 1934 lecture at MoMA, reprinted in Levy, *Surrealism*, pp. 5–6:
- "Surrealism attempts to deliver the subconscious from the principle of reality, thus finding a source of splendid and delirious images."
- 21 Leo T. Hurwitz made this connection in 1931 with his perceptive article "Of Mice and Things: Notes on Pierre Roy and Walt Disney," *Creative Art* 8 (May 1931): 359–63. See also Wechsler, p. 36.
- 22 This undated quotation is one of two epigraphs to Marc Eliot's controversial new biography, *Walt Disney: Hollywood's Dark Prince* (New York: Carol, 1993). Disney's life and work are also discussed in Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).
- 23 Alfred Barr, Jr., ed., *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936); and Schickel, pp. 190–91.
- 24 Salvador Dali, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali*, trans. Haakon M. Chevalier (New York: Dial, 1942), pp. 324–25.
- 25 "Marvelous and Fantastic," *Time*, 14 December 1936, p. 62; and Dali, p. 332. For Dali's days in Hollywood, see Dali, p. 327; and Meredith Etherington-Smith, *Dali* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992), pp. 261–63, 311–12, 346–48.
- 26 "Critics Stirred by Awarding First Carnegie Prize to Surrealist," *Art Digest* 9 (1 November 1934): 6; Breton, p. 282; "Marvelous and Fantastic," p. 62; and Dali, p. 330. See also an account of Dali's first American press conference, "Frozen Nightmares," *Time*, 26 November 1934, pp. 44–45. Even at the outset, American critics were suspicious of Dali's motives. As early as 1932, Paul Rosenfeld stated, "Surrealisme is an expression of spirit, or nothing; and Dali's primitivism seems a bit of shrewdness." Rosenfeld, "Conversation with a Surrealiste," *The Nation*, 24 February 1932, p. 237.
- 27 "The American Cult for Surrealism: Dali," *Art News* 35 (2 January 1937): 17. For the trial following Dali's arrest, see Harriman, p. 27.
- 28 "'Not a Madman!'—Dali," *Art Digest* 9 (1 January 1935): 16; and Robert Hughes, *Shock of the New* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 237.
- 29 For a discussion of Dali's repetition as an attempt to achieve public familiarity through methods similar to advertising, see James Johnson Sweeney, "Miro and Dali," *New Republic*, 6 February 1935, p. 360.
- 30 Salvador Dali, *Conquest of the Irrational*, trans. David Gascoyne (New York: Julien Levy, 1935), p. 12.
- 31 Dali's 1958 appearance on the program "Put It in Writing" is recounted in Fleur Cowles, *The Case of Salvador Dali* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959), pp. 132–33.
- 32 Disney, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 187. For the collaboration on *Destino*, see *ibid.*, pp. 186–87; Etherington-Smith, pp. 356–57; and Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, *Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981), p. 515. See also Alfred Frankenstein, "It is Something of a Jump From Burbank to Pasadena," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 February 1946, "This World" section, p. 8.